



## Pandemic in Limbo

### Nubaira Forkan

It was raining last week in Toronto. The concrete turned black as pedestrians started to jog to their destinations, foraging for umbrellas in their backpacks and briefcases. The rain here is a sad affair: it cancels plans and destroys lawn furniture. Rain in Dhaka is joyful. We rush to put away clothes from the verandah, children dance in the streets, the dye on their cotton clothes running. I can smell the trees and hear the hawkers yelling. I would run to my balcony and scream into the sky; my one transgression against polite society concealed by thunder.

It was raining last week in Toronto and all I could think of was home. I feel like screaming now. The pandemic has forced our lives into a complex limbo. I call Ammu, she tells me about a new surah she's learning; I tell her about the raccoons living outside the UofT graduate dormitories. I don't have the heart to shoo them away. She can hear the rain through the mic and suggests I make some khichuri.

The number of cases in Ontario in the southeast of Canada, and the province I now live in, has surpassed 30000. It started to skyrocket some time in late February. The reality that this foreign virus would somehow affect my life had not formed into a coherent thought in my mind until well into March.

Before quarantine began, I had met a friend for coffee; we were talking about the construction of lead characters in theatre and how to prepare for an upcoming play being hosted by our Bangladeshi student society. He stopped at some point and asked me if the play was even going to happen? I nodded pensively and repeated some facts I vaguely recalled from an article I'd been reading about the pandemic in Canada. That was the first time I pretended to know what was going on.

By the end of March, classes were online and my residence was emailing us to vacate the premises; by that point, we'd all read about the evictions at Harvard. At least my dorm was giving me a week. As panic began to spread and toilet paper started to fly off shelves, I kept going to my part time desk job at the university. During a lunch shift, while I was washing my hands for the fourth time that day, a delivery man stopped by the information desk. He lamented over cancelled travel plans as I lysoled every box and sprayed down every surface he touched. My supervisor asked me if I was flying home. I said I didn't know. With April came exams. I was wholly unprepared for the issues that accompany online exams; annoying pop-ups, typos, and wifi disruptions. This was the first time I broke out in hives before an exam. At some point, I decided that living alone was getting to be a bit too much; I retired to my aunt's for the rest of April and exams.

My aunt's house is a small bungalow in a sleepy neighborhood outside Toronto with such natural light you never really feel like you're inside. My aunt has a green thumb and every free surface has a potted plant: hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, and bougainvilleas. Every

day my aunt grooms and sprays her plants as I sit cocooned in angel wings and orchids pouring over neuropathology and skin rashes. Ramadan begins and each day the scurrying of squirrels on the roof wakes us up for fajr. After my exams ended, I bid my aunt a teary goodbye and returned to my dorm.

May is uneventful. I take up learning French and baking pies. One day, my boss informs me I won't have to return; the university is cutting part time workers as the pandemic worsens. When June comes around, I'm sitting at home unemployed and in serious need of stimulation. I scroll through airline websites obsessively; in lieu of my home bound flight that was cancelled in May I attempt to get on an embassy flight taking stranded students back to Bangladesh. But with no news of school, work or research formats, I can't take the risk of being denied re-entry into Canada.

Resigned, I accept that maybe I won't be going home in the next year. I log onto my faculty Facebook page; there are calls for volunteers to help source PPE. I sign up and my days become an endless stream of cold calls to potential suppliers and donors. My mum suggests I rejoin student journalism; the campus paper is happy to have me back. Suddenly, I am no longer restless.

Near the end of June, my great aunt and uncle insisted I come stay with them in Ottawa. I'm resistant at first but I'd kill for some Bengali food and conversation. On the day of the trip, they come rumbling down the road in a four-wheeler, my dada grabs my bags and stuffs them in the back next to a mammoth grill. He complains about the traffic and my dadi yells out a greeting as I squeeze in next to the upturned wheelbarrow in the backseat. The week I spend in Ottawa is idyllic; in the mornings my dadi makes dozens of bhaji and torkari dishes; in the evenings my dada and I go for hikes along the river that wraps around their cul-de-sac. Soon, I begin my summer job as a researcher at a hospital.

My mornings begin with patient assessments; garrulous octogenarians tell me about their days over the phone. Each assessment takes up almost a quarter of the day; but I get an insight into how the pandemic has impacted the most vulnerable. My job required me to meet in person and collect samples; but as with all facets of life, we've had to transition online. Now my results depend on self-report cognitive and mood questionnaires; I foresee this throwing a wrench in my work but we'll cross that bridge when we get there. June melts into July and the summer air turns rancid. One day as we're lounging out on the porch, my phone pings. It's an email from my faculty; all my classes in the fall are to be held online. I know this means I will fly home to Dhaka for the summer and fall. Before I call my parents to break the news, I take a deep breath of the Ottawa air. It was raining last week in Toronto and I thought of Dhaka's monsoon. In this heatwave, I can only imagine the clouds of kaak, kobutar and bulbul that roost in my balcony and the guavas and mangoes I will consume watching them.

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### **Author Biography**

*Nubaira Forkan is the daughter of PP Rtn. Forkan Bin Quasem and Rtn. Kazi Tasmin Ara Ajmery. She is pursuing a Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) from the University of Toronto, Canada. She is an avid reader and student journalist. In her free time, she volunteers at shelters and listens to historical podcasts.*