

COVID: We Went Through That S**t

By Journeya

This has been an emotional year.

To say the least.

My dad is a nurse; he doesn't talk about it really. It reminds me of what my grandmother said about her father who fought in World War II. I always thought that kind of trauma would be our great-grandparents' scene.

I don't think people *really* realize we have lived through shared history.

He and I were separated for three months. On my side I breathed shared air within four walls, and on his side his breath was filtered through a P100 respirator mask for twelve hours on end.

He was one of the lucky ones, my mom says. He used his resources well to get that gas mask, and his resources weren't from the hospital he had thrown his life at. I remember the day well, when he sent us a picture of him all decked out in his new gowns. Dressed all the way down in multiple layers of armored cloth of polyester. And all I could conjure was, "This can't be real. Is it?"

I know, on the other side, that man became someone else.

He hides it well, but he spends a lot more time with us now.

Where I don't get the heroic stories of nursing from my dad, I get it from my friend whose mother is also a healthcare worker. She remembers when it first started,

her mom said, “Don’t worry about it.” But then her mother watched all of them die right there, in those hospital beds.

Those three million people . . .

Summer of 2020 Worldwide Deaths: three million. Out of 7.7 billion people. 7.6 billion left. Though it’s a small drop, it’s a drop nonetheless. Why do I feel like nobody is really, *really*, talking about that? We weren’t ready for it.

She said her mother made them as comfortable as she could while she held each of their hands and felt them slip away while they reached for their strangled last breath.

Our parents, nurses, doctors, and surgeons are living *breathing* warriors, troops, and saints, but that sure as hell didn’t come without its pains.

And now we live in winter 2022. Five million deaths are now filling the room. I’ll scroll through the media and see bodies in the streets from the undeniable power of this new god we breathe.

I’m beginning to hear the weight of the five million spiraling up. My friends have it now, and that’s a lot to process even in itself. It’s a daunting game of waiting every day, for someone you love to get it and then have your whole world get choked out. Now just breathing makes all my insides feel twisted inside out.

What a strange world to grow up in. What a strange world to find hope in. What a strange reality where you are terrified of yourself.

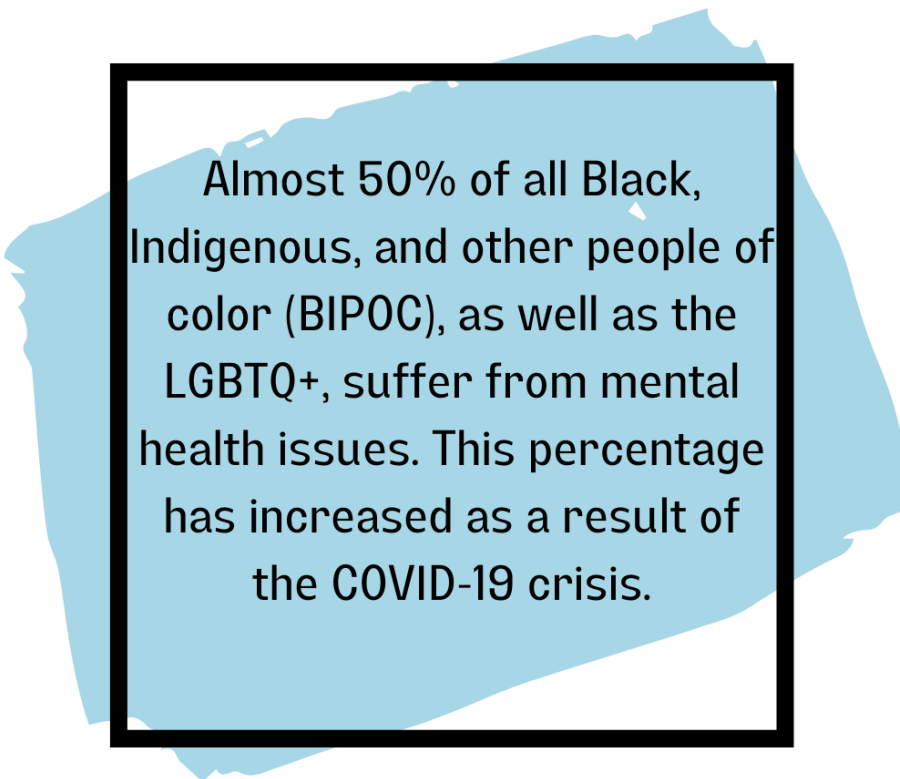
COVID 19: “The Virus Who Decides Your Death Date.” The product of Pandora’s box, it floods through the earth and breaks us in its oh so many ways.

I hurt for the one who released the creature from its cage.

We are not okay, but we are trying to look in this box for a fresh burst of air every single day.



Author's Note: This story took form throughout many different timelines of my life. Reading this back to myself, I can pinpoint where I was in my life when I wrote the Before, where I was when I wrote After, and how I felt when I was writing now. In this way the story itself gives me a gift. A gift I plan on showing to my descendants when they ask, "what was your teenage experience?" I hope as the years go on I can look back on this story and see how much my description of my school experienced has changed. I hope this story will begin drawing in people who have had similar stories that need validation. I hope it opens the eyes of many.



Almost 50% of all Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), as well as the LGBTQ+, suffer from mental health issues. This percentage has increased as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Evolution

By Adrija Jana

Visiting my grandmother in the summer was a yearly ritual which didn't happen. Instead, I experienced the first-ever 'Janta Curfew' (a lockdown of the entire population of India with 1.38 billion people). We had been getting continual news of the dire situation in China, but no one had expected the virus to travel so soon to India. When the lockdown first began, it was a crucial time for students in India because we were taking final exams, and the Grade 12 students were preparing for college. Suddenly, everything came to a standstill, and people who might have been preparing to attend a concert found themselves being asked by the government to bang utensils on their terrace to encourage the front line COVID workers.

After cleaning out every cupboard at home and ensuring there wasn't even a speck of dust at any spot, I sat clueless at home for more than two weeks, not allowed to go out, not even to go up to the terrace, and slowly got bored of binge-watching movies. In India school students take national level board exams twice--once in Grade 10 and again in Grade 12. These two groups of students are called "Board Batches," and the 2020 batch, which I was a part of, will evermore be known as "The COVID Batch." I then came to know of a new app called Zoom.

Everything was online so you could submit assignments late in the evening and sit for school wearing your school shirt and pyjamas. But missing was the chance to walk up

to the teacher to ask her something. Nor could you whisper something humorous to your friend sitting beside you. There were countless complaints every day about all the fights happening at someone's place that could be heard mistakenly "unmuting" at the wrong time, or how, when the teacher screen shared a document, showing only colourful scribbles instead of the text.

After a Zoom session as an audience member for my first-ever e-play (online theatre) I started to discover an entirely new side of myself.

I decided to join a theatre workshop organised by the same NGO which had produced the theatre show as a fundraiser for COVID-19 victims. After the workshop, the founder of the NGO asked me to stay back and work for them. I agreed, and that was how I played an active role in helping stranded people in the Sundarbans, a cluster of islands home to mangrove forests filled with globally endangered species. A cyclone struck that area in West Bengal in May 2020.

I went on to organise my first-ever online event—a webinar with eleven prominent panelists, talking about cyber crime and cyber safety. Since then, I have planned and created more than thirty online events for thirty-five different organisations, including a youth group and an international magazine.

Yet I had my fair share of downs. During the first wave of COVID the furious Amphan cyclone ravaged coastal India. It washed away my family's fishery business. This was a huge financial loss for us.

We were still getting used to the idea of the pandemic and lockdown, and there were many rumours on social media. Day after day there were people claiming to be doctors suggesting miracle cures which turned out to be fake. This coupled with many incidents of cybercrime, of which even I was a victim. Without my knowledge, my personal Whatsapp number had been shared on an adult

Instagram page. Male strangers sent me unsolicited messages and pictures. I felt panicked, confused and afraid. I could not gather the courage to tell anyone.

Indian society is still to see all genders on an equal level, and the first person to be blamed for this would be me.

This affected my confidence in classes. Logistics are my forte, but I was a Grade 11 student and my opinion was often not valued at some workplaces. At one meeting I remember we were discussing ways to improve social media outreach. I unmuted myself and offered a suggestion. No one responded to it. They carried on with the discussion, ignoring what I had said. The looks they gave me clearly said, "What does a little girl like you understand? Just sit quietly and listen." I felt insignificant and invisible. It would be a long while before I could build my confidence back again, bit by bit.

I had been sheltered and protected by my parents in all ways, and when I was suddenly given a virtual taste of the real world, I found it difficult to cope. In this competition of trying to take the highest credit and get the most appreciation, I felt like I was getting lost. I realised if you wanted to be recognised for what you did, you had to fight for it. What I had initially started to be able to give back to society, became a rat race for self-promotion. That was not me. I valued relations, and not this fight of pushing each other down to rise up. I felt in my heart a lingering sense of unhappiness.

For months, I would be sitting eighteen to twenty hours in front of the mobile phone or laptop screen, trying to balance studies and work with no leisure time. One day I was unable to look at the phone screen without my eyes burning terribly. The doctor said that I was down with a high fever because of "Zoom Fatigue." No one who heard this would believe it was even a thing. I was bedridden for days. and I realised I had not a single moment of "me time" for months. I had simply been working like a robot,

following the same routine day after day, until a point when I didn't even have to know what I was doing to complete a task. When I could finally take some time out to meet my grandmother, it had been ten months since I had last seen her.

In the beginning, the lockdown coupled with the worsening COVID-19 statistics, and the continuous inflow of bad news, seemed to be bearing down on me, and I would be stressed out all the time. There seemed to be negativity wherever I looked. But slowly I learnt to look for the silver lining, weed out the harmful, rejoice in the small moments of happiness and accept and deal with the cloudy periods of despair. And I did need to put my needs before others. If I did take a day off, the world wouldn't turn upside down.

My personal growth through the lockdown was very rewarding. But the pandemic has been a time of intense mental and emotional turmoil for most people. February to May 2021 was especially difficult for me.

Towards the end of January, my grandmother slipped in the washroom and fractured her right arm. Two weeks later, in February, my mother slipped while climbing down the stairs and fractured her right leg. Seeing my mother's situation, my father fell sick because of low blood pressure. My grandfather was already ill recovering from three brain strokes. My three siblings were younger than I was, so my family depended on me.

My grandmother and mother had to be taken to the hospital simultaneously. My grandmother could not be operated on because of her age, and she came home with a plaster cast. My mother's leg was operated on and she stayed in the hospital for a week. That was the time when the COVID cases started peaking again and we had no help.

Until then, I had just worked outside the house. But I had not done much when it came to the home front. I had to focus all my energy on my family. I washed clothes, did

dishes, and cleaned the house. I cooked food, looking up online recipes. I had never touched the iron before ironing my father's clothes every day. I burnt the bedsheet once and hit my hand on a running ceiling fan while folding the mosquito netting. I took care of my mother and grandmother, fed them, sponged them, helped change their clothes, and gave them medicines on time.

I helped my siblings with their homework. I managed both of our family's businesses—a fishery and a garment shop. The fishery had been run by my father who was still terribly unwell because of low blood pressure and rebuilding the business after the destructive cyclone was an uphill climb. In between I studied and did my school work. I had my Grade XI Final exams in this period too and came in first in class XI.

There wasn't a single word of appreciation for me, but for some force in heaven who everyone believed had pulled the family through the crisis. When I looked at my burnt fingers, injured feet and sweat-beaded brow, I felt a bit of resentment in my heart, and then I felt guilty for feeling this way.

I did find a way to vent my frustrations with self-harm. I would cut myself and try to focus on the physical pain to try and forget the emotional turmoil. But I injured myself too severely and couldn't help my brother with schoolwork. The next day, he was severely reprimanded in his online class. I realised this could be the way out this harming myself or anyone else, to the point where I would be rendered helpless. So I turned to music and writing instead. I told my journal what no one was ready to listen to, and music told me what no one else would. I truly felt comforted. I decided to help other people by giving them a safe space to share their feelings, and became a listener for "7 Cups of Tea," an online, anonymous mental health support initiative.

In all this time, I could not possibly ignore what was happening in the outside world. With more than three hundred thousand COVID cases per day, no number of helping hands could be too many for India. So I volunteered as a support person and helped hundreds of patients find hospital beds, oxygen cylinders, blood, food home delivery, and placed newly orphaned children, or children with parents hospitalised in temporary child care centres. In the daytime, I managed the household, my studies and took care of the family, and at night when everyone was asleep, I took night shifts to help the COVID victims.

Then in April, my grandmother was diagnosed with kidney failure and needed even more extensive care and a stricter diet. I handled everything in addition to the thirty-five organisations I worked with, and working as the student secretary of my school's student council. My days often began at 5:00a.m. and sometimes ended at 3:30a.m.

Throughout this period, I kept feeling like I would fall into depression. I felt stressed, yes, tense and extremely anxious too, but not for a single moment did I feel I wanted to do something drastic. Later I realised it was because I did not have the time or the mindset for it. I knew that I was bottling up a lot in my heart, and I needed to cry. Even if I found two minutes to myself, tears would not flow. I was emotionally dead working on autopilot. I knew if something happened to me, I would be taking down the entire family of ten members. So I persevered. I hardened my core.

Then my grandmother passed away towards the end of July 2021. That was the last straw. It was the push needed for everything inside to come pouring out. When the vehicle came to take her away, I would not let go of my grandma one bit. I became hysterical, screaming and shouting at the top of my lungs. My mother and sisters together could not pull me away. As soon the vehicle left, I fainted there on the street. I couldn't sleep all night, and when I did, my sleep was troubled with nightmares.

In our culture, the funeral for a person who passes away due to natural causes is held after eleven days. Because of the pandemic, only close relatives were present. The children and grandchildren are supposed to offer water to the deceased to calm their soul and send them off peacefully. As the priest held my hand and had me offer water, the promises I had made to my grandmother kept playing in my mind. She had only wished to go abroad with me and see me get married. I had also promised to give her a gold necklace when I started earning money. As I realised none of these promises could be honoured anymore, I felt like my heart was shattering. I almost wanted to turn back time and warn my younger self not to make promises she could not keep.

However, I have held on to her memory, and try to honour her wishes through every step I take.

In January 2022, I tested COVID positive. When I got the report, I wasn't scared. I told the virus in my body, "Good, after everything, we have come full circle and you have come to me. I will now show you what *strong* is."

In the beginning, I felt constantly weak and tired, and was down with a high fever. I couldn't keep down anything I ate, and could not smell or taste anything. I put on a mask at all times, even while sleeping, though I had a slight difficulty breathing. The residual cough accompanied me for many months.

Yet COVID could not stop me from doing a single thing I had planned out. I kept attending my classes, completing my projects, volunteering, working, and fighting with the virus. Neither did I let the virus disrupt a single moment of my routine, nor infect a single other member of my family—even though I was infected with the more transmittable variant of the virus. Five antibiotic tablets, and ten days later, I emerged from the ordeal stronger in a beautiful way. I felt more tired than usual, but when you're determined, nothing is impossible.

After I recovered I could feel I was different. I am an evolved individual, more mature, more resilient, not easily given to whims, or even bouts of anger with no reason. Miss as I might the old days, as change came upon me, I either had to accept the change, or risk being left behind, and the latter, I could not do. Once the heavy burden of worldly matters was put on my shoulders, I realised, I finally and truly grew up. I evolved.



Author's Note: Covid 19 pandemic—just the mention of this phrase is enough to open a trove of memories, feelings and associations for all who were old enough to comprehend when the novel coronavirus struck the world. Most of us had to weather challenges in our own ways—social, physical and emotional. As a High School student in India living in a middle-class family of ten, so did I.

In India, the lockdown was imposed during the time of board exams-national level exams school students take in Grade 10 and 12, and that are believed to be the manifestation of one's performance during their entire school life. It is already a stressful affair, and for my class, which went into the lockdown after completing Grade 10 Boards and came out of the lockdown only to take Grade 12 Boards, the pressure was tremendous. One of my friends succumbed to this pressure and took her own life, an experience that shook me to the core. Even though she was lively and always surrounded by many, we came to know she actually felt very lonely and left out.

These experiences made me realise the importance of mental health and that our experiences do matter. The result was "The Evolution," a reminiscence of my journey during Covid. It encompasses the sweet and the bitter, the rays of hope and the phases of darkness and the emotions,

expectations and contrasting thoughts. I share it with the global community with the hope that, maybe someday, it will give someone the last strand of hope they are looking for to hold on, and tell them, that indeed, they are not alone.

YOUTHLINE

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877-968-8491,
Text 839863 or
online.

On Fire

By Roodley Merilo

The world is *literally* on fire,
This isn't a metaphor
Although it could have been
Australia's forest fires were burning just as bright
As the hatred we had towards one another
Sparked by the death of George Floyd
Ignited cop cars became the latest of many tragedies, But I
 am stuck in my bed

[pause]

Unable to get up but still yearning
Caught in this in-between
Wanting to better myself
But being held back by
A doubt-filled mind
Force feeding me thoughts of this cruel reality
Noting the fact that I'm alone in this room,
No one has checked up on me in months
I should be failing three different classes
My youth has been robbed from me
Because I'm unable to get up
To get out of this bed

Trapped by these four walls,
My desolate room
Surrounded by dirty clothing land mines
Mom circles back to drop *the mind-blowing revelation* that,
my room is a mess

[pause]

But doesn't seem to notice
that I am a mess

[pause]

My life is a mess

[pause]

The whole world is a mess
So why do you draw the line at my room?

[pause]

I know mental health is a joke in this household
But I can no longer go on laughing
The hopeful boy you once knew is now just a memory
I wish I could go back,
Back to the simpler times, the carefree times
Where my world was exclusive to the toys in my room
Back where I shared a laugh with my friends
Where I could have hugged them a little tighter
Held them a little closer
Before they decided to treat their wrist like a weekly
haircut appointment just one of many, warping their
bodies into something

Less than admirable
No longer the friend which I once admired
But the mirror reflection I fear

[pause]

Why can't I get up
Why am I lying here
It's starting to get uncomfortable
My back is hurting
I need to pee
I haven't eaten in weeks
No!
Cereal is not a dinner
And chips are not a meal
But I can't seem to summon the courage to get up,
Get up
Get up
Come on you can do it

[pause]

Five steps never seemed so far before
What's the point anyways
I'm just gonna waste away my days on Zoom
Not learning a thing
But still getting A's
By pressing unmute
Just to say Roodley Merilo is present
But not fully here

[pause]

But lying here doesn't seem like the solution
I don't know if happiness is another fairytale lie
But it's something I want to strive for
Don't wanna end up like my brothers,
Or another failed child the way my father would put it
Need to get all "A's"
'Cause that's the only time he seemed proud of me
Feeling like I have to be greater than Michelangelo or
 Shakespeare
Needing to reinvent the wheel
And discover a new element to name it "Rood-anium"
So that maybe I can feel like I'm worth something
But all that only starts if I get up
So you need to
GET THE F__ UP!
[don't pause]
GET
UP
Roodley!



Author's Note: I created this piece to really highlight the mental battle many young teens face on a day to day.

Mostly I wanted to portray the negative feelings many of us felt during the pandemic; and how the pandemic itself made everything harder with online learning and the dreadful place the world was in. I hope when people read this they take away how simply getting up, despite all the adversity, can be the most powerful thing you can do.

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