



Worry, the only constant

By Lakshmi Iyer

The late evening sun slants through my open window. It is not yet the kind of Spring I long for. The temperatures hover in the 50s, not cold, not warm. Sometimes a wind blows, the wet kind that harks back to the ill wind that the books I grew up on talked about. The apple tree in my yard is budding. I feel a pang when I look at it.

Each Spring that Amma has been with me, she would putter around, walking up to each tree, whispering, caressing, and feeling the tender buds. Today, she is in Chennai, locked in her apartment, solitary confinement of sorts. When she left at the end of February, the murmurs of a pandemic were gathering strength, not yet the tsunami it is now. She landed safely in the wee hours of the morning and was relieved to be home after an uneventful flight.

Ten days later, the schools in the township where I live called for a two-week closure. I was already a telecommuter at that time. My husband still commuted and social distancing was yet to be the buzzword it now is. My renewed passport came in the mail, only six weeks after I had applied. A day later, the Indian government called for a

shutdown. The scrolling bar at the top of the Indian Embassy website politely requested that I apply for a visa after April 15th.

I called Amma religiously, each morning right after I brewed my kaapi, Indian style, strong with a dash of milk and a tiny spoon of sugar. I would sip on it, my iPhone still connected to the charger while I called her on the landline and scrolled through my Twitter feed. Our conversations revolved around our respective government heads. We traded notes, light on the emotion, and heavy on facts. I tried not to let my fear leak through the airwaves into her ear. She did the same, I think.

I log in to work each morning right after I shower after I listen to *Vishnu Sahasranaman* as I walk on the elliptical. I expand my prayers these days to include everyone I care about. Amma, my siblings, my in-laws, my children's other mother, their families. *Vasudaiva kutumbakam*, a phrase I grew up with is my new reality.

All-day long I switch modes. Employee. Mother. Homemaker. Worrier-in-chief.

I read up on the science behind how the coronavirus attaches itself to the host cells. I imagine a trojan horse letting loose a flood of clones, rapidly replicating itself and attacking my insides. Sometimes, I imagine this happening to Amma on the other side of the world. I imagine my children calling from their bedrooms in the middle of the night, gasping for breath. Some of these are dreams. Some are vivid images that flash on the insides of my eyes like a film reel I cannot stop.

I realize should Amma fall ill, I will be unable to travel, not just because of a non-existent visa but because I cannot risk leaving my children motherless. We are all high risk. Immunocompromised, as the articles I read lead me to believe. I do not yet douse the groceries with disinfectant, the ones my husband brings from his weekly excursions into the outside world. He does not wear a mask or gloves yet.

I have instructions for a no-sew DIY mask ready.

I send emails to my children's teacher. It ends with "I am exhausted and unable to cope. Please help." The response is immediate. They set up a time to talk with me. At the end of the day, I look back on the blur that was work and home and everything else and realize that we are in the middle of an effing pandemic. I shouldn't have to worry about anything other than survival.

The only thing that should consume me is keeping my family safe and the people I care about safe. Yet, I think about my impending book release. I wonder if it will ever be published. I wonder about the documentary that features our family and wonder if we will ever get to see it on the big screen. In the midst of life-altering events, the normalcy of my thoughts is an anchor.

I mull over the days lengthening. I imagine the windows of my study open, a warm breeze carrying away with it, the musty smells, and the fear that permeates our home. I imagine the intensity of the UV rays from the Summer sun burning away the lipid layer of the virus, deactivating it. I imagine my daughters, newly minted middle schoolers

carrying brand new backpacks to school. I imagine Amma texting me from the airport, reassuring me that the flight is on time and she will be here before I know it.

I visualize a world that is far from the one I am in now. The worry though about Amma a few continents away is a constant.

