

Hear Me

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The novel Coronavirus has halted the world and taken so many lives. In the United States, it is at an astonishing 960,526 cases with 54,248 deaths according to [worldometers.info](https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/) on April 25th, 2020.

Coronavirus was first made known to me around December of 2019. I remember I was studying for my chemistry final when I got a call from my mom. She was checking in on me when she began to talk about COVID-19 in China.

I am Chinese American, second-generation. All of my relatives live in China. I had heard about the dangers of Coronavirus before it began to become relevant in America. My mom warned me to wash my hands frequently and make sure to sanitize my room with wipes I could get at the nearby CVS store, and asked if I could get portable hand sanitizer to carry with me. But I was so wrapped up in my world of academics and friends and college life that, honestly, her phone call felt unnecessary and the fear she spoke with felt like miles away. I believed that we would be untouched; this was not a relevant concern.

But her words still rattled inside of me all day and, later, began to strike worry. Yet when I returned to my friends studying late at the library, I did not talk about it. I didn't mention my concern for a virus spreading halfway across the world. Because I knew it would not mean anything to them and it was something for me, for Asians and Asian Americans, to know, to think, to worry about. I felt a sense of over-exaggeration, surrealness. It was a part of my double identity. An American student, the daughter of a Chinese immigrant.

A few days went past. More phone calls from my mom. My cousin who goes to a university at Wuhan went home early. My anxiety was building. When I left for winter break, I went home to daily WeChat video calls with family members back home who had started their lockdowns. They'd complain about the boredom, the loss of freedom, and the emptiness of the streets. At the time, I had been intolerant. I could not understand their feelings. I still had a life here. Everything was still normal. I could not fathom the feelings they had, the sadness, the unbearable silence, and the oppressive feeling of loss. The stress, the fear, the numbness.

Winter break was over. I arrived back on campus. My mother's obsessive worry over COVID-19 had left me feeling shaken. I was glad to be on campus where everyone seemed unconcerned, everything was normal, untouched. It was easy to forget about crises happening elsewhere. Easy to bury my head in the present and the relevant. The days were a blur, a flurry of lectures, hangouts, hours spent in the library, and late weekend nights.

Near the end of January, I got a jarring phone call from my mom, this time at Central Library as I studied for a chemistry midterm. As I paced through the stacks, trying to keep my voice down, I listened as my mom told me about things in China. My cousin's university is canceled; classes have moved to online instructions. Grocery stores are closed; the streets are paroled; no one is allowed out. Cases were growing and so was fear. People were being tracked down and monitored and those who came from Wuhan, like my cousin, had to report their condition daily.

My uncle couldn't handle the lockdown. He ran out one day to take a walk around the neighborhood. I had never heard so much hysteria and anxiety from my mom before. The more I listened, the more upset I became. It was as if her sharp voice saying the words out loud shocked me to fully realize the severity of the issue.

My uncle lives with my grandma, who is around 76 years old this year. He himself has lung issues. At this time, when things are so serious, how could he be so selfish and irresponsible? To indulge in his momentary relief because he can't stand to stay home anymore? How can he act that way knowing that it brings danger to not only himself but those around him, his family and the people he cares the most about? If he didn't care about his life anymore, he still has a moral obligation for his family and those around him as well as for those who love him and wish him to stay well. How could he do such an irrational thing? How could he?

And the more upset I became, the more my voice rose despite my best efforts to keep my volume at a minimum. As I headed to the bathroom, I made eye contact with a passing friend. I couldn't manage a smile to meet theirs. My eyes were burning from frustrated tears beginning to well up. I looked away quickly and hoped they wouldn't misunderstand.

But I couldn't worry about them and what they thought; I already had so much worry. Walking back to the study room and seeing everyone laughing so freely, relaxed and talking, when on this same earth separated only by an ocean was a national pandemic where thousands of people were suffering; it was like a bucket of cold water. I didn't know how to feel.

As the day went on, my phone call weighed on me. My friends had brought up issues before, things that weighed on them, concerns, worries. I wanted to be able to talk to someone too, to speak about my anxiety and stress.

I brought my thoughts and concerns about the Coronavirus to a few friends. I was not met with the same response as friends who had worried over hurricanes, grades, self-worth, love.

My warning on washing hands more frequently as the pandemic grew was met by one friend with a proud, taunting statement that they had never washed their hands before. When I told another about my anxiety of Coronavirus spreading to America, my feelings were downplayed. I

was worrying over nothing. Someone made a joke about quarantining Asians. My mind flashed to the quarantining of Japanese Americans during World War II. I didn't find the joke funny.

These responses made me feel quite sad. I felt isolated in my feelings on the growing outbreak in China. I was trying to broach a new topic, a distressing one that no one wanted to talk about, much less care about. But I had relatives who were living through days of social distancing way before us. People I knew who were trapped in different cities and unable to go home and celebrate Chinese New Year with family, the American equivalent of Christmas. These were people that I personally knew who were going through a pandemic across the globe. Not just numbers or a news story.

I had never before felt so strongly of my double identity as the split between my life at college as a normal freshman and my ethnic background as a Chinese American. This chasm would only grow with time.

Spring break came around. More cases in the United States have showed up. China has had a brutal past month. The loss and sadness are immense. The news reporting of China's procedure was circulating in my mom's WeChat group chats. Nurses and doctors who had worn their face masks and protective gear for more than 48 hours, skin puckered, red and irritated, deep grooves from the face masks. Healthcare workers who slept on mats on the floor, physicians absolutely exhausted. Stories about young doctors and nurses, who had only just begun their lives, dying, some from the virus and some from pure exhaustion. Lives cut short. I never felt so mortal, so vulnerable and weak.

My mom ordered me to go to the student health center and get a face mask before boarding the plane back home for spring break. I did not want to ask for a face mask. But I went and they said they could only give one per student. I took mine and quickly left. I felt embarrassed. Almost ashamed. I still don't really understand my feelings at the time. Everywhere I looked, everyone seemed at ease. No one was panicking or seemed worried. Still not many people wore face masks. My self-consciousness peaked to new heights and I felt so, so aware of everything around me and of myself. I saw my skin tone in context to everything. How does being Asian affect how people see me? What people would assume seeing me, without or with a face mask?

Another friend made a comment, a joke about the Corona virus and the beer Corona, after passing an Asian student wearing a face mask. I couldn't help wondering if it was because they were Asian and/or wearing a face mask that prompted them to make that joke. I wondered if that student had been of any other race and worn the face mask, if they would have said the same thing. I didn't like my newfound suspicion. I didn't like to think this way. There was a creeping feeling inside me that I couldn't pinpoint; a feeling along the lines of "I can't be like them; I'm different." I didn't wear my face mask on my flight back home.

At the time, I still had a light cough from a cold I hadn't quite gotten over yet. I remember the feeling sitting on the plane, in the middle seat stuck between two white people, trying to hold in my cough. Out the corner of my eye, I saw the man lean away from me. My nose was clogged, and my ears weren't popping. Pressure was building and my right ear had a growing piercing pain from altitude change. I was deeply uncomfortable. I sat still and tried to be a stone, to go somewhere else with my mind to make time pass by faster. But when you need to cough, you need to cough. I saw the man flinched. My throat was so dry. I couldn't wait to get off the plane.

Once home, everything seemed fine. People were normal. At least that's what I thought. My mom began insisting on wearing face masks everywhere. And my mind changed. When we got into an Uber, I worried we would be denied our ride or worse. I watched us on the map as the driver drove us to our destination. When we were sitting in our car at a Schnuck's parking lot wearing our face masks, a car had pulled in and parked across from us. With one look at us inside the car, they drove away to park elsewhere. I didn't want to go out anymore.

When I came back from spring break, I wore my face mask for a while at the airport. But I felt so uncomfortably self-conscious wearing it. I was aware of how I must look to other people. An Asian wearing a face mask. People were getting harassed for less.

This was the beginning of March. People still weren't wearing masks. The airport was bustling as usual. There were probably around 550 cases in the United States, according to CNN. I took my mask off before boarding the plane. I felt that it would be best if I could be as invisible as possible, as "normal" as possible. During the whole plane ride, my mind worked overtime and by the time I landed in Nashville, I was shaking. I was scared and I was getting into my own head. I do that a lot.

Videos of others getting harassed, attacked, verbally berated circulated through my mind and I imagined if it was me next. What if that person in front of me suddenly decides that they don't like the fact that I'm Asian? What if someone decides to come up to me and blame me for the existence of Coronavirus? What if someone threatened me? Would anyone step in? Would anyone help me? Would anyone care or would they turn away?

What if I couldn't defend myself?

I don't know how I would've reacted. Maybe in my paranoid and exhausted mental state, I would've broken down. Maybe my face would've gotten red and I might react angrily. Maybe I would've done nothing and ignored them, stood in silence and strength. I don't know.

But I felt burdened by my heritage, my background, my culture. My ethnicity had never seemed so dangerous to me. I had grown up knowing microaggressions, not hate crimes.

I was glad to be able to meet up with my friend and head back to campus together. I despise myself for saying this, but I was relieved to be riding with a white person. I knew that being with them lowered my chances significantly on being targeted. This realization, the direction my thoughts went, left a terrible aftertaste, a sour bitterness on my tongue.

In the Lyft ride back, I remember thinking to myself that maybe I was still exaggerating my feelings; overthinking is something I tend to do. I work myself up about this and get into my own head too much. Maybe I just need to relax. Things are fine, right? Everyone is here back on campus; things are normal.

Back on campus, surrounded by friends, I felt protected. And I started to relax.

My mother called asking if I had seen other students on campus with face masks. I told her that I've only seen a few students in masks, and they were all Asians. She huffed frustratedly and told me to wear my mask anyway. That if I saw one person wearing one then I should feel fine to wear one as well. I didn't wear one. I didn't feel like it was fine to wear one.

In fact, I didn't wear my face mask at all during my time back on campus.

On Monday, classes proceeded as normal. But the coughs and sniffing in classes seemed to echo louder in the classrooms. An international student spoke up during discussion in my class. What they had to say resonated loudly.

Their father is a dentist in China who is currently working under quarantine conditions to assist in whatever way he can. Their family are all in China while they are here alone in America. They spoke about the unkind comments and looks that they and fellow students had received for wearing face masks or for being Asian and wearing face masks. Think about it. Their father and family are in China. Their father is fighting every day to help, putting his life on the line to save others. Here in America, miles and miles away from their worried families, they can't even wear face masks as protective measures for themselves without receiving negativity. Freedom of choice, my ass.

By Monday afternoon, the Hustler came out with an article stating over 50 students were in contact with a student who traveled from Barcelona and tested positive. Later in the evening, classes were cancelled, and everything was uncertain.

Nothing was normal. Everything was not fine.

I went home, back to my worried and fearful mother. I stayed inside. Lockdown. Quarantine. Flattening the curve. My new daily vocabulary. I spent more and more time on my phone.

What I saw scared me more. The Asian community accounts I followed posted almost daily reports of crimes nationwide against Asians. There was elderly man in San Francisco who was harassed. I couldn't bring myself to watch the video. I knew I would cry. And when I told my mom about this crime, I watched her eyes get red and puffy.

She said in a warbling voice how my grandparents used to pick up recycling to help around the house, to do what they could. And I remember going on walks with my grandma as a child and how she would pick up the empty water bottles or cans on the streets and collect them to sell for a few cents, almost out of habit. Even now, writing, tears come to my eyes and blur the screen in front me. When I imagine if that were my grandparents, I can feel my heart growing cold.

So much cruelty.

An Asian man was left to die in Sydney, Australia because no one dared to give him CPR. A Burmese family stabbed in Texas. A Korean man stabbed outside the Korean consulate in Montreal. People attacked for wearing masks. Two Asians on the subway in New York attacked by a mob. A man yelled at and harassed on a subway for simply standing where he stood. A Vietnamese sister and brother verbally and physically berated at a metro station for wearing face masks. A woman claiming to be the "queen of Australia" ordering Asian workers to "go back to China." Two girls spat on in Australia and blamed for "bringing Corona." A UCSC PhD student going on a racist rant on Facebook. A Coronavirus "prank" at ASU against an international student. An Asian woman attacked while taking her trash out, acid thrown in her face by the attacker who waited outside on the steps for her. These are the hate crimes that gain attention, that are reported, that are most commonly shared.

There are over a hundred attacks on Asian Americans each day.

And then to hear the very president of the United States of America call a global pandemic virus that affects all of humanity unanimously the "Chinese Virus." Even though he may have corrected his words, damage is done. I cannot express enough through written words the sorrow that I feel. Through the screen of my laptop, I am writing this not to shame or blame or complain, but to seek understanding and empathy from others who may not have the same experiences as Asians and Asian Americans who are struggling in this pandemic.

My story is only one of the millions, billions who have been affected by the pandemic. And I realize that I am fortunate, very fortunate because I am healthy, my mom and my relatives are all

healthy, and no one that I know personally is unwell. But that does not mean my fear is invalid. Neither is my pain at the amount of hate arising in this country in a time when solidarity is most needed. United we stand, divided we fall.

So please, be kind. Be considerate.