

Invisible Things

I slid my finger across the volume bar. The opening notes of Lauv's *Invisible Things* tumbled out thick and fast like cordial as I snapped my headphones into place. Little did I know that this would be one of the last trips I'd make to the hospital for a while. *'It's the invisible things that I, that I love the most. It's the way that I feel when I, when I hold you close,'* crooned the singer. In less than a fortnight, those lyrics would take on a much greater meaning. Life as we knew it had begun to change already.

As a student cohort, we were 2 months into our research projects; many of us had settled quite comfortably into the pace of academic life with new papers to read, and theoretical concepts to imbibe, distill, and analyse. Time was not slowing down for us final year graduates, and the turning of the leaves would signal our foray into applying for internships. Already, the year felt different from previous ones because we had swapped the bedside for the bench. Patient-contact varied between the different projects we were assigned; and I found myself wondering if all my clinical skills were going down the drain, purely from lack of practice. That was until our country became a growing red dot on the map of a global pandemic, and the distance became a privilege I would dread.

They say it takes six degrees of separation to bring two people together. In a perverse kind of way, the transmission of COVID-19 from bat to human host seemed to materialise out of thin air from a perfectly-aligned set of circumstances. An innocent inoculation became the repository of ill-fate. And the rest is history. Over the next few days, I watched in horror as news stories and press releases about the virus accreted in alarming magnitude and frequency. No one talked about anything else. I realised I wasn't the only one feeling lost in all this. In a manner stereotypical of this generation of selfie-takers, I found myself grappling with the consequences that this virus had on my own worldview. What did it mean that gyms and restaurants were closing? Where would I go if not to the hospital? How did toilet paper become the one paragon of stability and control within this society?

Those initial days felt like I was living in a dystopian reality. Time slipped away like a melting clock, as routines were stripped bare and streets became eerily empty. I was frightened and naive because life had never been so limited before. Everything became swiftly condensed into a four square metre box with only the Internet for company. It felt akin to solitary confinement.

Admittedly I was slow to realise the significance of the curve until I read about the sacrifices. Then I understood, quite distinctly, that staying home would make a difference to those who did not have the luxury or choice. I read about an intern struggling to adjust to an ever-changing landscape, an emergency doctor segregated from his wife and family to work endlessly gruelling shifts. An anaesthesiologist intubating COVID-positive patients and making invisible risks: each breath carrying with it some chance of aerosolized virus, each step forward more opportunistic than the next. In a profession so grounded in the practice of human touch and connectedness, medicine had become a minefield of inconceivable threats.

Inside and outside the hospital, we were all fighting our own battles. Some people talked about skin hunger, and I instinctively felt it too. I missed the seconds before a hug when the anticipation was as sweet as the resolution. I missed feeling like a moving part in a well-oiled machine. It seemed almost cruel that in times like this, physical closeness could do more harm than good. I dared not even imagine a patient's desolation behind a ventilator. Or a doctor's despair at facing limited supplies. The truth was, the safety afforded by my age and clinical inexperience meant that I was shielded from the worst outcomes. Meanwhile, those at the hospital seemed to conduct their duties with ineffable courage and grit.

Over the next few weeks, messages flooded in which helped to bridge the physical distance. In the invisible space once occupied by warmth and companionship, I began to witness the resurgence of a greater empathy. Paradoxically, our isolation drew us closer to the realities we would be fighting for. Our friends, our family, the wider community; their wellbeing. We were tasked with the responsibility of looking out for each other beyond the clinical setting. Reaching out took on a different meaning, but an important one nonetheless. It was a strange and beautiful experience to be bound by this common humanity. Like many others, I hoped that one day soon, we would look back on this time with a certain fondness for the connections we sustained and cherished.