

It Was Never Easy

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There are certain words that strike me in such a way that I am overtaken by them, almost immediately. Words that, in a way, prick me, scarring me along the way and I cannot do anything else but surrender to them. For me, “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011) and “good life” (Ahmed, 2010) are two such words, as they menacingly haunt me, following me everywhere I go. I cannot, in other words, escape them. Each letter in both cruel optimism and good life brings with it a punishing blow, sharpened by the edge of every consonant and vowel.

The bruise of cruel optimism, marked by a desire that becomes an obstacle (Berlant, 2011), is something that I know all too well. I have witnessed it in an intimate way through my own family and relatives, who have crossed several lands and oceans in search of a better life—one outside of poverty. I can only describe this dream in the way Ahmed (2010) does; that is, as “the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores” (p. 272). This hope, attached to a notion of a good life, has several fantasies: “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). Such optimism becomes cruel when those fantasies, framed by a desire to change the course of one’s life, are unachievable, where the instabilities of a migrant life start to rupture (Coates, 2019). Along with the shadow of unachievable fantasies, immigrants can “lose their identity, their family, their homeland, [and so much more]” (Prasad, 2016, p. 22). Indeed, then, hope is also a cruel word, especially for poor, racialized people (Millner, 2017).

Gripped by these words, wrought by a materiality that cannot be divorced from migration, I arrive to a story about my uncle in whom I have seen the cruel optimism and the promise of a good life in the most deleterious and insidious forms. The words that I pull, threading the story of a man who has lived a precarious life, are inadequate and shaky, for sure, but I hope that they provoke and resonate in some way, and with that, I share a story that I cannot forget and that must not be ever forgotten.

What do the COVID-19 pandemic and immigration have in common? *Breath.*

In February of last year, I was gripped by a sequence of events: a phone call from my cousin, my father and I rushing over, and the sight of an ambulance reaching before us.

My uncle was, put simply, out of breath. He was finding it difficult to inhale and exhale, as his lungs started to retract, moving from the front and collapsing into the back.

For a day, he was clinging to a ventilator for dear life, and, at one point, he had to be intubated. Later, he was given an oxygen mask, but his breath remained uneasy.

When I visited him, which, at first, was only for an hour a day based on the regulations at the time, the vigour of his voice had faded. Instead, he spoke in barely audible whispers, as every word of his was scratched against the surface of his throat.

In that instant, I became aware of what the pandemic was capable of doing: halting the body in a way that made it immovable. As one organ collapsed after another, my uncle learned this personally, as he struggled to bring his body back to its former condition.

But, as I spent days and then weeks with him in the Intensive Care Unit at Jean Talon Hospital, I learned that his breathing was always wanting. In other words, this was not his first experience losing his breath.

Almost two decades ago, he travelled from India to Canada, thinking it would bring something that he could not attain in his homeland. So, even though he was the only one in the village to have attended college, he dropped out and decided that life in another country would present more opportunities. Financial mobility, for instance, to support his parents, his sister, and his brother.

For him, ultimately, it made sense to discontinue his education because the opportunities elsewhere—in another land—seemed more favourable than an education from rural India. With that volition in mind, he left the village and flew overseas, having never stepped outside of the country before.

Aside from Gujarati and a bit of Hindi, he spoke no other languages, yet he was ready to journey across several miles to make a new life in an unknown place. He was willing, in that way, to let go of his own language to learn another, all for a supposed better life.

I wonder if he was out of breath then, too. Did he package his suitcase with an oxygen tank? Did he have a ventilator to support him on the flight? Was there an ambulance to call when he reached the airport in Montréal?

As these questions swirled in my mind, he told me about his journey as an immigrant for the first time, as he was lying in a hospital bed and thinking that his life was over. For instance, he spoke about having to share a one-bedroom apartment with several other young men from India, who were also there for the same reason, shrouded by their own desire for a good life.

It was when he spoke about finding a job in a textile factory that struck me the most. His description jolted me, as he spoke about the heavy lifting, the long hours, and the struggle of learning a new language in a short time to remain employed.

He also recounted another struggle: being away from his family. While he sent them letters, there was no other way of reaching out at the time. Moreover, he put breath into the words he wrote, only to never know if those words gave life to the ones he loved.

As he spoke about this, I wondered, if his body was aching all this time and it had only decided to break down now. I thought about this because here was a man who walked through life without ever visiting the hospital in the last twenty years, and that all changed in a split second.

He was never out of breath before, at least not in the same way, so I was made to wonder if the pandemic only took away what was already being stifled, slowly but surely.

I was never able to find a response to this question. What I confirmed, however, was that it had now decided to take a toll on my uncle. In fact, it was so much so that he started to cry when he recounted the story about moving to Canada, confronted by the experience of having to be away so far from his village and living a life of uncertainty.

It was as if the pandemic had brought that all back to life. In other words, as it took away his ability to breathe, it came with a flood of memories that gripped him, making him bear witness to what he could not contain anymore.

After almost four months, my uncle was able to return home. He was still a fragile version of his former self, but he was the same man I always knew: an immigrant who lived a life that threatened his capacity to breathe, move, and work.

On a quiet day, I can still hear the siren of an ambulance, and when I do, I see the image of a man, heaved from a flight of stairs from his apartment, struggling to maintain his breath.

Despite that reality, I continue to remember something else that is equally important that gives me some hope. My uncle did not come to this country to have his breath taken away. So, for him, the fight against COVID-19 was nothing compared to a life of finding breath where it could not be found.

References

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