

## **Covid-19 is My Alter Ego**

My older sisters and I forced our mother to leave the house. One of them rummaged through the closet for the thick sweater because the near midnight breeze outside was ice cold. Even with her difficulty breathing, our mother selflessly didn't want us to spend on her medication. But on that day, we were finally able to lead her to the gate with enough cash for the initial payment. As the loud slam of our screen door signified her exile, I froze in the silence that followed it, knowing that my mother's return from the hospital would be unknown.

Two years ago, the virus was just a reason for class suspension. But now, it's an inscription on my mother's laboratory result. I remember when I had brain surgery in sixth grade, Mommy was the sunlight in my dim hospital room and the shadow that followed my dextrose bag's every move. But with the present pandemic restrictions, I am not allowed to even visit the isolation room she's placed at.

Never in my wildest imagination would I have anticipated this seemingly modern-day apocalypse. The usual Mondays inside the classroom and listening to teachers behind the desk became me in the living room and them behind the laptop screen. Facing this old, almost dysfunctional device which takes one hour to turn on every day makes my head spin around, bringing me back to memories of the occasional CT scan bathing my brain with much radiation, which is now deadly for me.

Aside from my radioactive study zone, a low internet connection adds up to my enemies on the online learning battlefield. All around me is the audience of jeering background noises,

deep within me is the voice taunting me that I'm not good at techy stuff. But I've also never been quite comfortable wearing school uniforms, so being able to freely suit up only a t-shirt and shorts for the class is another level of solace.

However, I would never deny that it's a grand collection of missed memories out there - morning lessons for my Sunday school students at church, lunchtime at the cafeteria with friends, skimming through mystery novels at the mall's bookstore, and walking home from school with an eagerness to tell my mom how my day was.

Now, after class is dismissed, I go upstairs to my mother's bedroom where she's lying down because her body cannot handle extreme activities and even minor movements anymore. But while she's fighting for her life in the hospital, her empty bed haunted me like a chilly scene from a nightmare.

There was one night that she had to be transferred temporarily from one hospital to another and back because the original medical institution she was confined in had a broken CT scan machine. This "smuggling" took place at 12 midnight. It was long and laborious for my mom because there would be moments when the oxygen tube attached to her must be removed in order to flip her from the room to the ambulance and other places. As her lungs were failing, those brief tubeless minutes felt like an eternity for her. The pain was so severe that she calmly surrendered and waited to be brought to eternity above.

But she survived. She called in the morning the next day. It was a hopeful encouragement for me to start my school day. However, I still put on a metaphorical face mask whenever I face my teacher and classmates on Google Meet, pretending to smile and blink naturally. I also had to wear a literal face mask because of the "ash fall" back then due to the mild eruption of the Taal

Volcano located very near our city. Both masks were suffocating. None of them could protect me from the fear and anxiety creeping into my brain because of the distance between me and my mom, and the possibility that this distance would be permanent.

The eldest daughter in our family did her best to fill in the shoes of my mother during that period. She had to compromise her work and school in order to do more chores and responsibilities at home. It's as if she never paused to breathe or stay put. She also contacted various people each day to ask for help with my mother's daily hospital medications and bills. I tried to treat her like my mom - I shared what happened in my synchronous session daily with her, I vent out my frustrations to her, and I follow her command that was either a household chore or to lead our family bible study.

My other older sister was a freshman at the University of the Philippines-Manila. Although she's not transparent and open to any of us, I could observe that she's struggling with online classes as a college student. Instead of us experiencing a new year of a higher level - me as a Grade 11 and her as a 1st Year undergraduate - we were stuck in a seemingly alternate version of reality where we go through our academic journey in a different and chaotic environment and phenomenon they sugarcoat as *new normal*.

None of these felt normal at all. The virus takes away both life and sanity. Not everyone has an optimal setup for online classes at home. Not every employee can shift their jobs into a remote setup. Not every teenager can bring out the best version of themselves while inside the house where they feel either judged or mistreated.

Although I'm blessed to have a family that clings to God, we still have mental and physical health problems. I myself cannot hold back tears once they drip down my eyes like a

broken, unfixable faucet left running. I was too emotional and reliant on my mother, so the separation between us ate me alive and whole. The lockdown distorted my mind, making me feel like either an innocent Jew hiding from the Nazis or guilty criminal hiding from the police.

After almost two months of us sisters stepping up to more responsibilities at home and acting like Little Women, my father informed us that mommy was then free to go home. I was snapped back to reality and the realization that all this time, my coping mechanism was being with my mother. Her presence alone already recharges my spirit and courage to face each day. But her lifeless bedroom drained the life out of me, too.

The very moment that I catch a glimpse of her entering our big, white gate, my eyes sparked to life again. My smile became genuine again. I no longer felt the need to put on the mask of pretentious joy and peace. Although we were not yet allowed to hug her, I was contented and satisfied with just her presence. I even think that the entire house lit up upon her arrival!

A few days later, when we were slowly getting back to our family's own version of new normal, I expressed my feelings to my mom, especially my primary objective to not just survive and complete my school term but to still thrive and get that With High Honors certificate that will definitely be pinned on our refrigerator beside the certificate already pinned there stating that my mother was cleared from Covid-19.

My ambitious goals didn't match my staggered hopefulness and perseverance. Thus, I re-evaluated myself and attempted to diagnose and treat myself, a possible foreshadowing of my future as a physician. Seeing my mom lying down on her bed again but with a new thing inside her room - a green oxygen tank - hit me. I shouldn't allow the pandemic to slow down my maturity and pace on my journey toward my dreams and aspirations. I definitely don't know

when will God take back my mother or take back anyone of us. So, my coping strategy should not be dependent on things that fade or vanish eventually, but on a strong foundation that never changed even during the worldwide pandemic - the One who does not reside in this world.

After my brief reflection, I play back in my head the scene of my mom leaving the house one cold night, barely breathing and her entering the house with a serene smile on her face. Upon her arrival, a part of myself left in exchange. A character shedding within me took place, evolving with a new strain of bravery like how the virus evolved into a stronger form. I'm now ready to adapt to whatever may be looming ahead my way as a daughter, a student, and a creation of God. I now know that I shouldn't wait for the pandemic to stop before I give a green light to myself and run the race in front of me. I shouldn't ask the Covid-19 to go away because I don't have the power to do that. Rather, I should learn how to be able to live with it.

More importantly, how I'll be able to live with myself.