

## **"Corona, Corona": In the 2020 Cycle of Grief**

### **Last Week of February**

A few days before Nate, Anna, Emmanuel, and I left for our Spring Break trip to Morocco, my mom bombarded me with a series of messages. One of the only forms of communication my parents and I have is via KakaoTalk, a Korean messaging app, where I send them periodic updates of my life, and they respond whenever they get connected to the internet; since internet isn't very reliable in Tanzania, we rarely get to message each other in real time, so when one small vibration in my pocket soon became multiple vibrations, I knew something was up. I unlocked my phone and opened KakaoTalk to half a dozen messages from her:

11:16 AM - Hyo-In, I'd been wanting to write to you earlier, but we haven't had internet for the past few days. I don't have much time, so I'm going to be very direct with you: the four of you should cancel your trip to Morocco.

11:18 AM - Things are looking pretty bad around the world these days because of the coronavirus. It looks like the U.S. is still okay, but other places, including Korea, aren't doing well at all. Our country already has 400 confirmed cases of the virus with dozens more by the day.

11:26 AM - As of now, there are 14 countries that are banning Koreans from entering the country, and they're denying entry to Koreans at the airport here in Tanzania, as well. It's just a matter of time before they'll start doing that in other countries. Don't just say "no" about cancelling the trip - actually talk about it with your friends, Nate and Anna, and your husband, Emmanuel.

Overwhelmed by her messages, I responded to her, reassuring her that the four of us had been keeping up with the news and looking at different ways to travel safely.

"Plus," I said in my next message to her, "we've already booked all of our tours and our stays in different ryads, so we'd lose all of our money if we canceled the trip right now! We'll be fine, Mom, I promise. We're all young and healthy."

I shook my head in disbelief and a little bit of frustration as I watched the three little dots moving, waiting for her to type out her next message to me. I couldn't believe my mom was freaking out so much about a virus that was mainly just affecting China, Korea, and a few other countries.

"Okay," her message finally said. "Since you're telling me that you are all paying attention to the virus, I'll just stop here. Have a good weekend."

I knew my mom was upset with me and was being passive aggressive, but I was also annoyed at her for being so paranoid. I texted my Morocco group chat, sharing that my mom had asked us to cancel our trip.

"Can you believe it? My mom's being so dramatic," I said.

"My parents are worried, too. They're saying that things aren't bad in Taiwan yet, but people are being really cautious," Anna responded. "My mom wants us to travel with face masks! Haha."

I responded to her message with a laughing emoji.

Nate chimed in not long after, saying his relatives were surprised that we were still planning on going on our trip, and that his mom, who works as a nurse in Ukraine, told him we should all be very careful.

“Oh my goodness. We’ll be fine. Our parents just need to chill out.”  
Nate, Anna, and Emmanuel all responded to my message with a thumbs up.

### **First Week of March**

We were having the time of our lives in Morocco. We had left Boston on February 28, flown to Lisbon, spent a long layover wandering around Madrid eating tapas, then finally arrived in Marrakesh after almost 30 hours of traveling. The first few days of our trip flew by, and every moment of getting lost in the windy streets of the medina or eating tagines and drinking mint tea were magical. I loved the beautiful architecture of the Old City, and the warm weather definitely played a huge role in boosting our moods. Since our phones didn’t have unlimited international data, we got the occasional update about the coronavirus, but for the most part, we were unplugged, unaware, and unaffected.

On March 2, we left the city for a 3-day tour in the Sahara Desert, complete with Berber camping, camel trekking, and sandboarding. The four of us were so caught up in the majestic scenery of the desert at sunset and the breathtaking views of the Milky Way at night, that arriving at the big city of Fes after our tour was a sort of rude awakening for us. It had been so nice to be away from civilization for a few days, and the busy nature of Fes was a little overwhelming for us, but after a bath and massage session at a traditional hammam spa, we were ready to dive back in to exploring the city.

That’s when it started: the microaggressions and the racism. At first, it began with kids around the middle and high school age pointing at Anna and me, whispering “corona, corona” to their friends. Some of them would usher their younger siblings out of our way, covering their noses and mouths and glaring at us. “China, China,” other kids would say, following us and taunting us. Towards the beginning, I was nothing more than a little annoyed. “They’re kids,” I said back at our ryad. “They’re just being annoying.” Nate and Emmanuel sympathized with Anna and me, and we made the decision to not let it bother us.

By the time we got to Chefchaouen, though, things were worse. We noticed adults starting to fake-cough in our direction and say “corona, corona” any time we passed by. A few of them told us to go back to where we came from, which, contrary to their beliefs, was not any part of Asia. I was especially angry when a group of kids, no older than elementary school children, started hitting me with pieces of cardboard bigger than their own torsos, laughing when I asked them to stop. I was fed up by the time we arrived in Tangier. What had started out as nothing more than little annoyances had gotten to the point of really bothering me. When a group of college boys walked by me and spit in my direction, I was ready to lash out at them, but common sense held me back.

As the four of us were checking into our flights back to Boston from Tangier, the person working behind the front desk turned to her colleague and whispered in Spanish that I should not be allowed to travel because I was Korean. I bit my tongue and pretended not to understand Spanish because I didn’t want to deal with it, even though every part of me wanted to explain that, though I had a Korean passport, I hadn’t been there in over 4 years. After a brief conversation between the two women at the front desk who kept going back and forth on whether they should let me check in or not, we were allowed to proceed through security and to our flights. Then, after a long flight, another layover in Madrid during which we decided not to wander around, a flight to Lisbon, and one more flight... we were finally back in Boston.

Then, we got sick.

I kept telling myself that the cough was probably from the dryness of having been in Morocco, that the fever was just our bodies telling us that they were tired from traveling a lot over the past 10 days, and that my shortness of breath was because of my asthma. But somewhere in the back of my mind, I was also aware that we had traveled through Spain, which was, by this point, a major red-flag country with the coronavirus, that we had interacted with people at the airport who were coming from Italy, and that there was a small possibility that we had contracted the coronavirus.

I decided to stay home from work and classes, just in case. I also gave the COVID-19 hotline a call, and they redirected me to my PCP, who redirected me to someone from CDC, who eventually told me that unless I had been to China, Korea, Italy, Iran, Japan, or Hong Kong, or been in contact with someone who had been confirmed to have the coronavirus, I couldn't be tested even if I had all of the symptoms. I told myself that it was better safe than sorry, so I decided to self quarantine, and my husband, Emmanuel, decided to follow suit and told his company that he'd be working from home until 14 days after I got better.

Nate, on the other hand, went into work for the first 3 days of being back because at the time, COVID-19 still hadn't hit the U.S. very hard and he was in denial about the fact that he might have the virus. Then, after a long conversation with his PCP, he was encouraged to stay home until at least his coughing stopped and he didn't run a fever for 48 hours. He eventually gave in and made the decision to stay home, all the while grumbling about how he couldn't wait to get back out again. He was frustrated at the virus and the fact that the U.S. didn't have enough testing kits for who had coronavirus symptoms but weren't sure about their diagnoses.

Even amongst our friends, there were varied reactions to the virus. In our group chat, there were messages ranging from "Oh, wow, flights to the Caribbean are so cheap! Let's go!!!" to "I think things are getting really serious; we should be careful and try to avoid large crowds." to "I can't believe there's no more toilet paper - people are so dumb." In the group chat, I said, "Well, at least this isn't affecting us too much yet. Let's all just be careful and we'll be fine."

## **Second Week of March**

About a day after I had said that the virus wasn't affecting us too much, Emmanuel got a call from his travel startup company where he'd been working for the past two and a half years. He was told that he was being laid off from his job as a software engineer due to massive budget cuts caused by the virus. The news came to us as a huge surprise as he had been doing so well at the company and had even gotten another pay raise at the beginning of the month. He immediately started looking for other jobs and talking to recruiters, all of whom said similar things about "the state of the economy," and "hiring freezes," and "virus-related layoffs."

A few days after that, Emerson sent out the email to let the students know that all classes would be moved online for the rest of the semester starting the following week. Then, over the next few days, our group chat blew up with some saying that their companies were going to be requiring everyone to work from home, another saying that her grad school program was also being moved online, another letting us know that the public school systems were closing, and others saying that they had to keep going into work despite everything that was going on.

"So much for having said this isn't affecting us personally," I wrote in the group chat.

### **Third Week of March**

As Emmanuel continued to apply to jobs and I continued to cough and not be able to breathe, I thought about the severity of this situation. I was anxious about the fact that Emmanuel was unemployed, nervous about my grandparents' health in Korea, frustrated about classes going online, and overall, just sad about everything that was happening. I wasted a lot of time, and though time was all I had, I felt sluggish and unmotivated to do anything. A lot of my hours working on campus had been cut, too, so I had no structure to my days; I binge-watched several shows, including "You," "Love is Blind," "Tiger King," and "The Handmaid's Tale."

Any time I opened social media, I was bombarded by news articles or friends saying this and that. I didn't know what to believe any more, but I wanted to stay up to date on the latest COVID-19 facts, so I let my brain be overwhelmed by information.

### **Fourth Week of March**

Boston's Governor Baker issued a Stay at Home Advisory on Tuesday, and though Emmanuel and I hadn't been leaving the house anyway since I was still coughing a lot, I began to be more frustrated than ever before at the different ways people were reacting to the advisory, even amongst our friend group. Some still saw this as an opportunity to "work from home" (sleep in, chill, and maybe get a few hours of work in) and go to the grocery store whenever they wanted and have people over to their apartments, whereas others decided to take this as seriously as possible. I was in the latter category of people wanting to take this seriously so that we could play our part in staying home to protect our community.

My parents also sent me a long message on KakaoTalk saying that they were seeing and experiencing a lot of racism in Tanzania over the past few weeks; friends of theirs had been attacked with bricks and machetes while they were driving with their kids, another Korean family's house had been vandalized by people throwing things through their windows, and even my parents had been kicked out of the grocery store because the locals didn't want "virus spreaders" to be shopping with them.

Anxiety, frustration, and quarantines are not a good combination, and I had long and hard conversations with friends regarding COVID-19, ranging from freedom versus quarantining and the government to the virus itself, as well as emotional wellbeing and our families.

### **Last Week of March / First Week of April**

I decided to make a conscious decision: I wanted to let go of anger and frustration and try to look for the positives during this time. I read somewhere that this emotion we are feeling is grief, and I couldn't agree more. Watching the death toll and unemployment rates rise, seeing the U.S.'s slow reaction to the virus, experiencing a loss of routine and comfort, having my travel plans for the spring and summer become uncertain... it was grief.

But I also realized that, in the cycle of grief, there eventually comes a stage of acceptance. I believe I'm moving towards that stage right now. Obviously, there's still a lot for me to learn, but I'm at a point where I can look at this situation realistically, but still be hopeful

about it. I know that the death toll is continuing to rise and that the economy will continue to be bad for quite a while after this all ends. And while I'm still frustrated and anxious out of my mind, I have a sense of hope.

In times like these, we see the worst in people, but we also do see the best in humanity. There's only so much I can do to help this situation, and I am only one person, but I am the one person who can control my attitude towards this - from this point on, I'm going to try to choose hope and positivity. I know there'll be bad days and rough times ahead of us, but we're all in this together, and this, too, shall eventually end.