

“ To my parent’s captors”

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Free them. Release them. Let them go.

It’s been almost eternity since I saw even a ghost of a smile appear on their weary faces. Their haunting presence at home is a dreary reminder of the hardships my family’s had to endure for the past few months. Once carefree and jovial expressions have morphed into furrowed brows, downturned lips and darkened eyes. The apprehension they radiate is contagious, suffocating every little crook and cranny of our hollowed out household, quashing hope and drowning us with the prospect of the unknown. My parents took the brunt of it, and like a parasite you leeches them dry of any positivity, leaving them only husks of their former selves.

It would be easy to simply blame my parents for the emotional stress they inadvertently imposed on me, to blame them for enabling our financial situation to go awry, to blame them for wrenching my heart as I ached for *them*, yet the endless hours of isolation and contemplation have led me to the true culprit: you.

Why target us? I ask this of you, COVID-19. My parents were just your run-of-the-mill middle-class citizens: they had no ulterior motives and just wanted to provide for their families. So why? Why choose *them*? Being their daughter I understood them, and I would guarantee with all my life that they were completely undeserving of this punishment. Was the past year not enough torture for us? 6 months of constant rioting and sudden protests tanked sales figures and left my father scampering for alternatives—it steadily unravelled years upon years of struggle and labour in my father’s endeavour, shaking the very foundations of his business. His eyes used to light up each time I inquired about the shop, hands moving animatedly as he wilfully dedicated whole afternoons to discussing his future plans with me. It was my childhood dream, he’d say, ‘*Love what you do and do what you love*’—that was his motto for life. My mother and I grew enamoured with his business venture too, and unbeknownst to us it became part of our family.

And I suppose that's why it was so saddening to watch our 1st store shut down.

It happened a few weeks after the Chinese New Year—the majority of the population would rather stay home under the threat of a new, enigmatic disease hanging above their heads. It was our largest store yet, and the birthplace of much of my childhood. Packing shelves with Mom, haphazardly sticking price tags on stock, “borrowing” an item or two from the racks...I cherished every second of my time there. But now because of you, they will only exist in my memories.

The merciless landlord utterly refused to negotiate, and that was the reason why the shop had to close its doors one last time. Dad attempted to withhold that piece of vital information from me, but I found out anyways. I experienced waves of unadulterated rage: how could he not let me know? Did he presume that I was too young to understand? I was about to demand an explanation when the realisation that he probably hurt more than I did occurred to me. I stopped in my tracks and designated myself to wallowing quietly.

So that was one thing you ripped away from me, COVID-19, but as much as I would have hoped otherwise, the list continues.

You stripped away my father's lifelong achievements, but of course that didn't satisfy your hunger for destruction. No, you had to antagonise my mother as well.

Initially, my father was the main breadwinner for the family. As his business began haemorrhaging cash the family turned towards my mother. For a period of time, this unforeseen turn of events instilled within her a sense of duty and honour: she recently received a promotion at the airline company, so perhaps this could work out. These were trying times, but with a bit of grit we as a family should be able to come through.

A few weeks later all that dissolved into fear and distress.

‘Unpaid leave’, they called it. ‘Glorified unemployment’, I dubbed it. There was no purpose in mincing words. The truth was already glaring at our faces, so why bother appointing it with a fancy title? The prospect of being left jobless was now as real as could be, not just some distant penalty, for workplace mishaps. My mother roams the house now, pallid profile

wracked with trepidation and ghostly white strands interspersing her once glorious rush of hair.

The two most significant people in my life, you snatched them away and agonised them, as a cat does its prey, dangling a life nonchalantly. The remaining figments of my early years, you crushed them, with an anger like that of vexed gods. I have nothing left to lose now, so here's what I will say:

I won't permit you to hurt my family anymore. I refuse to let you hurt us, and no longer will you hold power over us. Whatever it takes, I will hold us together, and as this pandemic enters its dying throes, we will stand strong, united.