

To:

Sonali Misra

Dalkeith Road

Edinburgh

On:

1 January 2020

Eyre Place

Edinburgh

17 March 2021

Dear Sonali,

You must be doubly shocked: an *actual* letter in the post? And from someone claiming to be your Future Self? No need to give Papa anxious calls about being the target of identity theft; this isn't a scam. I will not trick you into revealing any personal or financial information. In fact, I won't ask anything of you except that you humor me. Even if you disbelieve me, at least this will make for a great story to narrate to your friends one day. Just read what I have to say and do with the knowledge what you will.

I remember the start of your day well. You've woken up with a mild hangover and a stinking smile since you lazed out on brushing your teeth when you dropped into bed late the night before. Your New Year's Eve plans weren't terribly exciting, as usual. Only you and two of your four flatmates, who were far away from their families either by circumstance or by choice, drinking gin-and-tonic and playing Bananagrams. Mixing vanilla ice cream with the strong coffee your Cuban-American friend gifted you. Relishing the chilly bite of the wind in the top-floor balcony as fireworks shimmered over Holyrood Castle and you held hands and sang along to 'Auld Lang Syne', surprised that you'd somehow picked up the lyrics in your time in Scotland. A few kilometres away, the city danced and drank in midnight at Hogmanay. You chose to stay home.

*Does this habit of opting for the familiar prepare you for the year to come? Or do you regret letting such seemingly humdrum opportunities to socialise slip through your fingers? I still don't have the answers.*

You've arisen with a bright outlook. Why shouldn't you? 2020 is going to be a fantastic year, filled with monumental adventures and events. You'll be travelling (for free!) to Canada – your first time ever in the Americas – for the launch of the anthology your friends and you have worked so hard on. While you're there, you can hop on to the US to meet some loved ones and add another country to your list because who knows when you'll get a chance like this again? 2020 will also be the first full calendar year of your PhD, the reason you moved back to Scotland after completing your master's. You spent only eight months home in India between the two degrees, and for most of it, to your parents' annoyance, you were locked away in your room to write your debut. And you did it: you *finally* finished a full book after starting and abandoning so many, their ghosts haunting and taunting you to this day. After a few deadline postponements, you submitted the manuscript in August, a few weeks before your flight. Luckily your delayed submission matched your editor's schedule too. You'd expected that it would release at the end of 2019. How you wished it would release before your birthday in December so you could say that you'd published a book at twenty-seven – positive things could happen at that age too, 27 Club. But it didn't, did it? Corporate internal plans have no care for arbitrary personal goals, and the book was pushed to March 2020. That's okay, it's just three months away so you won't have to wait too long to hold your book in your hands!

*Oh, but that fucking March.*

Before all that, what you're most excited for is Mama's visit. She has spent a few weeks in the US and will soon be on her way to you. It made sense to fly through the UK en route to India,

though a *bit* excessive, you thought, since you saw her not even four months ago. And you'll be visiting home in another eight months or so. But look at our jetsetter mother, travelling across continents all alone. You've been concerned about her as she makes her way around the US in the frightening climate under Trump, though she's supposed to worry about you as the daughter and she's visited foreign lands by herself before you could even spell them. No wonder that Little Sonali had big dreams of gifting Papa a Mercedes and Mama a world tour. Thirty seemed like a good age to do this – Papa would still be able to enjoy his drives and Mama her travels in their sixties. Thirty seemed so old back then. Thirty painted a picture of a proper adult with her own car, house, family and career, along with a disposable income with which she could attempt to repay her parents' love and generosity, to give them the things they'd sacrificed so that their kids could have the best start in their lives.

*You and I know better now. I'm turning thirty soon, and it is bleak. Not only because I can't tick off any of the Thirty Checklist Items and thus make for a piss-poor imitation of an Adult, but also because...*

You've had time to set up your new place and, unlike the university accommodation you stayed in during your master's, there will be enough space for both Mama and you to fit inside your bedroom; you could even stretch your limbs without knocking something over! As much as you enjoy proving to her that you can take care of yourself, of course you've already demanded that she cook you kulcha channa and mattar paneer because sometimes there's no replicating her recipes. In return, she'll enjoy British 'delicacies' such as crumpets and scones and snack on as many fat juicy strawberries as she can get her hands on, though you'll keep reminding her that she has to keep a handle on her pesky diabetes. Both of you will travel to places in the UK that you haven't seen before, the highlight being the Lake District. She'll insist that it's more beautiful than

the Scottish Highlands, but your loyalty to a nation you've lived in for the past few years will fight that. You'll take stunning pictures of her in landscapes that could pass off as cardboard backdrops of movie sets, and she'll try her best to return the favour but she'll either shake the camera, cut off your feet, or block the lens with a finger, until you give up entirely and not always graciously. As much as you'd like to keep the peace, you'll bicker about frivolous things that I can't recall now. What I do remember is the secrets you both will share that you never could in a man-filled house. You'll also learn to rein in the confidence that you have moving through public spaces, a delirious feeling that you've never experienced in India as a woman, when your wallet will be stolen in – where else? – London. Even after crying for a few hours over the monetary loss and the invasion, it'll take several weeks for you to rid yourself of the distrust you develop for these strangers in this foreign land. But you'll have to suck it up, because Mama will be leaving in two more days and you won't want her trip to end on a negative. And I'm so glad that you do. Unbeknownst to either of you, this will be the last time that you'll be together for a year and counting. I only wish you would choose kindness over strife and hug her more fiercely as you say goodbye, though your taller-than-Mama body is still not accustomed to how your figures fit in the reserved-for-special-occasions embrace.

Back in Edinburgh with your four human and one dog housemates, you'll miss Mama's presence and having a companion you could speak with in Hindi about shared cultural experiences that you'd always have to annotate for folks in the UK, but there'll be other things to keep you distracted. Your PhD, obviously, but also house parties, day trips, pub-meets, literary events and those long walks in Holyrood Park – you'll even finally climb Arthur's Seat! Here's something else to look forward to: you'll meet someone from Glasgow on 24 February, precisely ten days after you all host an 'I Love EU' Valentine's Day house party for friends with unattached or broken

hearts due to love or Brexit. Let's call him A; no, that's too boring. Aioli, yes, one of your favourite dips. He would approve of his moniker being a food item. One day you'll ask him if he would rather give up chocolates or you, and he'll tut-tut and ask you not to put you both in an awkward spot.

You picked the 24<sup>th</sup> because you'd bought a ticket for a concert in the city by X Ambassadors, another band that would never perform in your home country. That's an added upside of living in the UK: you get to watch performances that you would only read about in India. And Glasgow isn't too far away, either for concerts or dating someone. Though it's across the Scottish coast, you've travelled farther every weekday in India for university and your first job. Distance has never scared you.

*Time, on the other hand – that's another story.*

Things with Aioli seem to be progressing well. You'll go on four dates: walks, cafés, restaurants, art galleries, and you'll plan a minigolf double date with friends, like they do in the movies, just as those whispers that have been crossing the ocean since late 2019 – whispers of a new disease – start getting louder. They'll eventually drown out everything else. This new virus will seem scarier than the bird or swine flus, but as distant and foreign as Ebola was. Just awful. So bad, so sad. Those poor people in a far-off land you'll probably never visit. Humans have a tendency to die though; it's a truth that you've grown up knowing in a country that has more people than it knows what to do with. You're desensitised to violence and death, but not enough to make a habit of reading daily newspapers that are smattered with rape, murder, disease. You'd rather get your highlights from Twitter. But even it will be abuzz with news of COVID-19, along with bat-soup jokes and racism against the Chinese. With talks of how the virus will strike a balance

between being infectious and deadly to spread far and quick. How it will especially be fatal to the vulnerable – the elderly and the chronically ill.

*You're supposed to gift Papa a Mercedes and Mama a world tour soon so that they can enjoy them in their sixties. Mama also has that pesky diabetes.*

China doesn't seem so distant and foreign when you view an Indian map.

'COVID-19' will look so scientific. Medical. Code words for people in white coats bent over microscopes. It'll gradually become the more casual lowercase 'covid'. Or the old friend from the block everyone knows by nickname, 'the pandemic'.

But it'll take some time for covid to reach its pan- status. The world will attempt to sit back in the comfort of its imagined map lines, but the virus will have no respect for the borders that millions have died to etch. At least landmasses and oceans are real, tangible. Yet surmountable. As covid jumps from continent to continent, people will bluster at its audacity. How dare it inch from the Third World to the First, from developing to developed, from Mystic to Modern? Polio, tuberculosis, measles, *disease* has no place in the West, and its crumbling healthcare and policies will reflect that staunch belief.

You – who hails from a land where drinking tap water, walking barefoot, not washing hands equals illness – will take comfort in your location, and the national health services it comes with, too. Most of your anxiety will be spent on family and friends back in India who've not had your luck to escape, and they'll advise you to delay your visit home first by a few months, then a year. It'll start out as a decision to protect your family as well as yourself, especially since you can't imagine being stuck in a metal tube with recycled air for nine hours while other humans encircle you – how did you ever attend concerts in packed crowds? – but you will be at the mercy

of governments soon enough. As the UK has its on-again–off-again affair with lockdown, you'll instead find yourself stuck in a large house with friends of circumstance rather than choice as tensions rise, until you move to a smaller flat that'll leave you isolated. You won't know which is worse: being around people you may not always like or having days you won't hear your own voice. Meanwhile, thousands and thousands will die across the world as leaders fail to act, either in time or at all. How long till you receive a call from a loved one telling you that they're sick too?

Every conversation you have over the next year will be incomplete without a mention of the coronavirus: how many have died, what your Tier allows, where we are in the development of a vaccine, who is not obeying social distancing, when you can see your family again. You will feel uneasy when babies smile at your masked face instead of being fearful or confused. You will stop in your tracks as you watch other masked faces run around with Christmas shopping lists. Hand sanitiser and toilet roll will become valuable commodities, and if you were in India, you wouldn't have faced at least one of these shortages. Supermarket shelves will be bereft of canned food, flour, rice. Any of these scenes could be ripped from the pages of those post-apocalyptic novels you love so much.

Since covid will occupy so much headspace and actual internet bandwidth, one would hope that the universe would suspend all other grief. But life has no overarching logic, no system of checks and balances.

In the second week of lockdown, your friend will fall and break her back and spend a year in rehab as she becomes paralysed from the waist-down.

You won't see her because of the risk of infecting her and you'll miss her.



Another friend will worry for her mother's health and tell you that her worst nightmare is losing her mother, and it'll come true since Indian hospitals won't be able accommodate Aunty's heart surgery in time due to the strain on healthcare caused by the pandemic.

You won't be there for your friend because of the travel risk and you'll feel helpless.

One of your oldest family friends – someone you've known your entire life, your parents have known for forty years – will die of suicide as his clinical depression will worsen in corona times.

You will regret not meeting him the last time you had a chance to and rage at the ignorance about mental illness in India.

Your own Maamaji – the elder of your family, the man who practically raised his sisters, your mother, after their mother died when Mama was only thirteen – will unexpectedly pass away on a day that you knew you would be especially homesick because it would be Diwali and your dog Rico's birthday.

You will stay in bed and cry until your eyes are red and head cloudy.

You will not be by Mama's side when she needs you and this will haunt you.

Of course, your father and brother love her and will care for her, but they don't know her like you do. They don't understand what each smirk, twinkle, frown on her face means. They don't know when she needs someone and when she needs space. They are not the ones she turns to and says: you have taught me what it is to be in a mother–daughter relationship, one that I couldn't have; you are my mother reincarnate. Even in her grief, after losing one of the people she has loved most, she will tell you not to worry, not to be too sad as you are all alone. And that will torment you more, and you will wish – not for the first time and not the last – that you had hugged her harder at the London airport before she turned away.

I am sorry. I don't think I have said that to you yet. My heart aches for myself but also you. You will experience – not endure, *experience* – so much hurt in a year that will both fly by and never end. But I envy you, too. You at least have three months of normality left before we forget what that means for us anymore.

It probably seems like I'm bombarding you with burdens. You'll think: it must be because it's all packed together so black-and-white on the page, it must be the medium's fault. But I didn't have that slippery hope to clutch on to when I faced everything for myself. Most of these events will occur simultaneously or right after another, so that before you've had a chance to recover, you will be doused in grief again. The four walls of your bedroom will become your only physical companions, along with misery and tears, and you'll find yourself returning to the same refrain: *it's too much, it's all too much*. You know you can manage crisis, but when that 'i' becomes 'e' and you begin to live within crises-mode perpetually, you will feel like you are drowning and will clamour for a free, full breath. Short inhales will appear in the form of a few personal and professional wins, but none will escape the tinge of sadness that will shroud everything you do this year.

Your friends and you at the literary project you run, *The Selkie*, will eventually produce a gorgeous anthology to showcase the creative diversity in Canada, but the project will keep getting delayed as the team deal with their own hardships. What place would accountability and professionalism retain when everyone's just trying to make it through another day? And obviously you can forego dreams of exploring other countries; there will be no going to Canada for any book launches. There will be no going *anywhere* – no further exploration of Scotland, no visits home to India.

Your supervisors will be gentle and understanding when you won't be able to stop crying before a deadline and will fail to remember simple words to craft an email requesting a mental-health leave only two months into lockdown. You'll think of the times you had to conjure a physical illness while requesting a day off in India, when all you needed was a respite from work pressure. You'll still receive excellent feedback on your first-year annual review – can you believe it? You, who's felt like such an imposter in academia and hoped that no one around you will figure out that you're guessing at it all? But your PhD will not escape unscathed; you'll have to redo your research plans. You created this study to foster relationships with leaders in publishing in India and the UK, and now you'll hope and pray that they'll agree to video-call interviews and remember you as Sonali, the whip-smart PhD researcher, and not a bumbling fool wasting their time when you wish to return to the industry someday. And if you thought PhD work was already hard enough, wait till you see how much lonelier and more mind-numbing it can be when you're forced to conduct all of your work from home: no more day trips to Stirling to explore the university's library collections or admire the beauty of the campus, no more in-person meetings with your supervisors or any seminars and trainings. The screens you're so obsessed with will become your lifelines and your nemeses. Your eyes will constantly ache, but there will be no escaping your virtual life. It is where you work and exist now.

But hey, there's the anticipated release of your debut book, a childhood aspiration! The pandemic is no time for the launch of an unknown writer though. Even as so many around you will suffer and lose loved ones or their own lives, you will still feel sorry for yourself, and the accompanying guilt of misplaced priorities will turn your stomach. *21 Fantastic Failures* will keep getting postponed and will finally release in September, a year after you submitted the manuscript, when you won't be in India to witness a lifelong dream turn true: to see your writing in bookshops

across the country. Love and support will pour in from friends and family from across the globe, along with requests for free copies until you scold the economics of being a writer into their understanding. It'll feel surreal knowing that strangers are paying money to read your words, and thankfully most will leave positive reviews, but you'll go on deep internet dives whenever their fifty-word critiques will undermine your fifty-thousand. You'll constantly remind yourself that no matter how hard you try, you won't please everyone. You will still try your damndest to promote your debut through book releases, literature festival appearances, panel discussions, podcasts – all done digitally of course – since you know from your experience of working in publishing that, as a first-time author, you are not your publisher's priority. Ironically, your book will fail. You will find out a day after Maamaji's death that you have had less than optimal sales. But your tears will be spent on grieving and homesickness; you won't have any left to shed for your book. You can only spare some apathy, especially because the sales figures won't surprise you. How could it be anything else when people are losing their jobs, unsure of how they can make that next rent, food shop, tuition fee payment? You'll be among those too. Finding part-time work to meet your bills will become a defunct dream, like the rest of your plans. What will perhaps shake your identity the most will be that smudging of the ink on your blueprint; you've never known how to exist without mapping your life years in advance.

What about your exciting new relationship with Aioli in Glasgow? Travelling to-and-fro will start out as a slight inconvenience but will become a roadblock once lockdown is imposed precisely a month after your first meeting; travel will be banned unless it's for an 'essential' purpose. What is 'essential' in the UK will be a much laxer version of life in India, where the government will enforce a strict curfew, and even when it prematurely eases, the country will have rules in place that won't always make sense (why should one wear a face mask in their own car if

there's no one else there?). After ten years of your family playing the tune of 'No, you do it – no, I did it yesterday', you'll laugh at the demand Rico will be in, as taking him on walks within the apartment complex will be the only way your family can leave the house. You'll be amused by, and thankful for, the Scottish government considering outings for daily exercise and limited socialising an essential part of life, but even whenever lockdown eases, your anxiety won't let you use public transport too often to meet your partner in what will *essentially* become a long-distance relationship. But what you'll be most grateful for is Aioli's presence, as virtual as it may be, since you will rest a bit easier knowing that there will be someone in your continent who will care if you've managed to get out of bed, if you've eaten, if you're okay.

At least you're still in a gorgeous country, right? During your master's, whenever gloom crept too close, you would just need to step out into the streets of Edinburgh to be surrounded by so much beauty and clean air that it would assault your senses. Not once did it fail to elicit a smile. But when *all* you can do is walk around the city – and not travel anywhere beyond Edinburgh, which would fit as a neighbourhood within Delhi – the sights will lose some of their lustre. Respite will come when museums, art galleries, restaurants and shops open briefly, but you'll be pulled into isolation soon enough, yet again and again. Back to you and those same bedroom walls. No human white noise to distract you from the silence that'll be interrupted only by your own breathing.

Though it will seem like at several points in my letter and your experience of the year, all will not be lost. Since you're *you*, there won't be a period in 2020 when you won't have something to challenge and inspire you. Even before you returned to Scotland for your PhD, you had joined a volunteer team to support others in the book trade, because helping people has always brought you

joy and you had been warned that a PhD could be lonely. Those well-wishers had no idea what lay in wait for everyone and how much harder it would be not to be part of a local cohort or community. The work that you do with the Society of Young Publishers Scotland, an organisation almost as old as independent India and which – surprise! – you now head as the Co-chair, will give your days purpose and solace, and, okay sure, some stress too, especially after you’ll have to cancel the annual conference in March 2020. You won’t complete your novel that you’d rudely pushed aside first for *21 Fantastic Failures* and then for the start of your PhD, *but* you will revise the words that you have already and send them out into the world for different opportunities. Even when you’ll receive a rejection for a writing mentorship, it’ll be accompanied by a note from an editor who’d like to take your novel to the rest of their team. But it won’t get rejected everywhere: a literary agent will agree to read and review a major chunk of your manuscript. You’ll also push down your fear to appear at an academic conference and receive positive feedback on your research topic from a scholar whose work you’ll cite in your studies, taking you close to what you can only term ‘nerdy fangirling’. And you – who could never journal even in private because the sight of her own feelings embarrassed her – will publish one of your most honest and vulnerable nonfiction pieces, one that has been ten years in the making, in a wonderful Scottish anthology, *So Hormonal*. It’ll be your favourite work yet.

Still, this one year will age your soul by five. But through all the pain, you will learn to become more patient and comfortable in silence. You will learn to ask for help and even have your first counselling session. You will learn that you will not always meet the pedestalled idea of you, and that’s okay. You – who has numerous close friends – will be forced to focus your energies on a select few, and maybe that’s a part of growing up too. Not that you won’t want to help others, but sometimes you will need to put your own needs first and that won’t make you selfish. New

hobbies will bring you joy, too. Cooking, for one. If only I could express what a wonderful risotto and chicken biryani you'll soon be able to make! Most importantly, you'll learn to bin your plans and take each day as it comes...

... although every tick of the clock will remind you that you have limited time and opportunities left in this country.

I know you see this letter for what it truly is: a way for us to remain positive. You may press pause on your plans, but life will not. As much as you'll want to disqualify 2020 as a year, you won't get a do-over. Given the chance, I would trade everything that I've learnt this past year to get back who I was, who you are. I was happier, I would smile easier. Contrary to the clichés, the struggles have only made me weaker; the wounds have been precariously stitched, and each time my body is forced to strain to jump over new obstacles, the seams unravel. With the name my parents gave me – Sonali, the 'golden' child – it was perhaps prophetic that people throughout my life would liken me to the sun. But I feel like I've lost a little of my light now.

I don't know if this chance to warn you of what is to come is a gift or a curse. I wish I was writing you with happy news, that this letter could be about your greatest achievement, how you changed the world, how you fell in love. All I can provide you is a record of events that you'll soon face, not always enlightened by hindsight because I myself have not processed and grieved everything I lost last year. I'm not sure what purpose this will serve. Am I being cruel by stealing your ignorance? Will my warning make you do things differently? If I'm honest, as I look back at the past year, there is nothing that I would change about my behaviour. There is nothing *I* could have done that would have made either mine or others' lives easier. But what I can promise you is that your family will be safe. When your parents will tell you that they've received their appointment

for the first dose of the vaccine in March 2021, a stress knot that you won't realise you've been holding on to will release from your forehead, and you'll feel hopeful for the first time in a year. You will be safe and will wait for your vaccination appointment too. You will look forward to the day that you can travel home and embrace your family, Rico and your friends, with all the love that you've been holding on to – along with the fear and the stress – since 2019.

You will survive. I will survive.

We will.

With all my courage and love,

Sonali

17 March 2021