

The day he returned to work was anxiety-provoking for both of us. The skies were gray and crying big fat tears on my behalf. When the coronavirus pandemic started to ramp up in Iowa, he was on the only block in residency that was conducive to working from home: research. Though I remained on clinical rotations then, I did not feel the same anxiety going into the hospital that I felt watching him leave. I had given hearty pumps to every sanitizer dispenser until my already dry skin grew scales. Our team air fist-bumped patients instead of handshakes, and luckily, we did not consult on anyone in isolation. Perhaps because it was only just beginning, but I had felt safe even within hospital confines despite receiving multiple daily updates on policy evolution.

I knew it was only a matter of time but was still disappointed when student rotations were halted by AAMC and LCME. However, being at home with him was an impossible luxury. Usually we are either both at the hospital on different duties, or I am home while he works weekends, or even if we're both home one is bound to be too tired for any activity. During those 5 days, we cooked together, completed puzzles we had given up previously, and exercised not nearly enough because I couldn't focus through the laughter. What should have felt mundane was an indulgence. Where there should have been fear, I felt comfort. Safe. Loved.

Now he is back on the wards, and I am home worrying. Selfishly I wanted him to stay with me, safe away from all the people secretly harboring coronavirus. He returned one night with a headache, and wondered "is this it?" I brushed it off with no evidence whatsoever to the contrary. The next day he complained of malaise, with the same question. I asked him which resident isn't tired? Next came the occasional cough and sneeze. Again, I say no, it's springtime allergies, same as every year. Inside, however, I felt a familiar fear taking hold. Because what if?

During the SARS outbreak in 2003, I was living in Taipei. I do not fully recall the details, but I remember having my temperature taken every morning before being allowed to enter my elementary. I remember the tension but did not understand why at the time. I remember faces half obscured by cloth masks decorated with cartoon characters, the kind I imagine are still being worn in the current pandemic. So concerned was he that my partner once requested his temperature to be checked while being screened entering the hospital, but surprisingly they did not have a thermometer on hand. He was told that his malaise was "probably not COVID." I feel the same tension I felt during SARS, only now I understand why. The fear that found foothold in Taiwan 17 years earlier prompted the development of a national health command center which integrated agencies such that when COVID 19 came on scene, response teams were ready. My father, a professor in Taichung, tells me that classes are still running, and businesses are still open. I only hope that America and the rest of the globe will be able to recover from this pandemic and be better prepared next round.

Even before it was mandated, he was segregating hospital and home clothes, changing into green scrubs at work and back into street clothes before leaving in addition to Cloroxing his belongings. After removing his shoes, he heads straight for the bathroom to scrub his hands lest he contaminate me. Being in a relationship with a resident physician is inherently challenging because as a student, I don't share the same grueling hours and constantly wish that he had more time and was less tired for me. I often play second or third fiddle to his patients. This isolation has given us the gift of being present, and I couldn't imagine doing so with anyone else. While divorce rates are skyrocketing from problems magnified by proximity, we have discovered indescribable peace and solace in companionship. He comes home to experimental recipes that are keeping me sane. We cherish each sunny day and light candles when it rains. Meanwhile, his symptoms have evolved into congestion and itchy eyes. Thank goodness for allergies.