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## LOCKING HANDS DURING LOCKDOWN: A SHORT STORY

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Setting: Any city, every city

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India on Wednesday recorded the  
highest single-day jump of 507 covid-19 deaths  
and also a majority of cases – close to 4 lakh – in June  
to make it the worst month for the country  
prompting some states to go for  
varying degrees of lockdown.

Maharashtra, Delhi and Tamil Nadu have accounted  
for over 70% of 17,400 coronavirus deaths,  
according to the union health ministry data.

The data updated at 8 a.m.

Wednesday also showed that 18,653 new infections were reported  
in 24 hours taking the tally to 5,85,493.

At the same time, the recovery rate was also  
steadily improving to touch nearly 60%.

Meanwhile, in one corner of a city . . .

"O God! It's already midnight," said Abeer. Abeer was still in his office and it was the sound of grumbling which originated in his innards that made him look up and check the time on his home screen. What do doctors call it? "Yes, Borborygmi." He was late . . . again . . . No, not late. In fact, this was his usual time, but by normal standards, it was late. "Every day it is the same story," he

thought to himself. "How can I ever change this?" His mind got racing. He knew Mira would be upset. Every single day (rather night) when he would get home, Mira would be up and about, waiting for him. She would look exhausted. "Zahin!" he thought. The thought of his baby brought a smile to his lips. The frown became less deep and the eyes softened. "In that the world's contracted thus," Donne's line rang true here. Naughty Zahin is their whole world. Nothing existed beyond.

His mind in a haze, his fingers were moving violently over the keyboard, his eyes filled with the dreams of a promising night, all this while he was fighting a battle with/of the words. The page was almost ready and he had to approve a few things before sending it to print. His phone buzzed. "Jeez! last minute updates. WHY?" He was exasperated. Hunger was gnawing at his creative faculties. "Blast this corona virus. Couldn't even grab a snack."

What a waste of life it was! Sanitizers and masks all around. One has to be so cautious always. In the morning, when he was leaving for work, Zahin had started fiddling with the mask, which had meant a fresh round of washing up and sanitization. It suddenly struck him that he forgot to pick a bag of diapers for his son. All the shops were closed by then. The curfew had begun. "It's alright. I will explain it to Mira. And I am sure she has a few spare. She always does. Should I call her up?" His gaze got fixed on the cables running in and out of his desktop. He stared.

Two kilometers from the office was a deserted road with an under-bridge leading to the City Club at one end and a few modest, unpretentious marriage palaces on the other. The long and winding concrete serpent looked formidable in the glow of the street lights. But of course, not all lights were working and some (probably) confused their identity with disco lights. BLINK BLINK FADE BLINK. A sort of a pattern was being drawn. The road was desolate. A few apartment lights were visible from a distance. A passing car, once in a while, would break the monotony of the night. Harikant was in no 'hurry' to get home. "What is to be done there? Who is waiting for me, but starvation and need." He wandered aimlessly, reminiscing the times when this city would never sleep. Lavish weddings would be organized and money would flow. Those were the times, when he would get work . . . and food. He lost his job with the Municipal Corporation. He got fired last Thursday. The pandemic was playing with the lives of people, literally and metaphorically. No schools, too. But was he ever able to make all his five daughters attend school at the same time. At times one, at times two would join school, and there were times when he just could not afford it for anyone.

In the midst of the volley of such thoughts, he just could not steer his mind away from food. The word started echoing, and then the echo became louder and started coming from outside his brain. The streets reverberated and the night resounded with the same note. The darkness was enclosing in upon him. A horrible screech of the owl cuts through the thick blanket of night. This was when he spotted the gigantic pile of garbage. There was never the dearth of city waste. He went near and began exploring. He groped in the dark and delved deeper and further into filth. Before he could realize, he found a black bin-bag. He hurriedly opened it to discover half empty can of something, a piece of over-ripe papaya, rotten bananas, and rolled up stale dry *chappatis* packed in foil. He began to wonder why the cattle could not get to it at first.

Abeer rushed to the car and shoved his laptop bag in the passenger seat. He looked around to see . . . no one. It appeared that the whole world was hibernating. Before entering the car, Abeer spotted the pooch that would appear outside his office-foyer daily, sniffing morsels. Abeer reached inside the car and took out some biscuits for the poor puppy. Journalism had hardened him over a period of time but there were moments when his heart would snub the dictates of the head. More than ever, now was the time he wanted to be close to his family, particularly his Zahin. But the demands of his job were very pressing, more so now; “Courtesy, this blasted virus,” he just could not help cursing. He shifted the gear and the car gained speed.

Abeer was in love with engines. Behind the engine, he felt in control of his life, this life which was, now, testing him at every step. Dejection was slowly seeping in. Much was pending in life – a long to-do list. Every night he would sleep over it. His ‘go to’ friend was unable to help him and the crisis was getting more and more dense. He wanted to share his thoughts with the world, but he had no time. He felt suffocated. He wished the clock had more digits on the dial and the hands would continue ticking for a few more hours. The day was too short for him, “I have no time for myself. My creative faculties have become dormant. It’s been ages since I wrote a poem . . . forget it . . . I do not even have time to think about a poem. Poetry surely has left me high and dry. Poems evade me ever since I have become a hard core journalist. What if I also have a significant message to deliver to this ‘unawakened earth’?” Like Shelley, he felt as if he needs help, “Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!/ I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”

Just then, he caught a movement from the corner of his eyes. He slowed down. It took him a second to realize where he was. The long road famously called the Carlton Hotel Road stretched before him before merging into the darkness beyond. The movement which caught him off-guard happened on

the left side of the road. His journalistic mind became alert and active. He stopped, rolled down the window, and called out vaguely. The dark figure jumped at the unexpected sound. It slowly approached the car, and took the form of a man, with one arm behind him, as if hiding something. Abeer asked him if he needed help (a mild way of asking, “Who are you and what in the world are you doing here at this odd hour?”)

A thin silhouette became visible and then the man himself. His condition was very evident, so Abeer did not bother investigating him. However, his curiosity compelled him to stay a while longer and talk to this man. The man was in his fifties, not old, but all skin and bones. He had a pointed jaw line and sunken eyes. The want in his eyes could have melted the core of a rock. Shabbily dressed up, he looked very frail and he began to tremble, ever so slightly. “Was it because of cold? or hunger? or both?”

The man started talking. In answer to Abeer’s query, the man replied that he was only searching for food. He added that he had many mouths to feed and that he was the only breadwinner. There was no undertone. He spoke plainly, with sincerity. He said, “I have five daughters, saab. All waiting for me to get back home. But I can’t go empty handed. I looked here for food, and see, what I found.” He lifted the black bag in front of the window of Abeer’s car. Abeer felt a lump in his throat. “This man scavenged the trash-trolley for food . . . so that his children would not starve to death . . . Unbelievable. How can life be so rude and so ugly?”

That night Abeer could not sleep. His mind kept on going back to that long-winding road and the weather-beaten face of Harikant, holding the black poly-bag in his hand. The whole night long, Abeer was only with Harikant, talking to him, listening to his story, feeling for him in his mind...in his dreams (if at all he slept) and in his heart. He woke up with a bad headache.

When Abeer came back to his senses, Zahin was already awake and cooing to his father as he sat turtle on his father’s chest. In-between the baby talk, Abeer picked his mobile to check the time. The clock (as always) was showing the bitter reality and there went his chance of having the morning drawl in the company of his son. Zahin fled out of the room and Abeer quickly started browsing through his messages, facebook, whatsApp etal.

Many good morning quotes, typical whatsApp messages, some cute pictures and funny GIFs. This is how a day begins in this century. With all the shouting ensuing from Mira’s crazy routine with Zahin in the background, Abeer could not think straight for a while. He picked his bottle and went to the

washroom. His head was spinning and sunlight was pinching his eyes. "Father had a bad night," he scoffed at himself.

As the day glided by, his entire time was eaten up by endless calls, meetings, a million messages (majority related to COVID), and a zillion chats. Around 4 pm, he decided to sip some coffee to keep him alive. He took a break from official chats and simultaneously nibbled on his facebook account. Ennui during lockdown had driven people in different directions. After spending more time at home and less on roads, people had started introspecting, they had now time to think; rather, a lot of TIME to think. Now they could look inside. They also developed a habit of looking at the outside world, looking around them and observing the sights and sounds surrounding them.

Most of the facebook posts introduced us to friends taking up new hobbies. Dr. Manoj Ghai took to bird-watching. Dr. Singh became a veritable photographer (the pictures of his garden are a total smasher). Avni set off as a home baker. Ramesh Sharma had started weekly *langar* for the needy. Many people took up learning cooking, gardening, painting, sculpting, etc. Facebook was overflowing with their happy pictures of latest feats; faces beaming with rows of blossoming pots, or with a psychedelic paint pour, or a freshly done triple marble chocolate cake. Everyone was on a quest of a new calling, the real calling. To Abeer, the world seemed to be changing. Scroll up. Scroll down. Caffeine was working. Suddenly Abeer stopped in his tracks. He scrolled back. Something clicked in his mind. *Ramesh Sharma has started weekly langar for the needy*. That one post captured his attention. He went back to it again and again. It kept ringing. The roll of his mental camera had gone berserk, going this way and that; and finally it stopped flashing the picture of Harikant with that packet of food in his hand. Yes Yes. It struck Abeer that he could do something by way of help. In seven lines he posted the story of Harikant on Facebook quickly. A rapid clacking of the keyboard and Abeer went for his evening meeting. The same long day. By the time the page was ready, it was way past midnight. Burning eyes and a reeling head would mark the close of his day. The COVID count was alarming. The lockdown was extended. The Government revised the COVID rules. The scientists struggled in their search for an anti-dote. The economy shattered. The market collapsed. There was not a single piece of good news. As it is, what good can come out of a virus?

Nevertheless, life had to go on.

That night, the muscular pain became unbearable for Abeer. He had been working all through the lockdown, the curfew, even on Sundays; without break. Now his bones were breaking. Zahin was

snoozing. In Zahin's faint breathing lied the Abeer's salvation. Mira was fast asleep. She only needed to rest her head on the pillow and she would be out. What a blessing. Abeer tried to take comfort from the silence of the night but in vain. He just could not sleep. To divert his mind, he resorted to social media.

He saw a stream of messages on his post. What post? O! he had forgotten about Harikant. But his facebook friends had taken up the matter to a different level now. 579 messages, and increasing every 5 minutes. He sat up. He started reading; carefully this time. The range was predictable. Some were sympathetic messages, others were criticizing the world, and still some talked about the coming of the apocalypse. But one name emerged and that was his friend in Canada, Rupinder Singh. Rupinder (as they fondly called him) simply wrote, "Give me his number."

This message made Abeer jump in excitement and he immediately checked his WhatsApp account. There was a personal message from Rupinder telling Abeer about the POA. Rupinder was a Canadian resident and was actively involved with the local politics. He was also an executive member of a Non-profit Organization called "Me2U". Rupinder wanted Harikant's number so that he could instantly help him connect with Me2U (India chapter). Abeer felt as if he was standing under a pleasant shower of relief. A neutralizer for all his pains and aches. He told Rupinder that he would arrange everything for Harikant himself and ensure that there is no lapse in between.

That night Abeer slept like a baby. Liberation, at least for a night. The world is a good place, even for a night.

Harikant's children could then go to school and every night he could take actual food for his family. Not to mention, he became a social media rage.

Today's goals: Coffee and kindness. Maybe two coffees, and then kindness. Nanea Hoffman