

A CHAMELEON MIND

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In this piece, Ahmed explores his experience of contracting COVID-19 in prison.

When Harry Potter complains about his troubled mind, his godfather, Sirius Black, advises: "We've all got both light and dark inside of us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are."

The human mind is a chameleon. You can tame your mind or it can make you feel hell on earth. For the past few days, I have been fighting a similar battle. I'm not sure if my world has been distorted or my mind is exaggerating its reality. When my body feels a minor chill coming from the opened prison cell window, I recoil. I pray that I don't have COVID-19. I worry less of contracting the virus and fear more of being in isolation given that I am already physically separated from my family.

My wife thinks I'm not telling her everything about my health conditions.

Two weeks ago, one prisoner from my unit was placed in partial isolation because he had shared a bull pen with other prisoners who had come from an outside hospital. The facility was informed afterwards that the doctor who examined those prisoners had tested positive. A week later, the prisoner has come back. He has no symptoms. He shares his experience: you're locked alone in a cell, no personal belongings and no communication with family. No familiar faces that appear to show sympathy. Your mind plays tricks on you.

Three days later, a different prisoner catches a fever. He is taken to an infirmary and in less than an hour we're under quarantine because we've been potentially exposed to the virus. The administrative team comes in the unit and announces that we can still use the day-room, kitchen, phone, shower, etc. but must maintain social distancing. Why not isolation? Do they think prisoners will lose their mind if placed in isolation? Or does a prisoner's mind have incomprehensible depths that are discovered once faced with adversity only?

She knows I'm not telling her everything about my health.

It's the fifth day of quarantine. The regular guard has been swapped in the middle of her shift. Then, we're informed the prisoner tested positive. The quarantine has been extended to 14 days. We receive face masks to wear while we're in a day-room. Men don't take it seriously. The unit begins to receive extra cleaning supplies every day. There's three ounces of bleach mixed in three gallons of water to mop the floor and showers, but the unit floor is waxed and shiny. One porter is worried about his

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hard work. He sprays the wet towel a few times with diluted bleach and wipes the floor gently. He's satisfied.

Chris Cuomo, the brother of New York State's Governor Andrew Cuomo, comes on CNN. He has tested positive and wants to inform the public about the misconception that 80% of infected people will simply walk away like it is a regular flu. He confesses that he's losing his mind during excruciating nights. He has lost 20 pounds. He's in isolation in his house basement. He has a team of doctors and a lovely family to look after. His warning hits its target and I wonder:

If I go in isolation, am I going to be looked after by my family? No.

Am I from an elite group? No.

Am I going to receive a superb treatment? No.

That's three strikes.

What do I really have?

Hope.

My wife says she hears tiredness in my voice.

The phrase "social distancing" drives my life. I do the math: take a shower every other day, that's 50% less chance of catching a virus. Cook a hot meal every other day, another 50% can be earned. Cut the TV time in half as well, but I already watch TV less than an hour on average. So what; only 15 minutes for the news is fine. That would be too much time in isolation. Yes, but in my cell, I have my belongings to utilize, my books to do college work, and my electronic tablet to keep me entertained. What about the strange weariness of my body? Oh, yes. It aches. A shiver runs through my body every time I sneeze, which is quite frequent. I have extra clothes on and I'm under a blanket, but I feel cold. And sometimes, the headache intensifies around my forehead. I do push-ups a few times a day. It keeps me warm.

Like clockwork, our body temperatures are being tested twice a day. Mine is 98.9, 98, 98.5, 99, 97.7, etc. My mind is consumed with the fear of isolation. What if my body temperature spikes? Why is my body aching and shivering? Am I symptomatic? I'm spent.

My wife wants to know how I'm feeling.

On the tenth day, I find a burst of energy. I work on my academic paper, I read Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man". The epilogue intrigues me. The invisible man lives underground. He says, "I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime. I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."

I share similarities with the invisible man. My hole is above ground - a prison cell. I must come out of quarantine as well. It should not be overstayed, but what's a prisoner's socially responsible role?

Have hope?

When quarantine is over, we're going to interact with the rest of the population in prison who were not in quarantine. Are we going to be exposed again?

On day twelve, one prisoner fails to complete the standing count in the morning. He buckles down on his knees and lies on the floor. He is taken to the infirmary as well. Some prisoners begin to wear a mask.

My wife loves me.

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The following narrative has been written after interviewing the COVID-19 survivor from my unit.

I go inside the infirmary with a 104 degree fever. They put me in a cell. The first two days are hell. My whole body aches: back, shoulders, legs, even toes. I breathe heavily. Every time I inhale, it's like slamming a door inside of my lungs. My mind drives me crazy. I can't eat. Food is brought to me every day. The trays pile up. On the third day, I get an appetite. I eat all the food from the stacked trays. It tastes good. But my body still aches. I have crazy sweats. I try to stretch my arms, but I stop. It feels as if my chest could explode. I'm alone in the world. Everyone treats me as if I don't exist. Nurse checks my temperature. Do you have headache? Yes. Tylenol? Yes. Then the food tray is placed on the small table and the door is shut immediately. They treat me as if I'm the disease. This is my normal human interaction in isolation.

I lose my mind. I've been in fights and have beaten and jumped by a group of men, but this is nothing like that. This is much scarier. It's like COs (correction officers) are standing outside my cell, knocking at the door and telling me to get ready because they're coming in to beat me. Stress overwhelms me. And the worse thing is the sound of click-click – the locking of the cell door. There'll be no human contact for the next six hours. Humans are social creatures. I've been outcast. Am I going to die? As my eyes shut and my body exhausts, I tighten my grip on a thin invisible thread – hope.

When anybody passes by my cell, I wave at them. They ignore me. I ask for a phone call. They shake their heads. No phone in isolation. Shower? No. Isolation is killing me faster than the virus. I walk around my bed on my toes because my feet hurt. A strange stench lingers in the air. I search for its origin. It's me.

On the eleventh day, the nurse says, you're the strongest one. Why? Everyone else is vomiting, shitting on themselves, can't smell or taste. They're zombies. Do you smoke? No. You'll make it through. Finally, on the seventeenth day, I'm discharged from the infirmary. I step on a walkway so happily as if I'm being released from prison, but I'm in prison.