**Streets**

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I am not used to seeing the street beneath my 20th story apartment so woefully empty. The raw asphalt of the road cackles ominously under the smoldering sun without the hoods of multifarious cars and trucks to protect it. Stray dogs stretch leisurely, smack-dab in the centre of the road without fear of being run down. The weekly *bazaar* that lined this street every Sunday has now disappeared, the bangle-sellers and spice merchants having packed up and gone home, leaving behind only shards of glass bangles and a smattering of turmeric on the grey body of the street as a remembrance that they were ever here. As each reminder that human life ever existed and thrived on this street begins to disappear, I feel an emptiness stirring in the pit of my stomach as I reach to close my windows and draw the curtains over the street that runs below my 20th story apartment.

I cannot help but think about how many more streets have fallen barren all across the world, and that thought pains me for our streets have often been our greatest source of comfort. They have been places where we have congregated in moments of celebration and they have been our sanctuary in moments of sorrow. Our streets have held people of all hues and colours, wooden carts and BMW’s occupying two edges of the same road; our streets have bound us together in an unwavering coexistence. Perhaps for that very reason, now that we are being pulled apart from each other, we miss our streets that much more...or rather…we miss what they represented. It isn’t only the stalling of the cars which earlier sped down our roads that we miss, it’s the Sunday picnics we drove to in those cars, watching the trees that line the roadside pass us by. We don’t only miss the vegetable cart dragging its wheels along the street, but we also miss the vendor who often pressed a little extra *dhaniya-mirchi1* in our palms, with a smile, if we seemed particularly flustered on a given day. We miss the street corner just past our work building just as much as we miss the secret chuckle we shared with a colleague at the expense of the boss, standing right on that corner. We miss the streets lined with food stalls which we frequented as students, skipping a whole day of college for the simple pleasure that two plates of *chhole-bhature2* wolfed down alongside a trusted ally provided, and we miss the spot under the streetlight in the secret alleyway where we met our friends after dark. As we lock ourselves up in our houses, we perhaps finally realize why we went out at all. We ventured into the world for its people and the many wonders they sent into our lives. And as our streets become emptier, it becomes more difficult to hold on to those wonders too. I wonder, now, how much time we have spent guarding against what we thought were the things that would ultimately destroy us: nuclear war, terrorism, whatnot. I wonder if what will truly destroy us…is just an empty street.

But on more optimistic days, I think we are all plotting a return to our streets. I have found that uncertainty about the future makes us that much more certain about the present; it is almost as though we are scared that the present is the only future we will ever have. For as we face a darkness our world has never seen before, we have not abandoned our streets; we have only taken them elsewhere. In the absence of streets to flock to in good times and bad, the people of Italy have been singing to each other from their balconies, making sure that the silence of their streets does not infiltrate their homes. As we lose the roads on which we came together in solidarity before, we come together to salute our doctors in new and more heartwarming ways; we come together remotely to set up charities and donations for those who suffer from a loneliness more damaging than ours, whose uncertainty revolves around their next meal rather than the next recipe they master. As we grapple with the loss of our street-corners and the many friends we made there, we suddenly find ourselves making some new friends; we procure A4 sheets for the unfinished history project of the 5th grader next door, we call up our domestic help and the *press-wale-bhaiya*3 to ask if their family’s doing okay, and the ageing couples in our societies take great pride in teaching the college boys next door how to make a satisfactory lunch meal by themselves—over WhatsApp, no less.

Within the six (and often far more) feet of space that separates us all from each other, we have built some new streets, some connections that will last us a lifetime. The day we walk back on to the streets outside our homes, we will remember that we built laughter and confidence out of nothingness at one point in time. Perhaps we will never take our streets and—more importantly—the people on them for granted again.

Now, when I sit by my window, I wonder how many more people are looking down at the street in front of me and hoping for the same familiar hustle and bustle on it as I am. Even if for a few minutes, that mere thought makes me smile because I cannot wait to see that street annoyingly full again. And, oddly, that makes me feel less alone.

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1. *dhaniya-mirchi: free coriander and chillies handed out by vegetable vendors.*
2. *chhole-bhature: a very popular Indian roadside snack.*
3. *press-wale-bhaiya: the local help who irons clothes for a living.*