

# I Am Not the Only One

*A day in the COVID-19 life.*

*I was out of shape. And so, about 15 years ago I began my voyage of balance. Two commandments dictated my lifestyle—daily workouts and disciplined diet. My home gym welcomed me every morning at 8am. My meals became low in carbs and high in animal protein. I loved my chicken and mutton. Over time it was no longer about lean mass. My taste buds had the better of me.*

*Then, on Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, I gave up meat. It has only been a few months. But, I know it is for good. That's why I am documenting it in public domain. I have no temptations. Does my conviction deserve an applause? No. As many of my past convictions fizzled out. However, I know it is different this time. You see, my determination is fueled by my inner strength. It's a dormant strength—from getting rid of a lifelong habit to holding strong in a pandemic—it's right there in all of us, and yet, we miss it. So, let's play detective and demystify this universal 'source' of strength.*

**Lockdown. Day 30.** My departure time to office has stayed the same, 10:15am. The arrival time has fast-forwarded. I reach before a train of thought is completed. The roads are empty. There are no signals. It's a peaceful drive with little maneuvers around stray dogs who now own the streets. Even the journey's end is smooth. There are no blocking crowds outside the main gates—the popular '*chai ki tapris*' are deserted. The stress resides inside those gates, not outside. The security guards open them for me. There is no preferential treatment. Before letting me in, they point and click the temperature guns on my forehead—it's a fascinating gadget I never knew existed! I am okayed to go. I think they smile at me, but I am unsure. Their masks are always on. I can't recognize their familiar faces. I am in the middle of a science fiction matrix.



The campus is unrecognizable too. The water fountain is dry. The reception is uninhabited with no one rushing for the first available elevator. The video screens over the elevator doors are dead. The elevator climbs non-stop to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor—no one to greet and crack jokes. I walk into my office and rub my hands with a sanitizer. The computer comes on with a flooded mailbox. I already know what's in there. I have been through my mails in the morning. Three dreaded Ds. Discounts, Downsizings, and Defaults. Each mail requires a custom treatment. Each treatment comes with a tradeoff. Each tradeoff impacts real people—employees and customers. There is no intellectual stimulation here. The dilemma is emotionally draining. Fretting behind the desk doesn't help. So, I walk over to the big window in my office and peep out.

It's Indian summer. The sun is scorching. The farmlands are dry. The parking lots are vacant. There are no professionals entering or exiting the gates. It is eerie wherever my glance falls. The surrounding corporate buildings are brick and mortar, there is no life there. There are some residential complexes. I know there are lives locked up there, hiding from reality. Some of the residents may be

Cybagians. They may have planned a big year—buying that first house, first car, first overseas vacation, or perhaps even tying the knot. Dreams now feel distant. Including Cybage's. This was supposed to be our big year. Our silver jubilee. Grand celebrations were on the cards for each month with a spectacular finale planned in December. The grim realization is taxing. What to choose, individual security in the short run or business viability in the long run? It's an unfair choice. Maybe we don't need to choose. Maybe dreams will still come true. Maybe the uncertainty will just magically disappear. But for now, all plans need to wait. As right now, it's meeting time.

It's the daily stand up in the board room. My leadership team is there. They sit far from each other. The COO is the master of ceremonies. It's a spirited discussion. I am a spectator in the background, watching them in action. Every now and then the sober discussion is punctuated by Covid19 jokes. The laughter is a blast from the past. My mind races back to the turn of the century—the days of the dot.com bust. Many of the faces today were present back then as well. Every morning we used to brainstorm together. As I silently observe their expressions, I realize how time has flown by—all of us have grown old together. Yet, we are still talking the same things of yesteryears—how to strike balance for the overall good of everyone. It's a relaxed environment, there is chemistry, and everyone's viewpoint matters. This is our organization's nerve center—one would expect power games between strong personalities, but all I see is camaraderie. Occasionally, there is no consensus. They give me the respect to make the final call. Other than that, it's their show. It's a show of Cybage legends!

Rest of my day is spent over 'in-person' meetings with each account manager and department head along with their line managers. Their physical presence makes a big difference. They have an option to work from home in this pandemic. But they choose to come. They want to ensure the security of their teams, the existence of their customers, the triumph of their organization, and also their solidarity with their CEO. Each e-mail thread is discussed. Each business or delivery challenge is addressed. There are no perfect solutions. But, we try our best. By the time darkness descends, I can see the light. I am no more annoyed by the gang of dogs chasing my car. Poor creatures, they are probably hungry—forgotten victims of human greed. I will come back with my son to feed them, I scribble a mental note. The thought of Aneesh makes me smile. I am no longer stressed.

*My Aneesh loves animals. So, he became a vegetarian towards the end of 2018.*

*Such strong decisions are not easy for a 19-year old. Young ideologies often do not stand the test of time. Therefore, to encourage him on his chosen path, I made him a promise, "If you stay away from meat for a year, I will join you." He realized he was not alone. And now his crusade has doubled up.*

*I was there for my son. My team is there for me. There are believers—this realization makes us invincible. You see, it's the conviction of others in our conviction that gives us the strength. The source of our inner strength is not inside—it is outside!*