



THE QUARANSTEIN

By Samina Naseem

What is quarantine? The first meaning on Google, was, “a state, period, or place of isolation in which people or animals that have arrived from elsewhere or been exposed to infectious or contagious disease are placed.” Then, as a verb to “impose isolation on (a person, animal, or place).” What does it mean to be quarantined? From these definitions, quarantine means to live life in isolation because one might have been exposed to an infectious or contagious disease. But, is this the only reason we quarantine others and force them to live in isolation? Can we also self-quarantine?

I am Alysa. I was born to educated, middle class, Christian parents. As an unwanted baby girl, with a darker skin tone (as compared to my mother and elder sister), I was ‘quarantined’ from motherly love. As a child, I spent many evenings, alone in a storage room in my house, waiting for my father to come home. I did not dare disobey my mother and come out of the room without my father present. I was body shamed because I was chubby (I still am, and now I think I look very cute). I was quarantined based on my gender, darker-skin, and body-shape to assure submission. I was made to

feel ashamed of myself – my skin color and my body. I could barely look at myself in a mirror.

In my early 20's I was quarantined by my parents. After surviving my brother's rape attempt I was forced to stay in my room. What about my brother, you ask? He lived and walked freely in the house. I was placed in an undeserved quarantine.

I grew up to be an introvert, expressing two different personalities at home and school. I studied and worked long hours. My education and life experience shifted my views and thoughts about life, relationships, the dichotomy of good and bad, right and wrong, etc. As my views became more at odds with the perspectives of my family, relatives, and friends, I self-imposed/inflicted quarantine. The result was emotionally draining because I did not learn how to interact with others.

I worked in an organization where I was wrongly accused of teaching my religion to others. I once again quarantined myself: I quietly left the country before the news became public. It was personal, both a professional and religious quarantine, based on the fear of being persecuted.

As I reflect on the many types of quarantine in my life while currently experiencing the state-mandated quarantine, I feel free. I feel as if I have wings to fly. I engage in individual activities such as reading (novels, books, & research articles), writing manuscripts for publication, cooking, going out for a walk, crocheting, embroidery, and playing with my pets. I breathe freely. Under this layer of uncertainty, I breathe freely. People around me do not judge me because I have a darker skin tone or a heavy body. I do not fear persecution for something that I did not do.

Contagious diseases like COVID-19, are not the only reason we isolate ourselves or others. It can be a discriminatory act (based on skin color, caste, gender, religion, sexual orientation, political and social views) that results in intentional or unintentional isolation. It is not always others who impose isolation. It can be our family, friends, or ourselves. This quarantine period has provided time to reflect on our own lives and ask ourselves, whether we have quarantined others based on our biases or we have self-imposed isolation because of ours or others' biases. COVID-19 has given me time to think and self-reflect.

I am Alysa – I have survived uncertain times of my life. Each of these experiences left an ugly scar. Yet I breathe freely. I acknowledge that these ugly scars will remain. It is my choice to engage in self-loathing or view each as an opportunity to grow. I have learned to persevere, to persist, and to endure. I am emotionally strong. While I might falter, I

move forward into a fear-free and protected life. I am not naïve. I am aware of my surroundings.

I am Alysa – THE QUARANSTEIN – who has bandaged her scars to rise from the toughest of times and conditions, and who sees hope in ugliness and uncertainty. I find hope in blossoms and buds that sprout after winter. I find hope when birds find food in the worst of the winter days or a fragile butterfly flies very low across a road, without knowing what will happen. I see hope for a better future when a child is born. I see hope for a peaceful afterlife when a loved one dies. I see hope for a better world during this pandemic. I believe there are uncountable *quaransteins* across the globe – Let Us Continue to *Persevere, Persist, and Endure.*

