

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Asian Americans Have Always Lived With Fear

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Credit...Ping Zhu

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By Min Jin Lee

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Earlier this month, I took an informal poll on social media to ask Asians and

Asian Americans how they had altered their daily lives in response to the recent rise of assaults against us. I heard from hundreds of women and men, young and old, who described their workarounds — the extra steps they have been taking to stay physically safe.

They told me that they stay home instead of going out, and when they do go out, they take only the safest routes, carrying pepper spray or personal safety alarms. They walk on city streets only while accompanied by friends, and exercise during the day. They wear hats, trying to look “less Asian,” take taxis whether or not they can afford them. Some feel so threatened that they have nearly imprisoned themselves out of fear and distress.

This has been happening for as long as I can remember.

In 1977, a year after my father, mother, two sisters and I arrived in New York from Seoul, my parents ran a tiny wholesale jewelry store in Manhattan’s Koreatown. More a vendor’s stall, it was a 200-square-foot corridor-shape space between 30th and 31st Streets on Broadway. There they started out selling 14-karat gold chains, then later brass and nickel jewelry, plastic hair beads, ponytail holders and barrettes to street peddlers and mom-and-pop-shop owners.

Each morning, at 6 o’clock, Mom and Dad left our one-bedroom rental in the squat, red brick building on Van Kleeck Street in Elmhurst, Queens, and took the subway to the store. They closed shop only on Sundays to observe Sabbath.

My sisters and I attended P.S. 102. I’m the middle daughter, and because I was born in November, often the youngest in my class, although usually the tallest girl. I was quiet, nearsighted and confused by the newness of things. Several pretty girls took turns bullying me. I couldn’t say why. I never sought their attention. On occasion, my older sister had to step in if a bigger girl wanted to fight me. In class, I found it hard to concentrate. I minded my own business and said nothing, hoping that if I tried to shrink myself, I wouldn’t be noticed. I learned to pay careful attention to others.

In particular, I watched my parents because I was afraid to lose them. Day and night, I worried for their safety. I could not imagine a world without them.

The world felt so dangerous to me. When my younger sister was in kindergarten, Mom would leave the store to rush home by 3, leaving Dad to close up. Once, a large man followed her on the train, getting off at her stop on Grand Avenue. He grabbed her in the

stairwell, and she screamed. Some people rushed down the stairs, and she dodged him by running away.

As soon as they could afford it, Dad bought a car and started driving to work. That year, we moved into a two-bedroom rental in the back of the same building, overlooking the parking garage, and in the evenings, I'd wait by the window for their safe return.

Twice, thieves broke into the shop in the night, setting off alarms and triggering phone calls, waking us from sleep. Someone had hidden in the building's shared basement and sawed through the soft Sheetrock of the store wall. Another time, thieves broke through the back door. The police never found the culprits. Insurance never paid the claims. The landlord said the break-ins were not his responsibility, so Dad installed a steel-reinforced wall and a metal door.

Still, there were holdups and muggings.

One Saturday afternoon, right before closing, Mom swept the front sidewalk. Part of the metal gate was already down. Two armed men wearing army jackets cornered her. They pushed her back into the shop. One detained my father in the back while the other forced my mother to hand over their hard-earned singles, fives and twenties. They stole all the gold and silver chains, which my parents had paid for with borrowed money. After the robbers rushed out with the loot, the police showed up. The men were never caught. My parents started all over again to cover their deep losses.

When I was in high school, I went to the store with Dad one Saturday to help out. We opened up, and even before we had the chance to fetch our coffee, three masked and gloved gunmen came and robbed us. If I close my eyes, I can still see that gun. I told myself not to be afraid. Everything would be OK if we gave it all away, and Dad handed over the three display trays of gold and all the cash in the register, leaving only the coins. We filed a police report, but nothing ever came of it. Dad stopped selling gold and switched to cheaper metals in an attempt to make armed robbery less tempting.

Years later, on another Saturday, when I was helping out, we closed the store at 3 p.m. Dad and I walked west on 31st Street to the parking garage. A short man came up from behind and snatched Dad's leather satchel, where he kept the store safe key and cash. Dad bolted after him, shouting: "Stop! Stop! He has my bag!" I'd never seen him run so fast, and he kept pace with the thief.

Right in front of Engine 1 Ladder 24, a few blocks from Herald Square, an off-duty firefighter jumped off his motorcycle and nabbed the man. Firefighters spilled out from the station and held him down. The police arrived, and an officer placed his foot on the man's head, while another emptied his pockets: a condom, gum wrappers and a knife. The officer's black leather boot pressed down hard on the young man's bare head. I looked at the thief's face and saw that he was only a boy. Later, we were told that he was 16, about my age then.

In the '80s, my sisters and I took the subway to our respective high schools. Our round-trip train rides took at least four hours. One afternoon, on a packed E train, my older sister was suddenly surrounded by a group of teenagers. One put his hand in her jacket

and stole her wallet. She demanded it back, and they denied taking it. Laughing at her face, they called her a “Chink.” No one in the crowd helped her. At the next stop, they took off. They removed her cash and subway pass, then tossed the wallet and ID card on the ground. A stranger, noticing this, picked the wallet up and mailed it back to us.

From 1986 to 1990, I went to Yale. New Haven felt familiar, like my hometown, but I had to keep my wits about me. Once in a while, I’d walk down Chapel Street to get a coffee at Atticus Bookstore Cafe. Panhandling veterans dressed in grubby fatigues would walk up and grab me — sometimes in the front or the back. They’d say, “I like Chinese girls.” I’d do my best to tell them off and walk away briskly. Bystanders never helped me. Panhandlers who were usually peaceful and friendly weren’t that way with me.

Raised in a conservative Christian family, I’d learned to dress modestly. I believe strongly that you should wear whatever you want, wherever you want. Yet even dressed almost mannishly, I would be noticed. I did not cover my face. I could not leave my race at home.

In college, I went to divestment rallies against apartheid and women’s marches to “Take Back the Night.” When my grandmother was a girl, she had protested against Japanese colonialism, and at university, Mom had demonstrated against government dictatorship. I learned it was easier to stand with others to dissent and protest the terrible things of the world.

During rape awareness days, there were ghostly tape outlines of survivors on the ground to mark the places of a sexual assault. When I was growing up and at schools, men had sexually assaulted me, but I’d told no one. At rallies, women and men spoke of being raped and attacked, and in the crowd, I listened while holding a lit candle. All around me, I saw young hurt faces, bathed in the glow of tiny flames. I didn’t know if I made any difference standing there, but I was starting to understand that I was not the only one who cared.

In law school, I dated a guy, then broke up with him. He trailed me at school, and once, I found him in a parked car waiting for me to come home. He did not leave me alone until it was clear that I was dating another man. It was as if he thought he had rights to me until I belonged to someone else. Not soon after, when I was 22, I met the man who would be my husband and married at 24.

When I became a young corporate lawyer, both clients and colleagues touched me inappropriately and told me about their Asian girlfriends or wives, as if I’d want to know that they had slept with women of my race. In a business setting, you were supposed to be nonchalant, so I’d change the subject and then try never to be alone with them if I could avoid it. I focused on my work and shied away from social events.

In 1995, I quit being a lawyer to write. For a long time, I worked at home, then later, I started to give public talks and teach at a college. I’m middle-aged now and much tougher than I used to be. I brook no foolishness if I can help it.

Ever since Asians began arriving in the United States, they have been met with hostility and rejection, often sanctioned by state and federal legislation. The sad part is that so little has changed.

Back in the '70s and '80s, the West feared the growth of Japan; as China became a superpower, Sinophobia rose, too. Since 9/11, Islamophobia and attacks against Sikhs and Hindus have been unrelenting. Now, the pandemic and demagoguery have brought more waves of hatred.

Do I reasonably expect another person or a government body to keep me safe in some perfect way? I can't say that I do. That has not often been my experience. A person like me often finds legitimate workarounds. But you and I know a workaround is not a real solution and a temporary fix is never available to everyone who needs it.

Asians and Asian Americans pay the price of nativist fear. As income inequality grows and social services are cut, the vulnerable among us are left untreated and unhoused. Meanwhile, the number of attacks in the United States against Asians and Asian Americans grows. Ordinary nativists and the disenfranchised attack people who look like me and far too many others. The assailants may also believe that we are weak physically and politically, unwilling to organize, react or speak up.

For some, deep down, my ordinary Korean face — small, shallow-set eyes, round nose, high cheekbones, straight dark hair — reminds them of lost wars, prostitutes, spies, refugees, poverty, disease, cheap labor, academic competition, cheaters, sexual competition, oligarchs, toxic parenting, industrialization or a sex or pornography addiction.

What feelings do such reminders arouse?

Distrust, defeat, uncleanness, humiliation, sickness, death, terror, envy, anxiety and contempt.

Is it possible for me to understand the rousing declaration of a deeply mentally distressed person yelling that he wants to get a gun and kill as many Asians as possible? As a writer, I can intuit what he is thinking. From my decades of interviewing people, I have learned that nearly every person believes that she is the hero of her story. Does the yeller think that he is trying to save his people from those dangerous others — that is, people like me? I imagine so. Does he believe he is trying to protect the larger society from a pernicious influence? Yes, I think he must. The yeller sees himself as a hero for saving his people from me.

Then there are those who are self-controlled enough to mute their racist speech, so I will likely never hear a hateful confession. Nevertheless, in some small or grand gesture, when they wish, I will be made to feel their deep-seated desire to diminish or eradicate a

person like me — the Asian other — the source of their unwanted, violent, shameful feelings.

Adaptability is useful. We can work to change the things that need changing and work around the things we cannot change. But to those who want all the solutions from the victims of injury, I must ask:

How is that fair and reasonable? Shouldn't all of us as a society come forth with local, state, national solutions?

Far too many of us in this world are despised and rejected for our immutable characteristics — race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and identification, ethnic origin and religion — so when we can, some of us change jobs, homes, education, clothing, safety protocols, bodies, names and how and with whom we spend our time, in the slim, perhaps vain hopes of seeming less other through our modifications. But I ask you:

Should we want to change who we are meant to be?

At 53, I am no longer an immigrant girl. Like her, though, I still keep vigil for my elderly parents, sisters, husband, son and our growing family. I cannot imagine a world without them. I want to feel safe. We want it for everyone.

Over the years, in its general expression, my face has changed very little. Behind my small eyes, there comes a light, which I use to see you, and in its flicker, I hold the hope that you will see me, too.

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