

A Christmas like never before

ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

For me, the winter winds always bring with them the essence of festivity, as if to say, "Merry ho merry ho, Christmas is here!" Born and brought up in a big family, I have eight cousins who have been inseparable for years. Even though most of us have immigrated, all my siblings pack their bags and hop on planes just to be home to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ every year. However, the coronavirus pandemic has left us with no option, other than to celebrate Christmas from a distance.

About two weeks ago, while we were discussing our Christmas plans and expressing our sorrows for not being able to meet each other in person this year, my cousin Ritika came up with a unique solution. "I know we all cook our special desserts and dishes and decorate the Christmas table for the feast, but we have to adapt to the new normal this year. Keeping that in mind, why don't we all go digital?" she proposed. "Let us cook our favourite dishes and set a time to be on a group video call, where we can see each other's smiles and celebrate together, like we always do."

Speaking of our Christmas traditions, December 25 is incomplete without a cake. My sister Ritika loves to bake. We all look forward to her Christmas special fruit and nut butter cake. Every year, she goes out to buy raisins, pistachios, cashews, mubaras, cherries and her most important and secret ingredients, brown sugar and jaggery. As soon as she starts tossing the baking trays into the oven, the smell of caramelised jaggery and butter swirls around the whole house, capturing the attention of all who cross the kitchen door. We will miss that smell this year, but when she bakes and eats it from her home in Barishal over a video call with all of us on the evening of Christmas, we will talk about our memories of her cake in previous years.

Decorated cookies are a special addition to our dinner table on Christmas Eve. My cousin Neil, who is an art student, generally cuts the cookie dough in shapes of trees, elves, reindeers, Santa socks, and most importantly, snowflakes. We have his cookie cutters in our kitchen cabinet, but this year, he is in Virginia, DC. He visited Walmart three times and collected the essentials,



ILLUSTRATION: OISHIK JAWAD

starting from dough batter, chocolate chips and pecans to peanut butter and dried cookie frostings. During our video call, he will get to enjoy his freshly baked and beautifully decorated Christmas cookies from his balcony.

Jams are to Christmas what pumpkins are to Halloween. My sister Sharley collects oranges and guavas at the beginning of December to prepare her marmalades, which are widely adored by everyone in the family. While the orange marmalade is made from orange juice and orange zest, the guava jams require a lot of time and energy, as each seed should be removed from the fruit. The marmalade goes well with freshly baked casseroles from the famous Olympia

Bakery, and some salted butter to cut through the sweetness and bitterness of the orange zest.

While the sweet treats are delightful, our main dish for the Christmas feast is the turkey. Weighing at least 6 pounds, the Christmas turkey is always prepared by our eldest sibling, Zenith. She usually travels all the way to Shahdullahpur in Savar for it. She cleans it with its skin on, and marinates it overnight with ginger, garlic cloves, paprika, black pepper, some salt, oregano and a good spoonful of vinaigrette. This year, she drove all the way to the farmlands of California to get one. We will watch her prepare the turkey from miles away this year.

My youngest cousin, Kyrie, will grace the video call with her Christmas tree decorations and beautifully packaged gifts from Doha, which she plans to deliver to us next year.

As for me, I really like fruits. Every year, I am assigned to make a fluffy yet rich fruit custard for my family, with plenty of papaya, apple, grape and banana slices.

This year showed me that distance truly makes the heart grow fonder, and it cannot keep us from sharing our joy with our loved ones. Merry Christmas!

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YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES

NIG Summer Internship Program in Japan 2021 (Fully Funded)

National Institute of Genetics (NIG)/ Department of Genetics, SOKENDAI is accepting applications for a research internship program for undergraduate and postgraduate students who wish to gain research experience in genetics and related fields in life sciences. Intern students will conduct independent research under the mentorship of a host investigator at NIG.
DEADLINE: January 7, 2021 | Internships

Science without Borders® Challenge: International Student Art Contest 2021

The Science Without Borders Challenge is an international contest that engages students and teachers in ocean conservation through art. This annual competition inspires students to be creative while promoting public awareness of the need to preserve, protect, and restore the world's oceans and aquatic resources, contributing to the overarching goals of the Khaled bin Sultan Living Oceans Foundation. The Challenge is open to primary and secondary school students 11-19 years old, with scholarships of up to \$500 awarded to the winning entries.
DEADLINE: March 1, 2021 | Competitions

An Essay Competition on 'What Liberation Means to Me?'

We understand that "Liberation" can mean different things to different people, places and contexts. In 1971, for us "Liberation" meant getting freedom from the genocidal regime and establishing Bangladesh as a valorous and independent country. As we look back and contemplate, we want to ask you the following question:

What does the word "Liberation" mean to you – the youth of Bangladesh? Submit your answer in the form of an essay to participate in the "What Liberation means to me?" competition, which is organized by Youth Opportunities in collaboration with the High Commission of India, Dhaka. The competition gives you a platform to share your vision and idea of "Liberation" with the whole nation.
DEADLINE: January 10, 2021 | Competitions



Working towards a cleaner, safer nation

ZAREEN NAWAR

Asun Kichu Kori has been in operation since the last quarter of 2015. Founder Md Hasanul Islam Rayhan mentioned that the organisation was formed to primarily help the youth of their local area, Dholairpar, stay active and knowledgeable on maintaining a clean and safe environment. What began as a journey of attempting to help the youth in their community, eventually made way for the organisation to start various other projects surrounding social issues.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ASUN KICHU KORI

Members of Asun Kichu Kori stay active with various environmental and cleanliness projects.

Over the years, they frequently cleaned up the streets through the help of their volunteers. They have also received governmental help from the city corporation. "Asun Kichu Kori helps with free medical care in medical



Members and volunteers of Asun Kichu Kori at their free medical camp.

camp. Our members identify as blood donors, and we are working to build an active blood bank," mentions Rayhan.

The organisation has worked with around 100 volunteers so far and they require their volunteers to be over 18 years of age. All the interested volunteers go through a thorough interview process before being selected.

They keep their fund flowing through available members of the organisation. They have an advisory panel to help with funds as well.

A total of 13 doctors are active and voluntary members of Asun Kichu Kori. The organisation usually arranges a medical camp with four doctors. They have helped around 400 to 600 families so far.

Since the start of the pandemic, they have had to cautiously reduce their number of activities for the sake of their volunteers and the surrounding areas. Nonetheless, their volunteers took strict precautions before venturing out to run awareness campaigns on the virus. They were able to provide everyday

food to more than 500 families. They also arranged a human chain and rally, protesting against all forms of gender-based violence.

They distribute meat during Eid-ul-Adha every year. Currently, they are collecting winter clothes for those in need. "Our focus is always on the solution and not the problem itself, which is how we hope to get work done, regardless of the time it takes to witness an outcome," says Rayhan.

In the future, Asun Kichu Kori hopes to educate children in schools about the importance of cleanliness. "If children are taught about the essentiality of a clean environment from schools, they ought to become proactive members of the society, advocating for cleanliness," says Rayhan.

They also hope to run projects for transgender and physically challenged individuals. Asun Kichu Kori can be easily reached through Facebook.

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