

Those were the Days...

For over a year, and since the pandemic was with us, I started writing a diary of my days in quarantine. Looking back at what I wrote a couple of days back, I thought: why not share a few of the thoughts that came to me over the year in a concise way with Star Lifestyle readers?

The initial consequences of the pandemic were truly devastating — one after another, people I was fond of and admired were dying after being infected with COVID. Most depressing for me was the passing away of Sunbeams School's Mrs Niloufer Manzur, my mentor and 'Apa' whom I admired so, and depended upon, in all kinds of ways. I was initially thunderstruck for we had lost our guardian. Soon, condolences poured in from everywhere and I felt I could share my grief with everyone else who was mourning. Soon other people I knew or admired like Professor Anisuzzaman passed away, leaving the nation in mourning.

But there were some cases where we were relieved because COVID could not do its worst. My dear friend, F, for instance, had to struggle for a couple of weeks in a hospital ICU, but the good thing is she has come back to us.

To go back to the first phase of the pandemic though, I remember vividly the plight of poor people in Dhaka after the government had declared a lockdown. Soon, many of them would flock outside

our apartment building night and day, crying for food. There were day laborers and suddenly unemployed household help among them. My maid and I did our best to supply them with food, as did our neighbours. But they were so many of them and their moaning was so hard to bear. I remembered then of what my mother had said about her experience of the 1943 famine—of people begging for food or dying on the streets.

Then, all of a sudden, and around Eid-ul-Fitr, they disappeared, probably going back to their village homes. And suddenly, the streets seemed strangely empty for a while. On television, there were initially images of mass graves being dug all over the world and reports of daily fatalities from the deadly COVID became something we had to read obsessively. Although we were among the few people in our apartment building who still read the newspaper in print, I soon began losing interest in it. Even social media seemed to have nothing interesting to offer. The medical columns in newspapers carried reports on depression; social distancing had affected us all.

However, the lockdown was lifted after a while and things eventually started to come back to some kind of normalcy. Many people who had left the city returned to it. Most people were now wearing masks. At first, they and the world looked very



strange as I looked out from my balcony. At one point, the government and our resilient people fought back. Even when we had flash flood, I could see from TV that rural folks striving to start again.

With things improving, my colleagues and I were taking online classes for our students — a new experience for so many of us. Initially, at the end of the class, I would feel a little spaced out. "Poor little ones" I used to think at first. But gradually, they learnt to concentrate on what we would be saying.

But another March has gone, and the

pandemic has hit us badly again. When really unhappy with everything, I kept thinking of the opening lines from Mary Hopkins' song that I first heard in my teens decades ago but that still is part of me... "Those were the days, we thought they would never end..." But here we were, in the midst of the pandemic, and the good days seem to have gone out of our sight for all of us — teachers and little ones — forever.

By Nazma Alam
Photo: Collected

#REVIEWS

Pen palling in 2021

I first came across the word pen pal when I was a student of 4th grade. There was a very clichéd letter in the syllabus which was about describing your country to a foreign pen friend. I didn't just get through the letter like every other one but rather marvelled at it because the idea of writing to some foreigner was very exciting back then. But I always wondered where people would find such friends. As I grew up and the Internet became part and parcel of our lives, I found out that it's quite easy to make pen pals abroad.

GLOBAL PENFRIENDS

This is arguably the best pen palling website available online. It's very easy to create an account as you just need to have an email to register and it's searching parameters ensures you get to meet people of your appropriate requirement (like country, spoken language, subjects of interest), the extreme vetting policy before approving an account ensures the fact that there happens to be no scam accounts. The only drawback is you have two contact credits when you are using it for free and you have to pay a few dollars to increase the number of contact credits. Overall, I personally have met a few very fantastic people through this website and would definitely suggest others to use it.



PEN PAL WORLD

This is another popular pen palling website available. Some of its unique features include keeping a very concise introduction and a single profile picture. Other than this, being a non-paying member, you are allowed to send three messages per day, and you can send messages to the paying members as well, the feature which global penfriends lacked. However, its biggest

drawback is that you can get inappropriate messages from scam accounts. However, you can easily block them as the feature of the website allows you to.

MY LANGUAGE EXCHANGE

This is not a pen palling website in the literal sense of the term but it comes close. It's basically full of geeky people who are wishing to get a grip in a foreign language. However, if this is what you want,

the website is definitely for you. You can connect with other people through text chat, voice chat or email, a few features which are totally exclusive to this website. It's basically duo lingo but with people so it doesn't have any serious drawback.

INTERPALS

This is one of the oldest pen palling communities available online so you would be able to find a lot of people there with an option to email or snail mail them. However, this website is getting its fair share of negative reviews in recent times due to the authorities' indifference to scammers and the abundance of scam profiles in the community. However, you can always block an account if there is a red flag.

PENPALAND

This is one of the newest pen palling communities out there, with only a few members (3000 currently), but it has a great bunch of people. The search feature is very quirky as it gives you two options, "Find a friend" and "Find friend from travel destination." So, if you are planning to travel to some country to spend a year or two, this website can be really instrumental in finding you potential mates from the place.

By Rassiqa Aziz Kabir
Photo: Collected