



A Better Life?

Call Your Elders: Hugs from Here

Ramaa checks in on her 93-year-old aunt Indira, who lives in Bangalore, India.

Ad Break

Zahir Janmohamed: I'm Zahir Janmohamed...and this is Call your Elders...a special segment from A Better Life? A podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds.

In this series, we usually speak with immigrant elders, but in this episode, we're changing it up a bit. Ramaa Reddy is a travel and food journalist — and she's an immigrant from India who works and lives in New York City.

Some of Ramaa's family still lives in India. And although India went on strict lockdown early on in the pandemic, today, [there are more than six million cases reported](#).

So Ramaa decided to check in on one of her dearest family members.

Ramaa Reddy: My aunt Indira is an alert and sharp 93-year-old and I've always admired her for her grace and intellect. She lives with her son and daughter-in-law in Bangalore.

I lived with my aunt for a couple of years as an undergraduate, while my parents were living abroad.

I've been thinking about Indiratta a lot these days. So I called her up to see how she was doing.

Ramaa: Who's the one person that you want to hug when this lockdown is over?

Indira Reddy: Can I give you a hug from here? [Laughs.] All my lovely nephews and nieces. I love and I could hug all of you and bless you and, and hope things go well for all of you.

Ramaa: That is so nice. I'm giving you back my hug. [Laughs.] And all my kisses.

We are, uh, going through such a difficult time right now with Covid-19. Um, have you ever lived through anything like this in your life?

Indira: Never. Never, Ramaa. But I remember long ago, my mother's aunt...she'd say there was this terrible disaster that came as the influenza in the turn of the century...you know, she was a very elderly person, like I am at this age, she was at

that age when she was talking to us. She said, “You don't know the hundreds of thousands of people who died during that period.” But she would still have horror in her voice when she would talk at that age. She was a young woman at that time.

But there wasn't this isolation...people would get infected and they would die. This pandemic was the first time where people were aware — made aware of the seriousness. This, it was almost like an attack on humanity...and you didn't know whether you'd pull through.

Ramaa: Indiratta grew up during British rule in India. Her father was Director of Agriculture of the Madras Presidency, an important position in India's agrarian economy. I asked Indiratta to describe a scene post India's independence, when she was in her thirties.

Indira: We used to go up to the hills every year for a short fortnight visit. And we used to go to Ooty, which is in the Western Ghats. It was a very small town. When the summer heat and the dust was unbearable in the plains, and we'd go to the hills and it would be so beautifully pleasant. There was no dust, there was no heat. I remember walking into the glades...there would be pine trees and eucalyptus trees and the perfume of the pine needles. When you tread on it, you get that beautiful smell. Your — your feet would crunch on the pine needles. And there would be these massive eucalyptus trees with their blueish green leaves. And walk down and find...they're not farmers, they're really tribal people...they would collect wild mushrooms and strawberries and pack them in little baskets with leaves tucked into the basket and they'd put the wild mushrooms on top so that the basket would look chunky and nice for the buyers.

The strawberries...they were small, but very sweet and made a perfect, uh, dessert with cream and the dusting of sugar. And, um, in the evenings, it would be chilly and we'd sit on the carpet with the plates on our laps and enjoy our wild mushrooms and our, uh, strawberries.

Ramaa: I'm curious...how was life like during the British occupation? Um...did you have any interaction with the British?

Indira: When I was in school, I went to a school in Ooty, which was a convent school, and most of the children there were the children of expatriates who had posted in the plains and they wanted the children to escape the heat and they were sent to Ooty. There were lots of girls and they were very, very friendly.

Ramaa: Yeah. Uh, but, uh, do you think it was comfortable for all of India during the British period or just for upper-class Indians?

Indira: I don't think, um, everyone was happy...there was a lot of resentment. There was that feeling that they were the rulers and we were the — we were the ruled.

I remember my father once came home furious and he was telling my mother that he had a brush up with one of the advisors, who was an Englishman. And he had been particularly rude in spite of the fact that my father was the head of the department and so highly qualified there. That other man, who was an Englishman, thought that he could push him around. That was their attitude.

Ramaa: How do you feel India is today in comparison?

Indira: We're, of course, extremely proud of the fact that we are free and we are independent and we are respected. And we count as a country that matters in the world affairs.

Ramaa: What's your hope for tomorrow?

Indira: That I should pass away peacefully, Ramaa. There is nothing more that you want out of life. I've had so much love from all you children that what more can I want?

So when I always say, tell people...never mourn when someone old has passed away. It's a fulfilled life. And it's a natural thing. You grieve only when someone passes away when they're young and they have responsibilities, that is, that is true sorrow. So it's been a good life, no regrets and it's...and whatever comes tomorrow, I'll accept it with joy.

Ramaa: When I was in college, you opened your home to me and so many of my cousins. And we came and stayed for many years. And, uh, one of the things I loved the most was, uh, having dinner together at seven o'clock every night. And it was so beautiful. And I want to thank you so much for doing that for me, because it kind of, uh, gave me, um, I don't know, a feeling of family.

Indira: No thanks are necessary. I loved having everyone.

And, and I was so happy that you children were there to give companionship to my two children. It gave me so much joy just to see a house full of children and you being all happy and laughing and argumentative, and yet loving each other and spending time together. I felt it was a blessing. It gave me as much pleasure as it must have given to you. I still remember you as a child coming and sitting on my lap and me holding on to you. I felt blessed that I was able to communicate and love so many people without any...there were no conditions. It was an unconditional love that I had for all of you.

Ramaa: I felt it that way too. It was true, unconditional love. This has been such a beautiful conversation with you...so thank you so much.

Indira: Thank you darling...give my love, to the children and Harish.

Zahir: That was Ramaa Reddy speaking with her aunt, Indira Reddy.

We'll be back in a couple of weeks with another call to an immigrant elder.

Next week, please join us for another installment of A Better Life?...a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds exploring how Covid-19 is making many immigrants rethink their ideas about the promise of this country.

We want to hear from the immigrant elders in *your* life...how are they doing? And what's bringing them joy in this moment?

Reach out to us on social media and tell us how you're staying connected to them.

This episode was produced by Ramaa Reddy. It was edited by Mia Warren...she's our executive producer. Our audio engineer and senior producer is Jocelyn Gonzales. Our intern is Kenny Leon. Our assistant producer is Anna Dilena. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Our executive editor is John Rudolph.

And our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I'm Zahir Janmohamed. Thanks for listening.

John Rudolph: Call Your Elders and A Better Life? are produced by Feet in 2 Worlds.

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