



A Better Life? Should I Stay or Should I Go?

In response to the failed U.S. response to COVID-19, two immigrant women wrestle with the question ‘should I stay or should I go?’ — and reach very different conclusions.

Ad Break

Zahir Janmohamed: Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about airports. Growing up in the 1980s, my family and I traveled a lot. My parents are Indians from Tanzania and I think we traveled so much because we didn’t know where we fit in and what world, if any, was ours.

I was born and raised in Sacramento, California. But it never felt like home. Growing up, white kids would often ask me, “You’re not really from here, are you?”

I never knew how to answer that question. I still don’t.

And yet each time I traveled, I was reminded about how lucky I was to grow up here. That’s because on each of our trips, we always met people who wanted to come to the U.S. Some wanted to escape political violence. Some for better economic opportunities. And others — like this one dude I met in Cairo — he just wanted to come to the U.S. because he was a fan of *Baywatch*.

“How do we find what you did? How do we get a better life like you?” They often asked us. But lately, I’m not so sure if people still ask that question.

I’m Zahir Janmohamed and this is A Better Life? — a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds that explores the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants in the U.S.

America’s infrastructure is crumbling, as this coronavirus pandemic has made abundantly clear. And immigrants — people of color, African Americans, Indigenous people — have been disproportionately impacted by this pandemic.

But the idea of America, the idea that this country can still offer immigrants a better life...is that still alive?

This season, you’ll hear from first-, second-, and third-generation Americans about how they are struggling during Covid-19. You’ll also hear how they’ve found joy. Stories of loss, of discovery, of people who want to leave the U.S. — and people more determined than ever to make their American Dream come true.

In this episode, two stories of immigrants wrestling with the question: “Should I stay or should I go?” And arriving at different answers.

First, we’ll hear from our producer Mia Warren.

Mia Warren: My mom, Heeja, immigrated to the United States from Korea in the 1970s to pursue her dream of getting a PhD...but now she has a different dream.

Heeja: I like to live...outside of Seoul in a small village or something. I want to be a boarder in a farm house with a middle aged woman as my helper. I just want to be secluded and peaceful and kind of being taken care of.

Mia: My mom’s lived in the U.S. for more than 40 years. In four decades, she’s built an entire life for herself: a long career as a scientific patent agent, two kids who are now grown, and a community of friends in Boulder, Colorado, where I was raised.

I live in New York City now, and even though we’re almost 2,000 miles apart, we’re *really* close. We talk every day on the phone about our favorite books, and when we get together in person, we like to watch our favorite guilty pleasure...

Clip: Patrick Swayze: “Nobody puts Baby in a corner.”

Heeja: I hate to say *Dirty Dancing*, but that's, that's a good movie. [Laughs.] I'm a romantic deep down, I suppose. I always liked to watch dance. Something about being able to dance together and in the movement, there is a true exchange of your soul and love and warmth and you don't have to talk, you just dance and that's enough.

Clip: Jennifer Grey: “Most of all, I’m scared of walking out of this room and never feeling the rest of my whole life the way I feel when I’m with you!”

Mia: My mom doesn’t dance often, but she moves a lot. She’s an avid outdoors person. With short cropped white hair, at five feet and a hundred ten pounds, she’s climbed half the peaks in Colorado over fourteen thousand feet.

But that all changed back in January 2020.

Heeja: That afternoon, I started having this dizzy spell just out of clear blue. I was really dizzy and a bit nauseated and I just couldn't figure out.

Mia: She was experiencing mysterious symptoms every day. Bouts of dizziness. Weakness. A lack of appetite. Tingly limbs.

After taking just a few steps, she’d have to sit down and rest. She couldn’t play tennis, or hike up a mountain, or do most of the things that made retired life so enjoyable. And it all came to a head.

Heeja: I was so affected emotionally that I couldn't breathe at times. I thought I was having a heart attack because I was just breathing really, really hard. And I became afraid of what might happen any minute.

Mia: As the physical symptoms got worse, so did the emotional angst. She wondered if she would die in her sleep.

Heeja: I couldn't focus on anything at all. And I was afraid of doing a lot of things, going for a walk alone. And such an incredible sense of hopelessness and helplessness overtook me that I couldn't function.

Mia: Here's the thing: I know there's no "right time" to get sick. You can't predict these things. But when my mom got sick, it felt like the exact "wrong time."

Or put it this way: if my mom were healthy during this pandemic, she wouldn't have a care in the world. I *know* her. She'd be hiking in the mountains, breathing fresh air, not worrying about a virus she couldn't even see.

She wasn't sick with Covid. It was something else. We still don't know what it is.

For as long as I can remember, my mom has been forging her own path. She was born in 1953 in a village on the southern tip of South Korea. The war ended just after she was born. She was the only girl in a family with six brothers.

In 1976, my mom enrolled in graduate school at Miami University of Ohio. The week before the school term started, she was still in Seoul, waiting for her letter of acceptance to arrive.

Heeja: So last minute, I made it happen. I bought the ticket and packed in a great hurry, went to the international airport with all my family. I finally got on the airplane and I sat down and I just started sobbing uncontrollably because it just hit me that I was going alone. Some, some place I've never been, it could be moon or Mars or anything.

Mia: People said Ohio was cold, so my mom packed a few thick blankets in her suitcase. She brought a Panasonic rice cooker. And of course, a packet of o-jing-o — her favorite dried squid snack.

But like many immigrants, she never planned on staying.

Heeja: At the time, my sole goal was getting a PhD and go back to Korea, where I came from. But it didn't happen that way because life has its own way of working things out.

Mia: What she means is that she met my dad, a white American man. They divorced when I was a kid. Out of all her siblings, my mom is the only one to marry a non-Korean — and the only one to get divorced.

She's always done things as she saw fit, without caring much about what others think. She's happy living this way, and I've always admired her for it. But she never saw this sickness coming. And it changed her.

Heeja: All in all, I've lost confidence in life, Mia. I never thought I would say that, but you know what I used to be. I'll say 'Goddammit!' And just stand up and fly right kind of attitude.

Mia: Right as my mom started getting sick with a mystery illness, death rates from the coronavirus started spiking in the U.S.

Clip: "Tonight, troubling new data from the World Health Organization. The U.S. marked its deadliest 24 hours last week, with over 2900 lives lost to Covid-19..."

Mia: My brother and I both live on the East Coast. When the pandemic hit, we were really freaked out. We started staying home. Friends posted cooking videos and Instagrammed their virtual happy hours.

But back in March and April, I watched my mom's sickness collide with Colorado's stay-at-home orders, and her entire way of life shut down. Like many others, she was confined to her house, staring at the walls, with nowhere to go, no one to see.

Heeja: And suddenly I felt like everybody was having a good time in terms of family and friends and social things. Except me. I, I had the sense I'm sitting inside the house. I felt like I'm about to explode because I was so isolated. There's nobody near me to support me emotionally.

Mia: Of course, nobody was having a good time. But my mom couldn't process what was happening, with hundreds of people dying every day from Covid-19.

Heeja: Hello?

Mia: Sorry, Mom. Sorry, say that again?

Mia: That's us talking on April 30th. I was recording it on my phone walking through my neighborhood in Brooklyn. It was a really windy day.

Heeja: I was about to take my bike to Jax to be tuned.

Mia: Who's Jack?

Heeja: It's a, it's a bike shop in the neighborhood.

Mia: In this conversation, I was worried my mom wasn't taking social distancing seriously.

Mia: Why don't you call them first?

Heeja: Okay. All right.

Mia: And just say, 'Hey, what's the plan? As far as this goes, can I drop it off safely? Can I pick it up safely?' You know?

Heeja: Oh, okay. Okay.

Mia: And then when you bring the bike home, obviously, you have to make sure that you really thoroughly wipe it down and then wash your hands and all that jazz.

Heeja: Yeah. Yeah.

Mia: Right?

Heeja: I know. I know.

Mia: That weekend, [coronavirus deaths in New York City topped 18,000](#). People experiencing homelessness were sleeping on subway trains out of desperation. Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered that the cars be cleaned overnight to prevent infections.

Those early days, I was too scared to leave my apartment, sometimes for days at a time. Like millions of other New Yorkers, I was having horrible nightmares. The sirens never seemed to stop. A few weeks into lockdown, my roommate and I got into a fight about how to disinfect broccoli. To just be able to feel fresh air on my face, I'd climb onto my fire escape and up onto the roof.

I turned 30, right before the pandemic hit New York City hard. And in the past month and a half, I had counted about 20 new white hairs on my head.

My mom, on the other hand? She was totally preoccupied with her condition.

In March, my mom started talking about going back to Korea. She could get treated for her illness. She was *done* with the American healthcare system.

Heeja: It's despicable. It's the efficiency and the way sick people, especially elders, are handled. No matter how much you assert that you're hurting like hell, the help comes so slow and neglected. I had to yell many, many times to see a doctor. I mean, that's...it's just...unmerciful.

Mia: Her thought was simple. *If I go back to the country I left more than four decades ago, the country of my birth, I'll get better medical care.*

Heeja: They have a comprehensive system. You go to a clinic, they run all kinds of possible tests and take all the images from brain to whole body MRI and, you know, go into your stomach and they do everything so that they can find the culprit.

Mia: [Since 1989, the South Korean healthcare system has served 97% of the population.](#) It's a tight, efficient and affordable ship. Even foreign nationals have access to healthcare.

My mom's youngest brother lives in the U.S. too. And talking to him made her think she wasn't crazy to consider going back.

Heeja: In his mind, I dismissed Korea and everything that has to do with Korea and been holding America as kind of a promised land. And he said something like, "What has this country done to you? And at the end of the day, at the end of your life, you're suffering and they can't even figure out what's wrong with you." And he said, "It's about time you go back to Korea, where you come from, and you've been neglecting that aspect of your life so much." And he was really like...he was trashing this country and everything that's American.

Mia: But what does it even mean to go back? The Korea my mom left isn't the same place it is now. Gangnam Style, plastic surgery, and a clean, efficient transit system that puts New York to shame...none of those things was a blip on the radar when my mom emigrated in the '70s.

And my mom is privileged. She's built a financially secure life for herself here in the U.S. She owns her own house. She's a U.S. citizen. Where many immigrants don't have a choice about whether to come or go, she does. So I asked...why didn't she ever give Korea a second chance?

Heeja: I think that was the way my way of dealing with justifying my life. Why I didn't go back because, um, I could do much better here, you know, which I have done. But Korea has changed after I left. So it's not like I...I've been watching very carefully and they just bypassed us.

Mia: The South Korean government has been extremely successful in finding ways to slow the curve of the virus.

[By mid-February, they were producing thousands of Covid diagnostic tests by the day. They've used contact tracing and imposed strict isolation on Covid patients...](#)and they've been able to keep infection numbers relatively low.

But when my mom thinks about going back, she's not thinking about Covid. She's thinking about her own health. And she's building a dream.

Heeja: There are trees and forest and rice pads and a creek running nearby. I can walk down to the creek and walk around the small hills. And there will be locals sitting outside and gossiping and things like that. You know, we may have nothing in common, but that scene just gives me such a peace...peaceful image. I like to be part of it.

Mia: I still don't know how real that dream is. Is it something she's actually considering? Or just a fantasy she's building out of desperation? I'm not sure.

I am sure about one thing. Throughout this experience, my mom and I have both realized how important it is for us to be together.

Heeja: I wasn't a good daughter to my mother, mainly because there was a huge distance, right? I, I couldn't take care of my mother, even if I wanted. She was acutely aware of it. Her view was, America ruined her life because so many of her children came over and she couldn't be family like the way she was accustomed to. So my mother was quite bitter at the end.

Mia: I still don't know if my mom will make it to Korea. We don't know when it'll be safe to get on a plane. There are so many unknowns.

In the meantime, she's decided to move to the East Coast to be closer to me and my brother. I'm relieved at the thought of being a car ride away from her, but scared not knowing what her future looks like. Her health remains a mystery.

I don't want this to be a sad story. I want to know how it ends. And I want to be a good daughter to my mother. A couple of months ago, I drove from New York to Colorado to help my mom sell her house. Moving cross-country during a pandemic is as crazy as it sounds — and then some.

But my mom is an immigrant. She knows how to build a new life because she's done it before. Whether it's a better life...we'll just have to see.

Zahir: That story was produced by Mia Warren, who is also the producer of this series. Check out a photo of Mia and her mom at our website...abetterlifepodcast.com.

Some immigrants look at the Covid numbers in the U.S., as well as the rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and think: why did I even come here? But others see it differently.

That's what our next story is about. After watching how Covid-19 was impacting her family back home in Sonora, Mexico, Elsa Don Juan became more determined than ever to remain in the U.S.

Stay with us.

Ad Break

Zahir: This is A Better Life? from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Zahir Janmohamed.

Elsa Don Juan: My sister, she's the only one that was born in Tucson, but we all were born in Mexico.

Zahir: Elsa Don Juan grew up in a small city in Sonora, Mexico. She came to the U.S. in 2008 and now lives in a suburb of Phoenix.

Elsa: And I guess dreams do come true because since my husband got the job, then I was just like, along for the ride, for the work visa, and everything. So everything just came through, I guess. And we were living the American Dream that most Mexicans dream of all their life: to come here legally.

Zahir: Elsa was able to get U.S. health insurance for her elderly parents, who live in Mexico. It seemed like enough, but everything changed in March, when the virus started spreading rapidly on both sides of the border. Elsa went back to Mexico to care of her parents.

Reporter Maritza Félix spoke to Elsa.

Maritza Félix: What do you like the most of living here?

Elsa: There's no danger living here. And if we miss Mexico, it's like the border's three hours away. So we have the best of both worlds.

Maritza: Now tell me a little bit about your parents getting sick with COVID.

Elsa: When the stuff got pretty bad here in Arizona, back in March, they said, "We're closing the borders in four days." So I called them and I say, "Please come and be with us here. And we could all be together." Well, they're a little bit stubborn. My mom's like, "No, I can't get ready in four days. I have so much stuff to do, la la la." And so they decided not to come. And then the border closed and they couldn't come anymore.

And I was just worried sick all the time because my dad, he's older, he's 80. And then my mom is 69. And I was just like, "Oh my God, if this gets bad in my little town, if they get infected, this could go really bad because there's not going to be any hospitals."

My dad, he was the first to get sick. And then my mom got sick a week later.

Maritza: And then when did you decide to cross the border to Mexico and take care of your parents...how was it to make that decision?

Elsa: My husband, he was pretty upset. He really didn't want me to go, but I just couldn't sleep. I remember one day it was 3:00 AM. I call, like, 40 companies, trying for them to sell me PPE, protective gear. And they wouldn't. I have this really bad feeling. My dad got worse pretty quickly. And so when we got the results back that he has really bad pneumonia in both lungs, that's when I said, "This is it. I have to be there." And I just went into my husband's office. I was like, firm, you know, I was like, "I'm not asking, I'm leaving tomorrow, 5:00 AM."

My main focus was to keep my parents alive. And so, I drove as fast as I could, got there in eight hours. And as soon as I walked in the door, I saw my dad. He was in really bad shape.

I send the doctors the video and said, “This is bad.” And so the doctors, when they saw that and they saw that he has 78% of oxygen on his body...he had like 103 fever. And so that very same day that I arrived, he left in an ambulance.

Maritza: So what preparations do you make to be at your parents’ house with all this Covid around you?

Elsa: I of course called my doctor here and asked information like, “What can I do so that I don't get this virus?” And so I already had an N95 mask. And then I bought the hazmat, the gloves. And I wore the shield. I took Lysol, I took, uh, grade hospital disinfectant.

So first when I arrive home, I put everything on. I went in a room and so there was a whole process to go into that room. So it was little by little, take the shield off, take the goggles off, disinfect yourself. And then I threw all that away. I would wash my hands, wash my face and then go immediately into the shower. And then I went to sleep.

Maritza: How was it to be dressed like an astronaut, trying to keep safe?

Elsa: I suffer from menopause. So I have hot flashes. And so my parents had really high fevers and all the time they were shivering, you know, they were cold, so there was no air conditioning on. So, you know, Mexico, it was hot as hell, and I'm wearing my personal sauna. So I was sweating like a pig, the whole day. Like, the goggles will fog. And I couldn't see a thing.

Maritza: What do you think was the most difficult moment being over there?

Elsa: When I arrived and I saw my dad breathing that way...he was, like, almost incoherent. And that was the scariest moments of my life because I thought, “He might die. You know, he might die right here.” When it was just my mom and I, for the several six days, she was so sick. She had, like, no energy. She didn't eat. Her temperature will come all of a sudden, like a wave hit her, and then she will take medicine for it and then she'll be fine. But once it came back again, it was pretty bad. I've never seen her in such bad shape. And she lost a lot of weight.

And I kept going for nine days like that, because when you're against imminent danger, your body really delivers.

I don't think I've ever experienced anything like it.

I think I'm pretty good at bottling emotions up. [Laughs.] So I just feel like I need a little bit of therapy to just get the trauma out because I been through PTSD. I used to suffer from that, from the many years of the infertility that I went through. When my baby finally was born, I had really bad PTSD and then postpartum depression. So I know myself and I know when that's, like, creeping up on me. So I know that I need to get help.

Maritza: I know that you told us that your parents have a U.S. health insurance and you were thinking about the possibility of bringing them to the United States to get treatment...how it went?

Elsa: I call around beforehand because I needed to know my options. At the beginning, they said, “You can bring them if they have an appointment with a doctor.” That’s when they first got sick a month ago. And then when I saw my mom, she was not getting better. I wanted to bring her with me. They say, “Well, it’s only if she has an appointment with a doctor that is like a matter of life and death, then she won’t cross the border.”

Maritza: Have you think about getting your parents on this side of the border, on the U.S. side of the border to become, like, legal residents so they can stay with you? Or that’s not an option for you guys?

Elsa: I been telling my sister for years that she should make them U.S. citizens. And more so when Trump came into the office, I was sure he was going to change the policy. And so I was very afraid of that. And so I kept insisting that they do it and they decided not to do it. And now that this happened, I talked to them and I said, “We have to learn from our mistakes. We can’t wait any longer. You’re going to be an American citizen. And you’re going to be able to come into this country if something goes wrong.”

Maritza: You feel safer on this side of the border?

Elsa: Oh yeah. Totally safer. I mean...I come from a very small city in Sonora, which is right next door to the border. And it was like the safest town to live in. But right now, there’s the narcos, and all this stuff going on there is really ugly. I don’t want them living there anymore. I want them to come and live with me.

Maritza: Will you go back to living in Mexico?

Elsa: Never. We’ve lived here for 11 years and just the thought about moving to another country, I was like, “No, I don’t want to leave the U.S. I want to stay here!” But thank God it didn’t happen.

I feel like if the U.S. gets a little bit cold, next door, Mexico gets pneumonia. It’s bad. They really suffer from the consequences of what happens in the U.S. and we’re seeing it right now. Things got pretty, pretty bad after COVID arrived to them.

At the beginning, I used to panic. I just had to, uh, stop watching the news, but I could see in the newsfeeds of our friends, that it’s so high now where we’re worse than New York per capita. And...it doesn’t scare me anymore because I’ve seen COVID and I know how it works.

When I talked to my doctor, he’s like, “You’re going to get it. It doesn’t matter if you have an N95, you are going to get it. This is very contagious.” So when I went

there, I was like, “Okay, if I get it, I get it. So what?” So I decided not to be afraid of it.

Zahir: Elsa Don Juan speaking to reporter Maritza Félix. Since she spoke to us in June, Elsa’s parents are still in Mexico. She asked for a helicopter ambulance to bring them to the U.S., but their health insurance denied it. They are still suffering from health effects related to the coronavirus.

To see the full protective gear that Elsa wore when she stayed at her parents’ home in Mexico, visit our website, abetterlifepodcast.com. You can read more about our podcast and our team there too.

We’re all living through this pandemic...and we’re often coming to radically different conclusions about where we belong.

Have *you* been through something similar to Elsa or Heeja? If so, we want to hear about it. Connect with us — we’re at Feet in 2 Worlds — that’s the number two — on social media. We’d love to know what *your* experiences have been like, and to hear what you think of the show.

That’s all for this episode. It was produced by Mia Warren. She’s our executive producer. Elsa’s story was reported by Maritza Félix. Our audio engineer and senior producer is Jocelyn Gonzales. Our assistant producer is Anna Dilena. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Our executive editor is John Rudolph. Our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I’m Zahir Janmohamed. Thanks for listening.

John Rudolph: A Better Life? is produced by Feet in 2 Worlds. For fifteen years, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today’s immigrants and advancing the careers of immigrant journalists.

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Ad Break

CITATION

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