

Nothing could have prepared me for two weeks of Covid hell

Times **LIVE**



Tanya Farber is a senior writer. She tested positive for Covid-19 just before Christmas. Here she shares her experience

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People say it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to keep the sick, elderly and high-risk safe from harm.

Image: Tanya Farber

It's long after midnight and I can't sleep. It's ironic, really, because this is the first night in two weeks that I'm not gripped by fear of what the darkness will bring, or what new symptoms will stalk me in the morning as soon as I stand up.

Tonight, I'm kept awake by the audacity of feeling OK after two weeks of Covid hell, and I'm haunted by the notion of people gasping for air, turned away from hospitals packed to capacity. I'm haunted by healthcare workers brought to their knees and family members staring blankly at an empty bed occupied just days before by someone now buried in the ground.

We read so much about "deaths" and "recoveries", but between those two states there are countless people having a nightmare of a time. And yes, there are the asymptomatic lucky fish and those with a mild cough. But you just don't know how your body will react, and neither do you want to find out.

In my case (and I emphasise that as I know it affects everyone differently), it started with a headache. Of course, a headache comes in the gift pack of parenthood. But you pop a Nurofen, keep calm and carry on. Except, this time, the pill didn't help.

The next day, I just felt strange. Nothing to write home about. Just strange. A swim in my favourite place out in nature felt odd, like someone had painted an invisible layer of cling wrap between the water and my skin, which is normally at its happiest when immersed.

You know that feeling just before you get the flu and you can feel something brewing in your body and it's a matter of time? It was like that, except it didn't feel familiar.

A headache and a weird sensation while swimming? Let's not be neurotic, I told myself, it's nothing.

Later that night, my throat felt sore. But hey, that's not unusual for me. I was one of those kids who got tonsillitis at least once a year.

Part of my brain was saying it was psychosomatic, that the few symptoms I had were subtle, maybe even imagined. But another part knew damn well what was happening, but I shut it up and told it to stop talking nonsense.

By the next day, there was no doubt in my mind. You know that feeling just before you get the flu and you can feel something brewing in your body and it's a matter of time? It was like that, except it didn't feel familiar. It was as if a truly strange new invader had entered my body, and I had no idea what would happen next.

I phoned my doctor. She said to me: "This could go either way. It's too early to test you for Covid-19 because the most accurate lab results are produced on day three to five of your symptoms, so we're

going to treat this as allergies and see what tomorrow brings. Carry on staying at home and take care.”

I felt somewhat hopeful: “It’s windy in Cape Town. The pollen count is through the ceiling. My throat is sore from a postnasal drip caused by allergies, and the rest of my body is responding to that.”

I took the medication she’d prescribed.

Now bear in mind as you read the rest of this story that I am a science journalist at a mainstream media stable. I have spent this whole year reading science papers on the pandemic, interviewing marvellous minds, tuning into webinars, attending virtual press conferences with political leaders and health ministries.

I have stayed home as much as possible and shouted at people who don’t wear masks because I have read too many stories of what can happen.

But still nothing could have prepared me for what it was actually like to have Covid.

On the day I was tested, I was reminded yet again of the strange things we have integrated into our lives. My husband drove me to the testing station, but he sat in the front and I sat in the back. We drove in silence in our masks with all the windows open. I could see his love and care for me were muddied by his own fear of being in a car with contagious disease.

My younger daughter began vomiting. She vomited and vomited and vomited. She is a petite 12-year-old and I have never seen so much liquid come out of one person’s body. She was terrified – she kept telling me she couldn’t breathe and I could see she was inhaling some of what was coming out. It was very scary, but understandably, the doctor said there was no point in sending her for a test too – that families were overwhelming the labs by sending everyone for a test instead of testing one member and then all quarantining.

I was told it would be between 24 and 48 hours before I got my results. The rest of that day and that evening, I still felt terribly sick, but I was in a delicious no-man’s land between being proactive (tested and isolating from family) and waiting for the news. But just 12 hours after having a stick up my nose for a swab to be taken, my phone pinged. Everything was in small letters – except the word POSITIVE.

I know this sounds odd given my symptoms, but honestly, it felt like someone had slapped me across the face. I was expecting the results only the next day, not at bedtime when I had brushed my teeth and settled into my isolation room.

First up: notifying all the people that I or anyone in my family had had contact with. What if I had made someone else sick? My doctor said you shed the most virus two days before your symptoms appear. Yet another cruelty of this disease. I had worn my mask religiously and followed every other protocol, but still, you just don't know.

That night, as I fell asleep alone in a room that felt like eight thousand miles away from my husband, I kept saying to myself: "It is going to be OK. Most people have a very mild form of the disease. Just breathe."

But really, nothing could have prepared me for what lay ahead.

And before I go into the gory details, I want to say that my beloved family and friends are absent from this narrative. Not because they weren't there for me, but because they were, in the biggest way possible. I could write a whole different post, even more long-winded than this one, to describe the meals that were brought, the groceries that were delivered, the advice that was given, the calls that were made, the messages sent asking how I was. I will thank those people privately, and when I say "I will never forget", I mean that.

I can't remember each individual day that followed – they have all just blurred into an endless stream – so I can't explain chronologically what happened over the two weeks. But I can tell you that they're now a blurry soup of fear, discomfort and exhaustion – and I can remember how different parts of my body felt at different times.

There were headaches that ranged from dull to dastardly. They can lie over your eye or grip your head from the back. They remind you that the virus has played havoc with people's brains and doctors have even reported patients who presented with meningitis as a first manifestation of Covid-19. I was spared anything too dramatic there, but the neurological fallout is just damn weird: when I lost my sense of smell and about 80% of my sense of taste, I was reminded that our body is a machine made up of parts. We think we just "smell" something because that's how it smells, but there's a whole labyrinth of mechanical engineering between our nose and our brain that makes that happen. When you get Covid-19, the system breaks.

As for the sore throat: the "ache" in my throat in those first two days was child's play compared to what would follow. There were two or three days when I felt like I could hardly swallow, like someone had placed a ball of sandpaper in my throat and while Disprin or a warm cup of tea provided temporary reprieve, the beast would return.

Then there were the days when I felt as if my body was made of lead. Lifting limbs seemed impossible, walking to the toilet a long trek. It felt like each sore muscle was competing for attention.

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Sunday Times Daily / [Tanya Farber](#)

One afternoon, I felt like something was rolled up under the top of my arm as I lay on my side. I lifted myself and searched the blankets. Nothing. Then I touched the top of my arm and it felt like a line of bruising all the way down the top. I searched for a bruise. Nothing. And then I touched the other side and it felt exactly the same. Why the hell would the top of your arms feel bruised because of Covid-19? I haven't the foggiest clue, but that's the way it goes with this illness.

I think it was day three or four in my isolation room when I got up in the morning and I just felt dizzy and had a terrible stomach ache. Aha. My tummy is the new battlefield for today, I told myself. I should spare you the details here, but I want to keep it real. I made several (and I mean several) trips to the bog. It was neither fun nor pleasant, but lo and behold, when night fell, things only got worse.

I had finally managed to soothe my mind for a few minutes with an episode of *The Surgeon's Cut* when I got this horrific wave of nausea. I loathe vomiting more than anything in the world, and tried to convince myself it would go away. But within seconds, I was roaring over the big blue bucket I had strategically placed next to the bed for this very purpose. The sound woke my kids and husband up. Three masked faces appeared at the door, their eyes a mixture of empathy and disgust.

None of them could come into the room, so even as I got those horrible post-vomit chills and shudders, I walked slowly to the door to pick up the mop and water they had left for me.

"That's it," I said to myself, unable to fall asleep for fear of what would happen next. "My body has purged the perpetrator and tomorrow I will be better."

But I wasn't. Not the next day or the next or the one after that.

The virus finally went to my lungs, and every breath reminded me that we're just made up of all the working parts of our body. Our heartbeats when we're not looking, our lungs give us oxygen when we drift off into slumber.

The last part of each breath produced a feeling of sponginess in my lungs, and I'd feel dizzy. At that time, the oximeter was my lifesaver. That poor little machine was working round the clock, especially on the nights I lay wide awake too terrified to let sleep take me.

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Sunday Times Daily / [Tanya Farber](#)

Some days I felt as if an air bubble was trapped in my chest, and on other days I just had a sickly feeling of non-specific malaise, like my body was just sick, sick, sick, and yet I'd be hard-pressed to tell the doctor what I was feeling.

Sometimes I would feel fine lying down, but as soon as I stood up, it would hit me again.

Symptoms came and went, but the most consistent of all was the exhaustion. Walking a few steps felt like a trudge up a mountain, and speaking to someone on the phone would require a huge nap afterwards.

Now you may be wondering in all of this where the dry cough and fever come in. You're right to ask, but it's the darndest thing. Those are by far the most common symptoms across the globe, but even as I write this in my state of recovery, I can tell you I had neither of those. I maybe coughed four times in those two weeks, and to date (touch wood) I have not had a high temperature at all.

There were many false alarms that I had "turned a corner" and this was the question asked most frequently by those who love me: are you feeling better yet? I know I became boring, or like Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh who never has a positive thing to say. But honestly, each morning I would wake up thinking "today is the day I will feel better" and then moments later I would be overcome with nausea, or exhaustion, or the aching throat, or the lead muscles. More than once I cried because I just couldn't handle feeling so close to the edge.

So where am I now? Two weeks later, all I'm left with is exhaustion. I feel like I was pummelled, and now I'm embalmed in normality. Well, not quite. I don't think the world will ever be the "normal" one we took for granted.

What I am feeling now is more in my soul than my body.

I am filled with gratitude. I didn't know so many people cared about me (I'm not everyone's cup of tea), and I can't believe the luck of managing the disease at home and not needing a hospital during this second wave.

My husband also got sick during the course of my illness, by the way, but he had a much milder reaction and carried on being my stalwart, carer and friend. Our two daughters kept the sounds of cheer going in the house. I stopped being angry with them for watching too much television or eating Nutella straight from the jar. They were the sunflowers that brightened up the home.

I am heartbroken – for the thousands of families in our country today who don't have the room for isolation, or the general practitioner they can call up for advice, or the pharmacist that will send some Rehidrat and mucolytics.

People say it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to keep the sick, elderly and high-risk safe from harm.

I am devastated for those who have lost loved ones. I see on Facebook every day someone new is grieving, some having lost not one but many family members.

But mostly, I am angry.

I'm angry that some people still deny the existence of this disease and that others walk around with their noses hanging out above their masks.

I am angry that some people are still trying to party while others are fighting for their lives in overworked ICUs.

I am angry that we're living through a pandemic when millions of South Africans still don't have electricity or good sanitation.

And I am angry that some people assume it will be like having a cold. It might be. And you may even be asymptomatic. But you may feel like I did. Or you may pass it on to someone who dies. You never know if it's going to be you gasping for air and being turned away because you're patient number 200 whose family is begging for a ventilator.

People say it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to keep the sick, elderly and high-risk safe from harm.

And if you think you won't be struck by this, think again. This virus has one thing on its mind: a host, and that's you.

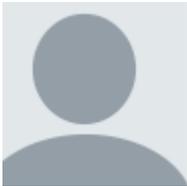
- **Stan Sandler** • [6 days ago](#)

I wish all the denialists (and there are plenty) would read your article. Glad you are on the road to recovery. Barbie S

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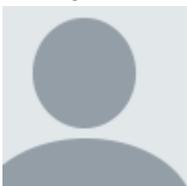
- **None None** • [6 days ago](#)

A very vivid expose of what happened to you, plus a dire warning that we all need to be super-vigilant. It also bothers me that people don't wear their masks correctly. Maybe more diagrams in the press plus photos of those who do and those who don't position their masks properly? Glad you are over the worst, but what a torrid journey.

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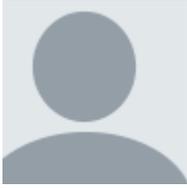
- **Sarah Kotze** • [6 days ago](#)

Thank you for your article Tanya. Wishing you all the best.

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[Moonsamy Govender](#) • 3 days ago

This article should be copied and shared. It is the most graphic account of a Covid-19 victim I have read. I try not to miss any article of yours. I am glad that you are well,

Tanya

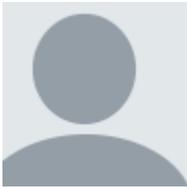
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[Thea Jackson](#) • 6 days ago

Terrifying account, one of several I've read in recent days. It is beyond comprehension that there are otherwise intelligent people who utterly deny the existence of C19. There was a brilliant article in Airmail, the digital weekly magazine published by Graydon Carter (former editor of Vanity Fair) written by the screenwriter of the movie Contagion. In it, the coronavirus addressing readers in the 1st person, saying things like "as I was sitting on the credit card machine in a Texas hair salon" & "I was sitting on the door knob in the Oval Office" indicating the sheer but certain randomness of the potential for infection.