

Xie and S's Story

Interview and story written with Jessie Tang



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou_

Mr. Xie is a frontline worker at a grocery store. S is a small restaurant owner

Since coming to Canada in 2015, Mr. Xie has worked at a Chinese restaurant and later at a grocery store. For over a year he's been working at a Chinese supermarket, going to work each day feeling the emotional stress of the pandemic. His state of nervousness and worry is exacerbated by the fact that he did not have a health card. Mr. Xie says that whenever someone gets too close to him or coughs in public, he would feel a pounding anxiety. As a grocery clerk stocking shelves, he is frequently approached by customers inquiring about where different products can be found. Although he doesn't speak English, Mr. Xie, being a person serious about his work, would use his phone to translate and communicate with customers. This kind of close contact at work makes him feel especially vulnerable during the pandemic.

In addition to the fear and unease around catching COVID-19, the recent rise in anti-Asian racist incidents since the pandemic also fills Mr. Xie with anx-

ety. His life of overwhelming stress was crushing.

During the pandemic, Mr. Xie has to get out of bed at around 5 a.m. in the morning, before spending almost 2 hours commuting to work. By the time he finishes for the day, it's almost 11 p.m. 6 days a week, he gives 12 hours each day to his job and loses over 4 more hours a day commuting to and from work.

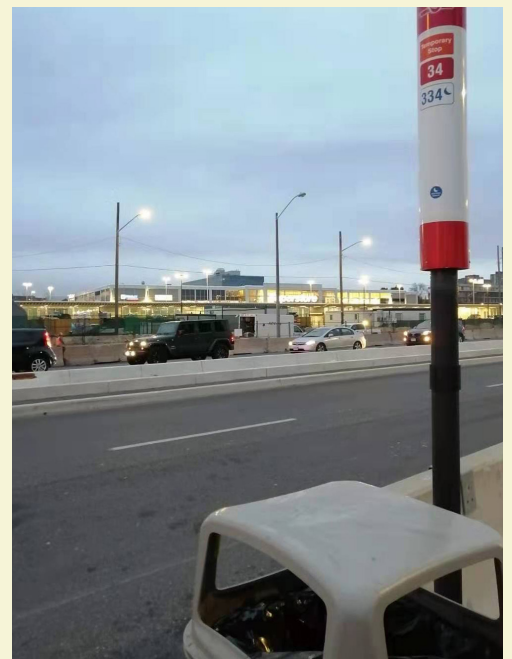
There are times when his mood suffers, and in his few remaining hours of rest at the end of his day, Mr. Xie can't fall asleep. His relative S, who lives with him, says that Mr. Xie, overcome with emotion, would sometimes lose his temper. He would repeat "I'm about to collapse, I'm so tired, so tired", making everyone unhappy.

At the same time, S can empathize with how living a life of such stress—and to be without status, on top of it all—would understandably lead Mr. Xie to feel a profound sense of loneliness and bleak hopelessness for what

lies ahead. Such precariousness in the body and mind really is hard to bear.

After almost 6 years without a health card, Mr. Xie finally succeeded in getting coverage under the Federal Interim Health Program with the support of community groups in January this year. Before this, whenever Mr. Xie felt ill, all he could do was buy over-the-counter medication, rest for a bit and push through again. His feeling, as S explains, is that "if the sickness can be hidden, hide it and if the suffering can be endured, endure it."

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Mr. Xie works 6 days a week and spends 4 hours each day on his commute.



Mr. Xie, who is responsible for stocking products in the store, takes care to neatly and carefully arrange the items on the shelves.

S says that in the past few years, Mr. Xie has fainted several times, but because he didn't have a health card, and with the rush of their hectic schedules, they didn't pay much attention to Mr. Xie's health. It wasn't until this year, when Mr. Xie finally got his health card and did a full physical examination that they realized the situation was serious.

On the very day of the checkup, he was rushed to the hospital and had 5 bags of blood transfused. The doctor told him if he hadn't come and sought medical care in time, with such severe anemia, he would have likely passed away in his sleep. At this point, Mr. Xie has only been diagnosed with diabetes. There are still a slew of other medical tests he needs to do to find the underlying cause of his illness.

Mr. Xie and S are grateful for the help they received from the community and hope that they could use their own power to help other people in situations similar to their own, marginalized immigrant working class families. Mr. Xie said, "I'm very grateful for the community members who helped me get my health card and am thankful to the people who donated blood to me. Narrowly escaping death this time taught me that I want to work and live

happily in Canada, like everyone else."

Compared to working in a hot kitchen, Mr. Xie much prefers his job at the supermarket. He is good at his job and carries a remarkable sense of pride and responsibility in his work. In the pandemic, co-workers who have more resources and economic options can choose to stay home from work, but Mr. Xie doesn't have that choice.

Even after the medical exam showed severe health issues, Mr. Xie spent just one day in the hospital, before immediately returning to work. Mr. Xie says if he had to take sick leave, the employer can simply find someone to replace him. Without much workplace training or English language skills, he wouldn't know what to do if he lost his job.

Mr. Xie feels comfortable with the

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supermarket's pandemic health and safety protocols. S, who runs a small shop, hopes that the government can take stricter measures to control the pandemic, to wait for things to stabilize before carefully considering reopening. Borders and airports should be properly managed, as should the flow of people, she believes. S, who for over 3 years has been running her small shop inside an office building, has seen almost no business because everyone is working from home. Even if life returns to normal in the near future, it will be difficult to get back to how things were before.

Mr. Xie has been living with his relative S since he came to Canada. He really enjoys living in Canada; the air quality is good and he can be free to join whichever organization he pleases.

Even though Mr. Xie wants to live a happy carefree life, as things stand now, his life consists of "daily headaches combined with other forms of mental stress...I want to be like the average person and buy a car...there is pressure from exhaustion at the end of each workday, along with being afraid of eviction by my landlord. So even with the pain and tiredness, I want to buy my own house—at least at the end of each workday, I'll have a comfortable place to fall asleep and set my mind at rest."

"I think of a Chinese song from my childhood: I want a home, a place in no need of extravagance, in my hours of tiredness, it comes to my mind. I want a home, a place in no need of bigness, in moments of fright, I don't have to be afraid. Who wouldn't want a home, but there are people without it, tears streaming down, that you can only lightly wipe away." This song represents the sentiments in Mr. Xie's heart, it is also his most genuine wish.