

Full COVID-19 Narrative
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To you,

Things are going to get weird soon. You're going to like some parts and dislike others. There's going to be a day where you cry for so long and hard that your chest will ache, but there will also be another day with golden sunlight slanting past the succulents on your windowsill, and you'll smile at the sunlight and find that you're happy. I'm not going to tell you what happens, and I'm also not going to tell you what I did when it happened to me. It would be unfair, I think, to everyone who doesn't have a future self to communicate with, and I also think that you'll be best off facing the situation with fresh eyes. I know the consequences and rewards already, you don't. I want them to come to you as a surprise because, let's face it, surprise is one of the most exhilarating things to feel, no matter the outcome.

I'll leave you with this though: take time to savor the small moments, the things you love that you never think about. The way the grass looks outside your window. The magpies hopping around campus. Your friends all squeezing close to fit around a single table. Things like that.

You'll get through it.

*Love,
Future You.*

Then (March 2020)

I can't help but feel like I'm living in a movie.

Though I know that this is real, the abruptness of it all, the strangeness, makes it difficult to digest. The clips I see on television belong as much to a movie trailer as they do to the news: grocery store shelves laid bare after running out of toilet paper, restaurants limited to take-out only, classes taken online and at-home, university campuses bare in the middle of the semester. The life that March (the beginning of spring) is supposed to bring has been distilled by panic and pandemic and pause. It's like those slow-motion climaxes you see in theaters, the ones laced with swelling music and held breath. Sharp and muddled all at once. Frustrating, fascinating, terrifying.

It's all very surreal.

What are the chances, right? Someone said to me a little over a week ago, right before we left for spring break. *I mean, what are the chances that this happens during our time in college? You know, most people don't have this experience. What are the chances?*

This was right after we received the announcement that classes were moving online. I remember opening the email on my way to class earlier that same morning. I remember hearing the voices buzzing around me: *did you see* and *this is our last class*, students grouping in the hallway whispering and showing each other their screens. The two classes that I *did* have that day (the last two in a classroom) were solemn affairs, laced with numbness and questions as we sat at our desks. *What do we do, what do we do, what do we do?*

As the day moved into evening, the question followed. In Hannon Hall, where I live and work as a resident advisor, students were hurried and panicked. Some were already beginning to move out of their rooms, and they piled clothing and bedding as high as they could in blue moving carts before rolling them out to their cars. That night, the directors of residence life called an emergency campus-wide staff meeting, and I huddled at the hall's front desk with two of my friends and fellow RAs. Our chairs didn't all fit behind the desk, but we crunched them tight, our shoulders pressed firmly together as we leaned in to catch every word the directors had to say about the campus and the residence halls and the state of our jobs.

The dorms are staying open, they said, the addendum, *for now*, unspoken but heavy in the air.

They opened the discussion up for questions, but there was still a lot that they didn't know.

Despite everything, when I left for break two days later, I packed like I was coming back. I brought the textbooks I needed for a week of work, dirty clothes to wash at home, my laptop, the essentials. The things I wouldn't miss for a week—extra socks, tea, a reading for three weeks down the line—I left in my room. After I packed up my car, I helped close our dorm for the break, ate breakfast with a friend at Feed Cafe, and then drove the seven and a half hours through rural Idaho home to Boise.

I want to pause for a moment on my drive home.

Though that drive was long, leaving me with a stiff back and aching neck, there was a pleasure to it that I wish I had appreciated sooner. High in the mountains with no cell service, there was little I had to worry about except for maneuvering my old Subaru over snow packed roads. No pandemic. No university emails and the closures they ushered. No questions from frantic residents. There were no startling changes, no news that I had to react to. Only my hands, white-knuckled on the wheel as I drove through a snowstorm with the Beatles humming softly on the radio.

For a few hours, I could pretend that things were normal.

At home, this illusion shattered.

My sister, whose spring break was the week before mine and had been scheduled to fly out hours before I arrived greeted me at the door. Her school had extended their break, she told me. Just for a few days as they sorted out how to transition to online classes. Since I hadn't seen her since December, I took

this as a stroke of luck. *What are the chances?* That night, I fell back into a familiar sense of routine: dinner with my family and washing the dishes with my sister. The cat on the windowsill, watching us through slitted green eyes. Our leather couch, putting new books away on my bookshelf, rain on the roof, sleep.

Here is when everything began to unravel.

First, it was the coffeeshops: open but near empty inside, only a couple of customers seated alone in the corners with their laptops. *Where were the families? The college students on break, reuniting with friends?* They served the coffees in paper cups. No more risk of reusables.

Next, it was Tuesday: the second time my sister was supposed to return to school and the second time she didn't. There was no going back to Minnesota, where the university was all but shut down. *But my textbooks*, she said. *We'll buy new ones if we have to*, my mom replied. *You're staying here.*

Then, it was the coffeeshops again: open only for delivery now (same with the restaurants). Chairs pushed to the sides. Baristas running out to the curb to deliver to cars. Instagram pages promising that the stores were still open, even if the emptiness inside made it seem like they were not.

Finally it was my job: urging us not to come back. Though the dorms weren't closed, an email was sent out advising residents not to return to campus to pack up their things. To the RAs, a similar message was shared. *We are strongly urging all students not to come to campus*, it said. *This includes our Residence Life student staff.* Though we were given the option to return to campus and continue working (as a handful of students were continuing to stay in the dorms), it was advised that we evaluate our situations and decide if it was safe for us to come back. *(It isn't, my parents advised, because we lived in Idaho and what if Montana goes into lockdown like California or Chicago? What then? How will you get home?)* Two days later, I was back on the road again for the second time in a week.

After a seven and a half hour drive with mom (who had the week off and had volunteered to come with me), I arrived back at school. I packed half of my room that night before falling asleep in my bed for the last time while my mom slept in a sleeping bag on the floor. (Her snoring woke me up sporadically, and I spent most of the night staring at my walls.) In the morning, we finished packing. White walls. Empty room. A bed unmade and closet bare. My succulents and fairy light packed up in the car beside my foldable bookshelf and the mugs that had lived on its shelves. Before I left, I got coffee with one of my friends and fellow RAs. *This sucks*, we said. *This all sucks*. And then I turned my keys in to my boss, effectively stepping down from my RA position for the semester. *I'm going to cry*, I told my boss as she hugged me, because this wasn't how I had imagined the year ending: so abrupt and sudden. My nose burned. She hugged me again. I ducked my head and shouldered my way out the door.

Seven and a half hours home.

My mom drove the first half, and I rested my head on the window to watch the mountains go by. Radiolab on the speakers: a story about the Vietnam draft. Snow in the pine boughs. Clear skies overhead. With no cell service, I could close my eyes and pretend that everything was normal.

But it was no longer easy to be so ignorant.

The end of the world:

empty highways, face masks, and

an internet haze.

Then (April 2020)

After arriving home from moving out of my dorm room at the end of Spring Break, the days have begun to blur together.

All of my classes are now online, but they aren't streamlined. Some of them still meet virtually, though one is on WebEx and the other is on Zoom. The other three don't meet at all. Instead, they regulate us to different forms of discussion boards and assignment dropboxes. It's weird to attend class from my couch, but there's nowhere else to go. Everywhere is closed: restaurants, coffeeshops, even the parks. My mom works at a school, and because all schools have been moved online, she is now home alongside my sister and I, meeting with the other administrators from her laptop at the dining room table. Last Wednesday (or is it Thursday? It's beginning to become difficult to tell one from the other), my dad's work closed too. He works at a nonprofit with only a handful of employees, so they continued to go in for a few days following the announcement to answer emails and get payroll sorted out. But after that, on Saturday, he joined the rest of us at home.

We've tried to treat the weekend normally. In my family, it's tradition to go to a coffee shop on Saturday and Sunday mornings and play a board game. The coffeeshops have all been closed except for take-out, so we bring the drinks home and play at the dining room table. I value these breaks from the ever encroaching boredom, and have tried to find solace in other activities as well, such as reading, hiking in the Boise foothills with my sister, and taking on the challenge of spring cleaning. I've managed to spend some time outside every day, even if it's just for a quick walk around the neighborhood with my mom. The fresh air is grounding in a way that nothing else is.

As of right now, the most challenging part of all of this is finding a schedule that works. My whole family is home right now, meeting with employees, coworkers, and classmates virtually, which often causes our WiFi to lag. It doesn't feel like there's enough space in the house either. While there are

more rooms than people, I find that it's difficult to stay motivated when I'm working from my bed. I never realized how much I valued space until I was forced to stay home with four other people who also shared the same restrictions.

I could almost pass this all off as normal (like an extended vacation, an over-long weekend) if it weren't for all of the strange little details. The closed coffee shops, lagging WiFi, everyone at home on a Tuesday afternoon. We had an earthquake here in Boise yesterday too, the first one I've ever felt in my life and an uncommon phenomenon in Idaho. Apocalyptic. What's happening? Everything feels unbalanced. Stuck in limbo. I'm frustrated and confused and bored. At home, there's nothing to do. What do we do?

Keep moving forward, I guess.

My Quarantine Reading List:

A Visit From the Goon Squad - Jennifer Egan
Manhattan Beach - Jennifer Egan
The Goldfinch - Donna Tartt
The Night Tiger - Yangsze Choo
The Mythic Dream - Dominik Parisien
City of Stairs - Robert Jackson Bennett
Being Mortal - Atul Gawande
The Worm at the Core - Sheldon Solomon
Waking Gods - Sylvain Neuvel

My Quarantine Playlist:

To a Poet - First Aid Kit
Stubborn Love - The Lumineers
Jenny Jenkins - Mt. Joy
Grand Hotel - Regina Spektor
New Slang - The Shins
Big Jet Plane - Angus & Julia Stone
Hem of Her Dress - First Aid Kit
Drivin' on 9 - The Breeders
King of the World - First Aid Kit

Now (May 2020)

It isn't all bad.

That's not to say that this isn't frustrating. It is. Of course it is. This experience is jarring for innumerable reasons—the lack of schedule, the distance of friends, being unable to work—and I don't want to disregard any of them or push them to the side. My struggles, as well as the struggles of my friends, family, and community, are all valid, but I think that I need to take a moment to disconnect from them. Not to ignore them, but to breathe.

So here are some of the good things:

- There are teddy bears in the windows. You can see them when you walk through the neighborhoods, the little button eyes staring back at you through the pane. Someone set a website to keep track of them, and parents are encouraged to take their children for walks to see how

many they can find. We put one up at our house: a brown bear in a blue dress, a gift from my great grandmother when I was a child. She watches the street, sunlight streaming in around her.

- I opened my sketchbook for the first time in a year. I'd forgotten how much I liked to draw, though I can't say that I'm much good at it. That's sort of the point though, isn't it? There's time for hobbies now, not the hobbies we're good at, but the ones that we aren't. The ones that we abandoned. The ones we need to practice. Some other skills I've revisited: cooking, jogging, yoga.
- There was a meadowlark singing in the sagebrush when I went hiking on Friday.
- I have so much time. Some of it is wasted procrastinating on school assignments, but I've had more time for my hobbies (see above), more time to catch up on sleep, more time to spend with my family. Since my sister and I are both in college, it's not long before we both have our own places, before we stop coming home for the summer. For now, though, we're both home, maybe for the last extended stint of time in the foreseeable future.
- My friends and I have been video chatting every Saturday evening at 8:30. Even though we can't see each other face-to-face, we're all together for a few hours (even Jeff, who lives in Singapore). I can't imagine what this experience would be like without access to the technology that we have. I'm thankful that we're able to communicate with each other. It helps us stay connected, regardless of the distance between us.