

COVID-19 Narrative

The Week Before Spring Break

“Mom, I don’t know if I can come.”

“What? I’m busy honey. Of course you’re coming, you’re crazy. Don’t play into this fear. Get on a plane and get your butt here. That’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t know, Bennett said he won’t see me for two weeks when I get back. I don’t blame him. They say the virus can survive even on a tray table. I just don’t know if traveling at all is a good idea right now.”

“That’s crazy, you’re being ridiculous.” I hear her talk to a coworker in the background.

“Ok, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Ok, sorry, I’m at work, it’s busy. I’ll see you on Friday, sweetie. Okay? Love you.”

“Love you. Bye.”

I knew better than to argue with her in real time, it was just going to turn into a fight as was our wont. But, this conversation caused me much anxiety. I hated feeling indecisive.

I didn’t go to California, thank god.

Mid-late March

I went for a walk with my partner, Peter. I told my friend the other day who asked how I was doing that I was spending time with a new man, and she joked: “wow, what a time to start a new relationship, eh?” No shit. I live downtown, and we decided to walk to Main Street to see

how it felt, to check which businesses were closed. We turned off Grand and onto Main street. It was quiet for the typical Bozeman lunch hour, but there were still quite a few people milling about. My anxiety spiked. What are people still doing, shopping, socializing? Don't they know how this can spread, how easily, how quickly? We walked one block and headed back towards my house on Lamme street. We walked to the far edges of the sidewalk when we were forced to pass people. It's like a horror movie – fear strangers, fear your loved ones.

Going to the grocery store has become something that requires mental and emotional preparation. Anxiety is high. I don't want to touch anything, but, obviously, have to. I put on food prep gloves in the foyer of the Co-Op. My cart has been sanitized. I make my way through the aisles, the tiny produce section. Was it always this tiny? My heart races. I move to the onions, someone approaches too close to me to grab an avocado. I grab one without looking and quickly go back to my cart which I parked in the middle. I get bread. Flour is sold out. I move as quickly as possible, grabbing what I need. There aren't many people at all. Most are wearing a mask. Some aren't. It's clear, the divide this is causing. I feel it in my friendships, too. It feels like everything else in the country – split down the middle. Us and them. Paranoia. I move to the checkout stand, my cart overly full because I don't want to have to go anywhere for as long as possible. There's a plastic divider between the checker and myself, and I notice it's taller than it was last time I was here. We have friendly banter through our masks. I bag my groceries in the bag I brought, careful not to put it on the conveyor belt. I check out, using ApplePay on my phone instead of inserting my card. I go to my car with my cart and my gloves still on and unload. I take my cart back inside and I discard my gloves on the way out and

sanitize my hands. I open my car door and realize I had touched it with my potentially infected glove-clad hand. What all did I touch in there? Is the virus on my clothes? In my car now? On my grocery bag? Did I get too close to anyone? Do I have it right now? From what I'm reading, I could carry and pass it for up to 12 days before I have any symptoms. I get home and unpack and think about what my grocery bag touched and notice my onion is bruised.

Early-Mid April

I usually see my little brother, Bennett, once or twice a week for dinner and for our city volleyball league game. We won our qualifying game and were supposed to play in the tournament this month. I haven't seen him since the middle of March. We are a lot alike, we have a similar sense of humor and we see most important things similarly only he has a different outlook on the world – he's a finance major, capitalistic and ambitious. He loves discussing innovation, technology, the global economy. I'm the writer who wants to study Latin, to talk about Shakespeare, to discuss nihilism. We have the same sense of humor and the same ardor, our eyes just light up over fundamentally different things.

But, I digress. I miss him. It really, truly hit me recently: the ramifications of this on my personal life. I had the thought that I truly don't know when I'll be able to hug and kiss my little brother again. Or when I'll see my mother and my sister and my nephew, who are all in Santa Barbara. I let it weigh on me for a moment and the hot pressure creeps into my throat and chest and I finally cry and it spirals. I think of my dad, too, who is dead, but would be absolutely engaged in all of this in every way. He'd be completely consumed by it. He was a news addict and a finance person, like my brother. I wonder what he'd say about the future, about the financial markets,

about humanity as a whole. He'd love to talk to me about all of this, daily. I cry for an immeasurable amount of time – time is different now, it seems. I give myself permission to do nothing that day.

Peter and I have only been dating exclusively, seriously, intentionally, since the middle of February. We made the decision to hole up together during quarantine at my house – we both wanted to isolate early on. It's been heaven having him, getting to know him, cooking with him, walking with him. We see the world with the same cynical, but grateful lens – disliking humanity but having painful empathy for people. It's a juxtaposition that I've found a lot of people in my life don't understand. We've become incredibly close, domesticating together in a way that looks like we are six months or a year into our relationship. I know, without doubt, that if I didn't have him I'd be sinking into a drunk, depressive state. He cannot drink because of medication, so that's been incredibly helpful. I haven't had a drink, and I think this is the longest I've gone without alcohol since I was 20 years old – 11 years. But, Peter. Everything is new, even in the mundanity of our current existence. I'm learning facial expressions, physical cues, situational behaviors. Quickly, we've moved to the place where the response "*Of course* that's how you feel about that" is common. You know what I mean.

He's an engineering student, and his homework online is much more straightforward than mine. He's diligent and disciplined. I, on the other hand, pace around, do yoga, work, cook, focus on anything but school. Talk to my sister or mother or brother or best friend Sarah on the phone. Obsessively look up recipes, read new employment laws coming into place because of Coronavirus. For the past few weeks, I've found myself wanting to tell him I love him, absolutely

bursting at the seams with it, but I just can't get it out. Fears of commitment and inadequacy swirling around in my head. I talk through it with my therapist over video call. Shouldn't I just be able to say it? Won't it fall out of my mouth? I ask her. You're not good at being vulnerable, you recoil at it, because of your parents, of past relationships, so of course it's hard, she says. But this is healthy, it's grownup, it's supportive, she tells me.

I want to tell him with intentionality, without expectation of response. Because I do love him, so I shouldn't need him to say it back. I want him to say it on his own terms. I swirl and swirl and shame myself for knowing that if I say it first and he doesn't say it back I'll be crushed. I want to be more secure, more self-actualized, more confident than that. We say goodnight, sweet dreams, I like you so much. It almost feels silly not saying it at this point; I can tell he's tip-toeing around it, too.

Days pass in a haze. The words almost spill out of my mouth multiple times: when he puts a beautiful plate of food he's cooked in front of me, snuggling on the couch, camping and climbing in Wyoming, holding each other in bed. "Tell me what you're thinking right now, all of it," he says to me. Gazing deeply with those large, cartoonish blue eyes. I say nothing and kiss him instead. On April 13th hugs me in the kitchen for longer than usual, I'm sitting on the counter, so we're eye to eye. He pulls away and looks at me and pauses and says "I love you, Clare."

I love you too, I say.

I'm doing yoga. Lots of it. Whenever I have a spare moment, or take one to breathe, I get on my mat simply to quiet my thoughts. It's easy to stay occupied with this on a daily basis. Not

because I'm reading the news a ton, but because I have to figure out how to run my business this summer and how to manage school, and my lack of motivation to do either. There's a lot of managing happening. Yoga is my favorite part of my day. It was before this and it still is. I miss my teachers, but they've been posting videos and although it's not the same, it still feels good. It's one of the few activities that allows my mind to be completely blank. I breathe and move my body and go inward and let go. I've been meditating, or trying, but letting my thoughts go while I sit and breathe is proving to be very difficult right now. I sit and breathe anyway.

I'm resigned. I'm here. As I write this, I'm sitting in my living room which is rearranged so I have space to do yoga, although my energy level is low. Not for any particular physical reason – I haven't been overly active, and I'm (for obvious reasons) about a quarter as "busy" as I usually am. But it's this malaise. It's real. I think the energy required to sit with this, this... sitting, so to speak, makes me tired. I went from sleeping 6-7 hours per night and having energy to do my day, to 10 every night and feeling like accomplishing two tasks is a win. Even my body systems have seemed to slow down. I'm in a daze doing the dishes, cooking, taking walks every morning. I get home from a long walk and wonder if I'm even here, I forget what the walk was like. Where did I even go? Everything has slowed. It's as if I've retired from my life. My dough for a loaf of bread is slowly rising. I bake now, which is new for me – it takes up more time than cooking. Breaking up the days.

End of April

Copies of The New Yorker are scattered around my house. They're leveling the dining room table I moved to make space for yoga, sitting under the legs that aren't on the rug. They're in stacks on my coffee table, in my office, on my bedroom floor. I prefer to read something physical, tangible – any less time on a screen is good. I can't stomach throwing them away, for some reason. But, their colorful, illustrated covers have become shiny-paged piles of guilt scattered around my house; reminders of the reading I'm not doing, the writer I might never become. The ones on the kitchen table became little trays for rolling spliffs. I don't know how I broke up my days before. I walk around in a haze. How is it already 6pm? What have I even done today?

I wake up and immediately have the thought that I should have been up earlier. It just pops into my head lightning quick, and I lay there for a moment and say, oh yeah, I can really do my work or school whenever feels right in the day. I roll over and reach out to Peter, placing my hand on his back. He rolls over and kisses me and closes his eyes again, his breathing immediately back to a steady rhythm. He's instantly back into his narcoleptic space. I lie there and look on my phone at nothing in particular – scroll through e-mails, click one, get drug around a retail site. Check the New York Times app. Scroll through the articles, pick one, read half. His dog whines at the foot of the bed and rouses him. I get up, we drink coffee, and sit.

I think about doing yoga for 15 minutes before I actually roll out my mat. Peter joins me. He's new to yoga and it's been fun watching him get into it, it's made me appreciate it more. We flow for an hour, listening to the cues of the teacher, not thinking about anything, making shapes with my body; inhaling over four counts, exhaling over four counts. I lay on my back on

my mat next to Peter, his breathing a soft background to the cacophony of thoughts of the things I need to get done playing in my head. I keep my eyes closed, my breathing returns to its natural state. The liminal state between sleep and wake eludes me, savasana is not achievable for me anymore, and instead I get anxious about all the things I need to do once I get up.

School is winding down and it's causing major anxiety. I haven't done enough. I know I'm not going to finish this. I hope this teacher passes me. I can deal with a Pass, not a Fail. If school is online in the Fall I'm taking the semester off, I know that. I start getting anxiety about things changing, about what my time with Peter will look like once things open up, how our lives and closeness and schedules might change and what affect that will have on our relationship. I want to coddle it like a little baby, tell it it's going to be fine, that nothing will change, this honeymoon phase isn't over. But, we are in a vortex of change, which, is bizarre given that most days feel exactly the same. Nothing is the same. It might not be after this. That thought scares me. We've really been thrust into this new normal, and now we're going to be kicked right out of it. I don't want to see anyone else or be social like I was before. Multiple relationships feel like too much to manage. I can barely deal with my own brain right now.

We matched on Tinder last spring, and I was immediately intrigued. Maybe not intrigued, as much as actually interested. He's a climber, tall, dark hair, blue eyes, and in one picture wears glasses and he reminds of Gregory Peck playing Atticus Finch. I have the thought: *He seems like someone I could actually be with.* We chat – we're both 30 year-old students. He uses a word I had to look up (I'm a sucker for a large vocabulary). He doesn't talk about climbing (I take this

to mean he is someone of substance). We make a plan to hang out on Thursday. I go on the app a few days later to confirm that we are going to meet and to give him my phone number. His profile is gone, our chat erased from my queue as if it never was. I sulk, lament the loss of the possibility for a few days, and swipe on. Eight months later he reappears, and we match again. I get a message as I'm walking from the parking lot to my class:

"Did I just see you walk by Norm?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"That's serendipitous."

Yes, it is.