

## COVID's Quiet War Against Suburbia

I jolt back into consciousness after the cat knocks my finance textbook off the kitchen table.

Simultaneously, my older sister bellows at her third graders via Zoom, and I hear my little sister snooze her alarm for the 15<sup>th</sup> time this morning- it is evident her case of senioritis has not subsided in quarantine. Dad smiles and cracks a corny joke before heading back down to the basement, while Mom puts on another pot of coffee.

Another morning of quarantine in our house-turned-office, turned-study-space, turned-classroom begins.

Chaos and close quarters are our new reality. Our old lives taken from us as quickly as the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) permeated through every corner of the world, infecting hundreds of thousands of people, and sending citizens back into their homes, with no end date of this nightmare in sight.

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It is April 9, 2020. My little sister should have been celebrating her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday drinking cheap booze stolen from our garage fridge with her friends, all of them savoring their last few months together before college.

But not this year.

This year, she sets her alarm for 11:00 a.m. She hasn't risen before noon since this quarantine began, but today is her birthday, she shouldn't sleep so late. Dad has made his famous crepe recipe just for her, but that doesn't totally mask the anti-climactic celebration consisting of just me, my sister, and my parents.

But then 12:00 p.m. hits. The quiet and wide street on our block becomes filled with dozens of cars, honking and beeping incessantly. We all walk outside to see the parade of cars carrying poster boards and kids shouting, "Happy Birthday!" Chills run up my spine, and I know she finally feels the birthday magic she would have felt had we not been chained to the house. We stand there in our pajamas, a strict uniform in quarantine, and hug our not-so-baby sister; definitely a birthday she won't forget.

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For my older sister, the morning began less glamorous. As Dad was cooking breakfast, she was pleading to her third graders via Zoom, could they PLEASE just put themselves on mute for the next 30 minutes.

She hadn't been out of graduate school four months when she was hired as a third-grade teacher for a prestigious elementary school nearby. To date, she hadn't even had a year of teaching under her belt. Now, she was trying to create an online curriculum for her eight-year-olds that could be taught virtually for the remainder of the school year.

She had now entered a new realm of virtual pandemonium.

Finally, the clock hits 11:00: snack time. Now, she would have a 15-minute break to refill her coffee mug and sigh as loudly as she wanted before she had to virtually haggle her children again. She would also use these 15 minutes to email the parents of one her students- this student's tendency to log off the Zoom meeting when he didn't feel like answering a question was becoming a large issue.

But these feelings of agitation and anxiety would soon dissipate when she logged on 15 minutes early before class and all of her children were patiently waiting there for her. Each child talking over one another, battling for Ms. Rich's attention so they could display their pet dog to her via the Zoom camera.

It was the five or so minutes of true diligent learning she got that morning, when all of the kids were actually focused, that my sister's fear they would forget to read over the next few months began to subside; completely replaced with the warm feeling of adoration her children had left her with.

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Mom wakes to the sound of 13 eight-year old's giggling. She smiles and thinks to herself, how in the world is she going to get all of those kids to mute themselves?

With auto-immune disease, we all worry about Mom the most in the midst of this pandemic. If we were responsible for making her ill, it would be too huge a weight to bare. But of course, she insists upon doing the grocery shopping, she is ironically the least afraid in all of this, and knows she'll likely have to go back to the store anyway if she leaves it up to one of us to do. Or, maybe she just wants an excuse to put on jeans today.

Unfortunately, leaving the chaos at home doesn't prepare her for the chaos of the grocery store. Lines of tape are spaced out every six feet, and every shopper has their signature masks and gloves on. A strange feeling to be monotonously shopping for Dad's favorite potato chips while simultaneously feeling like you're in the middle of an apocalypse.

As she waits in line to pay, she overhears a man at the register asking, "Are there any more masks?" The cashier nearly laughs in the man's face; has he been watching the news? "Where could I get one?"

My Mom feels her stomach lurch, she knows she has an extra mask in the car for one of her daughters. This poor, clueless man.

She jumps out of line and tells him she would be happy to give him one of her masks. The man smiles and begins repeatedly thanking her, as if she had given him a 100-dollar bill and not a glorified piece of cloth.

The man's refreshing gratitude snaps her back into reality again. Though the pandemic is infiltrating every aspect of our life, smothering society in anxiety and uneasiness, the human spirit will always be more persistent than any virus.

She drives home with all of the ingredients to make her youngest daughter's favorite birthday dinner, spaghetti and meatballs, and is once again filled with a feeling of gratitude, for the things she has in all this madness.

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Over 300 miles away, my eldest sister's voice cracks through the phone, wishing the youngest a happy birthday. She calls just before she will begin another practice full-length MCAT, (the Medical College Admission Test) an undertaking that will take her seven hours.

She might be the only person in the world who isn't terribly upset about being locked inside; she has been given the gift of time and minimal social obligations, plus a government mandate to stay inside and finish her work.

In her barn-style apartment, there is nowhere where she can get complete silence; no library or study space that is truly distraction-less. She teeters on the edge of sanity some days, feeling like her stress might start teeming at the seams and all over the kitchen floor if nudged the wrong way.

But just as she reaches her tipping point, Aries and Leo, her two little kittens, brush up against her leg. They look deep into her eyes and remind her to take a breath through their language of animal innocence, and a smile returns to her face.

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And then, there is Dad. The glue that holds all of these crazy girls together with a solid foundation of comic relief and huge breakfasts to look forward to each morning.

I know he has been laid off, and no matter how many times he goes to walk the dog, that will still be his reality.

But he doesn't let on how stressed he really is, just smiles and asks how I would like my eggs cooked. Like with anything else, he knows that bad days will pass, and new opportunities will come with the warmer weather.

And when this is all over, we will hug our family and friends a little bit tighter, be a little more patient with the cashier at the supermarket, and we'll remember the little acts of kindness that reminded the world of the power of humanity during a global crisis.

We will relish in a night out to dinner, and never pass up a chance to get ice cream with friends, because we know how quickly all of the simple luxuries in life can be taken away from us.

When the pandemic passes, we will mourn the losses, and be grateful that we were reminded of what is truly important in life when the world stopped spinning for a few months.