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The Boogeyman

It is March 12th and I am afraid. I used to be afraid that stepping on a crack would break my mother's back. I used to fear kidnappers or someone robbing my home. I used to worry about fire drills and lockdowns in my school. I didn't like heights or tight spaces and I was petrified of loneliness. I didn't fear going to the grocery store and Dunkin' Donuts. I never expected that the embrace of my best friend might land one of us in a hospital, or that shaking hands with my neighbor could threaten her life. But suddenly the world is shut down and *normalcy* is like a dream. Within a few days hospitals were overrun, people were dying, and the world was told to stay home. Of all the things I feared, I never feared the boogeyman, and he is on a rampage now.

I trust no one. I don't trust my mother, I don't trust my brother, I don't trust my mail man, and I don't trust the newscasters. Nobody knows what's happening; all we have are informed guesses and hope. The sun is shining, but the world feels cold. I look out the window and see light but feel an indefinite sense of darkness. I live next to a busy intersection, but when I look out my window, the road is deserted. I used to hear horns, sirens, loud engines, chirping of walk signals... and now... nothing. I didn't understand at first. I thought my friends were ridiculous when they asked if I was taking all of my belongings home for spring break. I laughed at them; I *laughed*. I told my therapist we should all just wash our hands. I couldn't have been more wrong.

President Bergeron sent students an email yesterday. She told us that it was with a heavy heart that the college had decided all learning after spring break would be held remotely, and that the Dean of Student Life, Victor Arcelus, would be in touch soon. This afternoon, Dean Arcelus

emailed us saying that students were being asked to move out of their dorms by March 23rd.

Tears brim my eyes as I realize that the wild speculations are now reality. I have to go back to school one last time this year to say goodbye.

I am not a senior, and I will have one more year of school to make up for this loss, but there is a pain in my chest when I think of the seniors who cannot go back next year, who thought they had more time. I sit on my floor wondering what went wrong, what we did to deserve this kind of spring. I have to go to my dorm room and take all of my belongings home. I have to take classes in my house while I stay inside riddled with anxiety and depression. I have to cope with the pandemic, and I have to do it without my chosen family, my college family, by my side.

It is March 14th, and I am getting in my car to drive an hour and forty-five minutes to move out of school. The drive down is quiet, and I try to forget what I will have to do when I arrive. I park in the small driveway beside Windham and slowly climb up the stairs to the main entrance. It causes me an almost physical pain to open the front door and walk down the hall to my room. I unlock my door, and, as I step into my home, a wave of melancholy takes over my mind. I sit on my bed and look at all of my belongings and understand that I cannot put this off much longer.

I stand here packing, overwhelmed by the simplest task. I need to put this sweater down. It is too heavy to hold. It is purple with a hole in the left sleeve, and I wear it all the time, and right now I cannot hold onto it. Beads of sweat form on my forehead, and I go to wipe them away. I stop myself. What if it's on my hands? What if I have it? I can't touch my face. Touching my face might mean death. Instead I try to wipe my forehead on the sleeve of my

black sweatshirt. Although it is warm outside, I dressed in long-sleeve layers to have something to touch door handles with.

I exit the cluttered dorm and go down the hall to the bathroom and push the door open with my elbow. I get paper towels ready before washing my hands: one to dry my hands with, and one to open the door with. I wet my hands, and as I let the water warm up, I get soap and start scrubbing. I am singing *Happy Birthday* in my head twice and letting the water wash over my fingers and palms. I hope it is enough. I use the first paper towel to dry my hands and pick up the second to grab the door handle before throwing them both away. I've touched this door hundreds of times, but it's different now.

I go back to my room, tears forming in my eyes again as I look at the clock. It's 9:30. I turn back the mess in front of me and wonder how I will pack it all up before my mother gets here at 11:00. It takes more strength than I can describe to pack up my belongings. Usually packing is bittersweet but isn't so chaotic. During my first two years of school, I made sure to begin packing in mid-April, so that, if my parents visited, I could send things home I didn't need anymore, like winter clothing, or a board game I hadn't touched all semester. I took time to prepare. This year I had to go back to a room that was being lived in and pretend I was ready to go. The dirty mug I left had to be rinsed out, the freshly washed sheets I was excited to come back to had to be stripped and shoved into a duffle bag, the new shirts I bought tossed into a box, not to be shown off when classes resumed. I had been in the middle of living in this room, and it was like somebody paused a movie midway through and cut out the rest of the rising action, just to see the ending. The end doesn't look like it's going to be happily-ever-after.

My mother arrives and helps me put everything into our two cars. We are very cautious in touching door handles and public surfaces. It doesn't take long to load everything up, and much to my dismay it is time to leave sooner than I thought. The campus is quiet in an unsettling way. Maybe if it was louder I wouldn't feel so sad. My mother asks me if we are done, and I nod because I can't seem to find my voice. She asks if she will meet me at home, and I nod again as I look past her at Tempel Green.

My mother says, "Listen. I'm truly sorry. I know this isn't how it was supposed to go. I'm more sorry than you know, and this is a loss. I know that, and I hope you can recognize that too. I'm just sorry." My mother hugs me and tears run down my face. I want to wipe them away, but I can't remember what I have touched since last washing my hands. I get in my car, put some hand sanitizer on, dab my tears with a tissue, and put on my sunglasses to hide my red-rimmed eyes. I drop my room key off at the gatehouse and don't look back.

I listen to sad music the entire drive home, for better or for worse, and I feel *everything*. School is where I am free to be whomever I choose. My family loves me, and they do everything they can to accept me, but I am not the Hannah they dropped off at orientation; I have undergone a metamorphosis. My mother makes jokes I used to find funny, and my brother asks if I want to play Minecraft, but it's of no use. I want to play Hearts at 3am with my best friends. I want to get french fries from the snack shop long after I should have gone to bed. I want to wear my pajamas in the library. I want to lie down on Tempel Green and stare at the clouds. I want to trip over roots in the Arboretum and laugh with my friends because that's the way life should be! That's life as a college student! I can't do those things at home, no matter how many video-conferencing programs the world creates.

It is now March 20th, and I am still feeling sorry for myself. My life at home could be so much worse, and I know I am fortunate to not go home to someone abusive or to a home that does not have necessities. However, I also grant myself permission to acknowledge that it could be a lot better. I live with my mother, my ninety-four-year-old grandfather, and my brother, who is high-functioning with special needs. For a virus that targets elderly people, my household has a lot of risks. My brother worked in retail before his store closed a few days ago. We had to trust that a kid with severe ADHD adequately washed his hands an appropriate number of times and didn't let anyone breathe near him. Although his job loss provides me with economic concerns, I am personally grateful that his store closed.

My mother still has to go to the grocery store, as well as pick up prescriptions for my grandfather at CVS. My brother plays Xbox loudly in his room from about 1:00 P.M. to 3:00 A.M., and he laughs wildly with his friends over their remote connection. My grandfather watches the news at an absurd volume every day from 3:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. All I can hear every day is the coronavirus, how many people are dying, how nobody can get tested, how God forbid you get sick or you'll kill everyone you love over the age of sixty. My grandfather also uses a chairlift to go up and down the stairs, and it makes a chirping noise his aged-ears cannot register; he does this with great frequency. Through all of this I have to learn to attend college remotely.

My family has a playroom that has not been played in for nearly a decade. I am twenty-one and my brother is twenty-four, so we haven't done much playing since the late 2000s. It is in the basement, through my grandfather's unused workshop, and past many dust-filled and cobwebbed corners. Nobody goes into the basement, and it would be a nice, quiet

space I could turn into an office. However, when I walk into the room I realize it will be no easy feat to get it into usable shape.

When my brother was locked out of our home a few months ago, he came in through one of the basement storm windows and broke it in the process. Although we fixed the window, leaves and debris piled up while it was broken, and we have not cleaned it yet. I spend two days trying to clean this room; two days trying to make it even remotely similar to my beloved dormitory. After removing nature's detritus, I put away old toys and games, reorganized cabinets and closets, and clear off a table to make my new desk. I hang up my wall decorations and put up pictures of friends and family. I put my rug from my dorm in the room, and I indulge in putting my coffee maker from school down here as well.

Now it is March 30th and this arrangement has been working for a while, and I don't mind it. I joke to my mother that I am "going down to the office" and take my laptop and some snacks downstairs with me. It honestly isn't bad; it just isn't my dorm room. I would give anything to sit through a 9:00 A.M. Friday lecture on the fourth floor of Fanning, if only I could get back to school. My online courses are fine, and everyone is trying their utmost to make it that way, but it just isn't the same. At first, I resented my professor who stuck close to our original syllabus. I complained to my mother this was no time for rigidity, and I wished the course was more flexible. But then I also became frustrated with my professor who wanted to create as much flexibility as possible. She said we wouldn't hold discussions at all anymore, and I told my mother that this was my favorite class and it was over, just like that.

Eventually, rigidities faded, and the two ends of the spectrum met in the middle. Optional WebEx meetings were created by professors trying not to impose. Most professors prioritized

communication and open-door policies, and Many people wrote touching notes during this time. I receive an email from one of my professors saying that she cares a great deal about us and recognizes that this time of uncertainty will be difficult, but she promises we will make the best of it. The email is signed with “much love,” and I know it is genuine.

In addition to this, I receive a heartwarming email from my Shakespeare professor. She says that everything is upside-down, and she is so sorry about how the semester is turning out, but we will make it through. She reminds us: *Shakespeare’s entire career was punctuated by repeated outbreaks of plague. Plague was endemic throughout Europe during Shakespeare’s lifetime, and when outbreaks occurred, the only public health measures available were the ones we’re experiencing with the coronavirus, social distancing and quarantine. Playhouses were closed if plague deaths in London rose above 30 per week.* She tells us that out of plague quarantines came classics like *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, and that, although this was not the plan, she encouraged us to try and use this time to make things. We need not produce our own *Macbeths*, but we might find ourselves with time to reflect and time to *create*.

As classes begin to meet online, things become more normal, which hardly seems possible. I sit by my computer a few minutes before class starts, and I open up the WebEx link to join my classes. WebEx is finicky, so I have to be sure to wait until exactly the minute my class starts or it won’t let me in, but soon enough I am used to this too. My professors are becoming more accustomed to the technology we are using, as are my peers, and we are becoming less wary of asking for help. Most classes begin with check-ins or anecdotes of the latest quarantine antics. One professor shared with my class that her seven-year-old sprayed Pam cooking spray on the kitchen floor while she was momentarily unsupervised. We laughed, but it is safe to say

even those of us who remain healthy during this time have our hands full. My professor had never felt so human to me, and although there's not much of an upside to a pandemic, I do appreciate the community and kinship formed through this adversity.

At the same time, I feel the paranoia of the pandemic more and more every day. Death totals are rising, test kits are seemingly diminishing, and the news can't give accurate information. It isn't their fault, nobody has the information to give, and the CDC is asking everyone to stay home, so how are journalists supposed to go out and get the news? The news people can give us numbers they believe are accurate, but we don't have enough tests to confirm our estimates, and nobody can get close enough to the virus to investigate it without great personal risk. The major priority of the medical field is to cope with the overwhelming number of patients at critical-care status.

Every day I hear the news blasting in my home from my grandfather and wait for information I can trust, but every headline is preceded by or followed up with "weasel words" like *seem, might, could, possible*. The words that mean that nobody knows; they imply speculation and uncertainty. The only thing we can be certain of is that we have to stay home, and that the CDC wants us to wash our hands. For now, we watch the news with fears that we don't talk about, and we stay home. If anyone in my home needs something, we send my mother. She says this helps us to reduce risk. She vowed to go only to the supermarket and CVS, she wears a mask and gloves, and she stays six feet away from any other human being.

It is now March 31st and our risk reduction techniques have crashed. My grandfather leaves his walker out of reach as he is walking to his bathroom and trips over an exercise bike in his room. We should have moved the bike out a year ago because my grandfather is in no shape

to use it, but regardless, it is there, and causes him to fall. I was asleep in my bed as this happened, but I wake up when the EMTs arrive and enter my home. I stay perfectly still, frozen with fear. There are strangers in my home in the middle of the night; scary under the best of circumstances, much more so when there's an invisible virus causing a pandemic.

My grandfather spends the night at home, but in the morning, after calling his general physician, it is clear he should go to a hospital. Usually we would not hesitate, but we are supposed to stay home at all costs and avoid the coronavirus and any place it could be lurking. A hospital is a coronavirus-ridden environment, but we have no other option. My mother drops my grandfather off at the door because nobody is allowed inside the hospital if they do not personally need a doctor. He doesn't understand and is slightly offended that he will be alone, but there is no time to explain. We learn that he has a fractured vertebra in his neck, and the doctors say he should be okay. They keep him for a whole week because he is extremely disoriented, and they need to make sure this is normal elderly-confusion caused by a change in environment and not related to a head trauma.

It is now April 9th, and my grandfather has been home for two days. I haven't left my home in nearly 30 days in order to reduce my risk of exposure, but now he is home and I cannot be sure whom he has come into contact with. He cannot be sure either; he hardly remembers his time in the hospital, and what he does remember doesn't make sense because he was disoriented most of the time. He saw doctors and nurses, and we are told he was in a special wing to protect him from patients being treated for the coronavirus, but I am still worried. We weren't allowed to visit him, and the staff was overwhelmed with patients, so there was little time for them to communicate anything but the essentials of his care.

He came home with a hard neck brace he was supposed to wear twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for four weeks. Within twenty-five minutes of his arrival home he was taking it off. My mother shouted “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” and he only responded he has to take it off to eat or drink, neither of which he was doing. She asked if he knew how to put it back on, and he insisted he wasn’t stupid. And yet he didn’t seem to know how to reassemble it. I sat in the front hall crying as this spectacle took place in the living room. After much arguing they managed to put it back on, but it came off again soon after. We would need to have a visiting nurse come help him at least a few times a week, because there was only so much my mother could do. Someone else would be coming into my home intermittently. During a time of social isolation and invisible viruses, someone would come into our safest space.

Everyone I talk to is bored, and maybe I am too, but mostly the boredom just illuminates my terror. With nothing to distract myself, I have plenty of time to be scared. If what they say on the news is true, then my family is in trouble. We are not isolated; we have people coming and going. We made it so long without any hiccups, so I think we were cosmically due for a mishap. But now what? Rule number one is nobody in, nobody out. We are breaking that rule constantly. From the moment this all began I feared I already had the virus, but after twenty days of absolute quarantine I figured I was in the clear. I had gone twenty days with no symptoms, and I finally fought off my anxieties, but now the relief is gone and the fear remains constant. I have new potential exposure to the virus every couple of days.

It is April 10th and I don’t think I can leave my bedroom. They say don’t go into town except for essential errands, and that’s because they don’t want you fraternizing with people outside of your household. Now the world comes into my home, and I have just one more safe

space. What is safe? Can I use the stove? Should I wear a mask in my living room? When did the world turn into a Hollywood creation? I shut out the world, and now I will shut out my home, because I am paralyzed with fear.

I move my “office” into my bedroom and vow to only come out for meals. Nobody is allowed in except for my dog and my cat, because I know they would never betray me with the coronavirus. I ask my mom if she thinks I am being paranoid, and she just says she will support me in whatever I feel I have to do. We don’t know what is or is not paranoia. The pandemic is indefinite, and you cannot make plans for two days from now, let alone two weeks, or two months. My friends and I worry whether we can go back to school in the fall. I want nothing more than to return to my normal life, but maybe this change is permanent. This way of life may be unsustainable, but I don’t really believe we can go back to how it was before.

Maybe this is all a dream. It seems impossible that it’s reality. Since when did loneliness save lives? When did my childhood home become a place that could kill me? I had never believed in the boogeyman; he never lived under my bed or hid in my closet waiting to get me. But now he is here. Covid-19 is silent, and he cannot be seen. I use Lysol and Clorox to shoo him away, but he may be stronger than I am. Even if he doesn’t infect me, the psychological warfare has become devastating. He sits in my living room, on my refrigerator handle, on my TV remote... or so he would have me believe. My mother always said the boogeyman wasn’t real, but now she looks worried too. I don’t know what to believe or whom to trust.