

Catja Christensen

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To Hug Fearlessly, To Breathe Deeply, To Sleep Soundly Again

I pulled out my journal from my navy blue backpack that camouflaged with the shadows under my bed. It was Thursday, March 12 at 1:16 pm. I hadn't touched my books since I arrived at Union Station near midnight six days earlier, but I felt compelled to document what had happened in the short time I was home for Spring Break. Throughout that six-hour train ride a week past, when I was kept awake by the bright lights and gossiping passengers around me, I couldn't shake the uneasiness I felt when I locked my dorm room in Smith earlier that day. I remembered standing by the windowsill next to my bed after I hugged Zoe goodbye, gazing out at Cro Boulevard and Shain Library with the sun just about to set, and realizing, for the first time, that I was sad to be leaving Conn. It had finally become a home to me. At the time, I thought that feeling of melancholy was simply because I was leaving behind my friends and classes that I loved. In hindsight, it felt like an eerie premonition.

I was last home on January 19, three days after my 19th birthday, so when I reunited with my family and friends in Washington D.C. and Tysons, Virginia, they were surprised I was back so soon. As usual, I tagged along with my brother, Viggo, to his ballet classes. At 17, he was in the pre-professional division of The Washington School of Ballet, TWSB, like I was in high school, and so I reunited with my former teachers and caught up on all the goings-on at the school. It was a Wednesday when life as I knew it was drastically going to change.

One of my dear teachers, Elizabeth Gaither, had taught us an excerpt from one of my favorite ballets, *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, by William Forsythe that she had performed while dancing in the company. I felt transported to a year ago when I would feel so enthralled by

choreography and dancing with my friends that it felt as if I hadn't been gone. Later that evening, another one of my most influential teachers, Mimmo Miccolis, rehearsed his latest contemporary choreography, *GroundUp*, featuring Viggo dancing with my best friend, Kasey, along with their classmates. I had watched the online recording of them performing this piece at the Kennedy Center on loop when I was quarantined in my dorm room a month earlier with the flu. I ended up memorizing chunks of the choreography because of how much I rewatched that video, and Mimmo let me fill in for a girl who left early because she wasn't feeling well. Those three days of quarantine had felt endless to me, but the most torturous part was gazing out of the window near my bed and seeing people go on with their lives while I hugged my pillow and struggled to breathe. Thinking I had a bad case of the cold, I had fought my way to my classes Sunday through Tuesday, not wanting to be marked absent or miss my weekly Psych lab. After I tested positive for the flu, the women working at the Health Center said that people like me were why the coronavirus, then what I thought was just a news report about a contagious virus far away in China, spread so fast. I felt guilty as I shuffled back to my dorm in Smith, arms full of chicken soup cans, Gatorade, and saltines.

My roommate, Zoe, and our friends, both named Kevin, had our usual movie nights on her side of the room, but I sat in the doorway separating my side of the room from hers, blowing through a tissue box and sitting six feet away from them. They would deliver me bagels for breakfast left on the table near my side of the room or bring me clam chowder and grilled cheese from Harris in my Tupperware. They even ordered pizza one day so we could all eat together, albeit six feet apart from me. I held my breath whenever I had to cross her room to go to the bathroom, and either she or one of the Kevins would open the door for me so I didn't touch the handle. We disinfected every surface and made sure I had everything I needed for my day in my

room, but seeing them walk out the door to their classes and knowing that I could only visit the bathroom a few times a day was very isolating.

I missed every Dance Club tech rehearsal and show that I had stayed up late at night rehearsing throughout the semester, but I miraculously healed and went 24 hours without a fever just before the last Saturday show. When I walked into Myers for warm-up class, my friends all cheered and implored me to take it easy as I was still recovering.

“Catja resurrected!” they joked throughout the evening. I felt on top of the world, except that my stamina was shot, and I hadn’t moved that much in nearly a week.

A month after that ordeal, after Mimmo’s rehearsal, I felt rejuvenated and fully healed; my stamina was recovering, and I could hug all my friends again. However, news of the coronavirus, now called COVID-19, was hitting closer to home, New York City to be exact. Italy, Mimmo’s home country, made headlines with the virus’s rapid spread and the healthcare workers' battle to keep up with the daily influx of new patients. I was starting to realize how bad the global situation was becoming, but I still felt hopeful that it wouldn’t reach me, despite being in the nation’s capital.

One of my professors had advised us to bring our textbooks home with us just in case we didn’t return after break. I had laughed to myself when she said that. In early March, there was no doubt in my mind that we would be returning. However, later that Wednesday evening, after I got home from TWSB feeling energized and cheerful, I received an email notification on my phone from President Katherine Bergeron, subject line: Important Message Regarding COVID-19 and the Spring Semester. My heart started racing as I opened it. I had seen my friends from high school posting about their respective colleges’ closures regarding the pandemic on Instagram, most recently University of Michigan earlier that day. I quickly scanned the email,

searching for the phrase I knew was tucked between paragraphs of information and consolation: “transition to remote modes of teaching until at least April 30.”

“No, no, no, no,” I burst out, progressively growing louder with each repetition. My mom called out from her room down the hall, her voice tinged with concern from my outburst. I ran to her, kicked open her door, and flopped onto her queen-sized bed, crying as I held my phone out.

“I’m not going back,” I whimpered. “They closed campus. I’m not going back.”

Perhaps it was exhaustion from my earlier physical exertion coupled with my building anxiety from seeing news reports and Instagram updates that made me react so emotionally. I sensed it was coming from the moment my professor suggested that we might not return. I knew when I sat on the Amtrak train, keeping my hand sanitizer nearby and wondering if I should wipe down my seat. I knew when I first re-entered the Washington Ballet studios, and my teachers greeted me with a weird elbow bump to avoid close contact. All the signs pointed to this, but I couldn’t believe that the campus I had been on just 6 days earlier, the place that had finally become another home to me, was shutting us out. I felt betrayed, and yet I knew this was the most logical safety measure to take.

Since that night, I have had trouble sleeping.

The next day, I went with Viggo to his ballet class again. I knew I wouldn’t be dancing in a space as spacious as Myers in Cro for several months, so I wanted to stay in shape as best I could while Viggo had class. The TWSB studios hadn’t closed yet, but everyone knew it was inevitable. One student was reported to have been exposed to someone who tested positive for the virus, so the wooden barres were disinfected and the studios were deep-cleaned. All that work for one potentially sick student. The hand sanitizer dispenser was frequented by everyone throughout class. Ms. Gaither called it scrubbing in and scrubbing out of the studio like we were

surgeons. Every aspect of life was reevaluated like that, from a medical perspective and with medical terminology. Midway through class, we were notified that the studios would be closing indefinitely effective that evening. Class came to a halt as we looked at each other, standing next to each other at the barres and realizing that this would be the last time for a while that we would dance together. The tension and crushed morale of everyone was palpable throughout the rest of class.

I saw Mimmo again as I left the building, and we walked over to each other and hugged.

“I know we’re not supposed to, but I don’t care right now,” he said. I felt the same. Even after knowing that businesses were closing and schools were transitioning to remote learning, the virus still felt so far away. So I hugged Mimmo and my friends once more, then my family and I all returned home. We haven’t gone back to DC since. That evening, I started documenting the daily changes in my journal, from the menial work I did at home to national and international crises.

The week following was a blur. Kasey and Viggo were supposed to take the SAT that Saturday, but it was canceled the day before. Viggo and Mikka, my little sister in 5th grade, still went to school for a few days, then Fairfax County Public Schools abruptly told the students not to return. Mikka could not even return to get the books left in her desk. Alaia, my 24-year-old sister studying at Tufts School of Medicine in Boston, canceled her flight to visit her friend down south in Richmond, Virginia because she feared that she wouldn’t be able to return to her studies if Virginia locked down the state. I prepared myself to transition to online classes for the first time in my life. First, I needed closure regarding the abrupt end to my first year living at Conn, so I called my dad and asked him if we could drive his big SUV and move me out of my dorm. He agreed, and we left on Sunday, March 15 at 8:30 am from his home in Berryville, Virginia.

It was a St. Patrick's Day weekend like never before. The only green I saw was from the trees we passed on the 430-mile drive up north. Daddy developed a head-splitting migraine just 30 minutes in, so I took over for a few hours, then Viggo took a turn, then eventually Daddy took up the end of the journey. We were trying to make it back to Virginia as soon as possible, so I only had an hour to say goodbye to the campus. I stripped my bed of its floral sheets, ripped down my decorations from the walls, untidily emptied my desk into boxes and backpacks, and tossed my pillows out of the window to save time. I left a card I wrote for Zoe on her desk since she was moving out a few days after me. I reminisced on the memories we made in such a short time and poured out much of the frustration I felt that we couldn't even say goodbye to our shared space together in my words. I took a moment to stand in the partially empty dorm room, soaking in the memories I had made in it: the fire alarms I had nearly slept through until Zoe woke me up; the movie nights where we ate goldfish crackers and drank hot chocolate; the carpet where we celebrated Chrismukkah and exchanged gifts while wearing matching pajama pants; the corner of the room where we did puzzles, well, where Zoe did puzzles and I tried to help. As Daddy, Viggo, and Mikka finished loading the car, I locked the door and walked down the stairs.

I returned my Dance Club costume to the dance lounge, which was eerily quiet. The lounge was rarely empty during the school year, even at the latest hours of the night, because rehearsals were scheduled at any time available, and often choreographers would find solace and inspiration alone in the studio at 2 am. Finally, I walked across Tempel Green to collect my plants from a friend who was staying on campus over break and was babysitting them for me. I had planned on doing my homework out on Tempel more after break. There was only one day in March where the weather was a sunny 45 degrees, and Zoe, Kevin, and I had sat out on a blanket

to do work. Now, the sunset was beautiful above the arboretum, but it was time for me to go, just as soon as I had arrived. I dropped my key off at the gatehouse, then we drove back home.

On March 30, Governor Ralph Northam issued a Stay-at-Home Order for Virginia. Mikka and I had made an excursion a few days earlier to Target and the local Garden Center to pick up some seeds to plant and other activities to keep us busy at home. I had become accustomed to Zoom, Webex, Google Meets, and every other online tool required for distance learning. The first week went better than expected. My French class, consisting of myself, seven junior girls, and Professor Didem Alkan, was close-knit before we left campus. The others had been in the same classes together throughout their time at Conn, and they welcomed me, a mere first-year, warmly into their mix. Our small class size meant we got to check in on how each other was doing during the now nationwide, enforced quarantine. One of my friends lived in New York City, the hardest hit in the US, and she shared her experiences with living in the hotspot. Of course, we had to quickly adjust to academic work too, and we had our midterm on just the second remote session. Two classes after, I had a 15-minute oral presentation, and it was a hot mess. In a typical classroom setting, I get debilitating anxiety when it comes to oral presentations, and my body physically reacts in every negative way possible. I thought it might be easier through Zoom, but not being able to see my friends or professor except in tiny digital squares made my anxiety double. I was alone in my room, talking to a computer screen about the Rwandan Genocide in a language that I still wasn't super comfortable with, and I was panicking.

This was my first negative experience with remote learning. I identify as an introvert and value having some personal time away from others, but paradoxically, quarantine, isolation, and social distancing had exacerbated my pre-existing social anxiety. Even if I liked being alone sometimes to do my own thing, I also liked being around people and seeing my friends on

campus as I went about my day. I needed social interaction and the energy of those around me to stay sane. Even though my family was all getting along and talking with each other, I felt the loneliness strongly. Spending hours sitting in front of my computer was draining. I missed walking around to all my classes, breathing in the fresh air. Now, I had to plan out times between Zoom calls just to remember to stretch my legs.

My Modern dance class took a lot of adjusting, too. I no longer had a sprung floor to protect my joints when I jumped, nor did I have a big space where I didn't have to worry about kicking a wall. During our warm-up combinations, we would often stretch our arms up in different movements. I hit the ceiling fan and light so many times that I thought it would crash on my head every class. I was tired of trying to adjust my camera so it wouldn't cut off my head or feet, and for some reason, everyone's camera feed was mirrored to me, so I had to learn every combination backwards. I felt frustrated and unmotivated, and I was freezing in the cold downstairs floor of my house. The one thing that kept me going was seeing my friends' faces and Professor Lisa Race in the little squares on the screen. I knew we were all probably experiencing similar things. Some people were struggling with carpet floors, and others were dancing in their bedrooms. I danced next to our ping pong table, while my friends danced next to their couches. Nonetheless, we kept adapting, and the senior dance majors helped out by sending us videos of phrases they choreographed until we linked them all together into a monstrous, four-minute long final phrase.

My Costume Design and Construction class, which I had to hike across campus to 33 Gallows Lane to get to when we were at Conn, was another class in which a lot of unconventional adjustments had to be made. Professor Sabrina Notarfrancisco brainstormed innovatively and efficiently, sending out sewing machines from the Theater Costume Shop,

where I worked while on campus, to those who needed them and putting together packages stuffed with grid rulers, straight pins, safety pins, pajama pant patterns, clips, elastic, ribbon, interfacing, cotton fabric, and handmade pincushions that were sent to each of the 12 students in the class. We successfully completed our first construction project of the pajama pants by following video tutorials she filmed and posted on Moodle, even figuring out how to do fittings on ourselves. Then, she taught us about how to read patterns and start brainstorming for our final project, which was to create a costume that helped visually convey a character either from a play or one that we created. I had long dreamed of making super wide flared jeans, decorated with embroidered flowers and paired with a vibrant halter top. I was inspired by a photo of The Three Degrees, a popular vocal group in the 1960s and 70s, that I came across while reading in my dorm room a few months before. I immediately got to work on making my dream disco-dancing-queen-flower-child outfit inspired by the fashion of the mid-70s, sketching out my design and making the patterns.

Creative projects, like my disco costume, kept me going as I slowly lost motivation. I stopped journaling in mid-April when the days began to blur together. I felt like I was repeating the same process of sitting for online classes, doing homework, and being in a vacation state of mind since I was home all the time. I was keeping up with my work, but only just keeping up. In between online classes, I would set aside my work to just be creative and find motivation to do something. I painted a lot, taking photos of flowers in my garden then sitting outside on our deck, listening to birds chirping. I wished I could have seen Conn in bloom, just like in the photos on CamelWeb. I started playing hours of video games late into the night with Viggo while I struggled with insomnia. I dedicated my nights to *The Witcher*, becoming immersed in the digital universe where I contemplated morality and politics while killing monsters. It was a

way of escaping the dystopian COVID world and entering a dystopian fantasy world, but one was more fun than the other.

I even tried to teach myself how to play piano again, but to no avail. Mikka was much more instinctively musical than me. She played cello and recorder at school and continued at home, but then she started dabbling in the piano and on a guitar I found tucked away in a closet, probably from when our dad still lived with us. He was a professional trumpeter and has been working on his doctorate in music over the past several years, and Mikka seemed to have inherited his talent and ambition in regards to music.

“Do we have any more instruments?” she would ask us while plucking the guitar. She taught herself how to play songs by ear after having memorized the entire Addams Family soundtrack from attending the three shows Daddy guest performed in. For weeks, I would hear her walk from the piano to the cello to the recorder to the guitar, figuring out how to play the right notes. I loved seeing her so curious.

I sewed a lot, not only for my Costume class, but also for my friends and for local hospitals. My uncle, Tito Toty, sent me a video tutorial from the Deaconess Hospital that demonstrated how to sew masks. I had seen my favorite fashion designer, Christian Siriano, shift production from his beautiful gowns to pumping out hundreds of masks a day, and I wanted to help and feel useful while quarantined at home. I started sewing as often as I could, and eventually, I got the rhythm down so I could make a finished mask in 10 minutes. Some people were skeptical early on about how effective masks were, but as the virus surged on and continued to worsen, the CDC and healthcare workers eventually required everyone to wear masks in public areas. I knew homemade masks were by no means medical grade nor extremely protective, but the lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals along with the

skyrocketing numbers of people infected called for desperate measures. I watched seasons of TV shows and listened to audiobooks as I sewed for hours, but my neck and back would quickly ache from sitting in front of the sewing machine so long. I was the most inactive I had ever been.

On the few occasions it stopped raining in April, Viggo, Mikka, and I would bike to nearby tennis courts and play for a few hours to get moving. Some days, we would run over to a field and toss a frisbee around. Later, Viggo dug up his old baseball mitts and Mikka grabbed her softball mitt, and the three of us would play catch with each other, working on our aim, speed, and hustle. When we weren't all together, I would sometimes bike to the Post Office to send out packages of masks and help the financially struggling USPS, and Viggo decided to train to bike the 28-mile round trip from our house to DC for fun. Mommy worked out early in the mornings, squeezing in workouts before she began her remote work. We all found our ways to stay active, but my lingering lack of motivation and the regularity of sitting for my Zoom classes made it challenging to want to do push-ups. Finding the most fun activities to get a work out in together was helpful in that regard.

Throughout all of these transitions, everyday life was changing rapidly, too. I remember how nervous I was when Mommy and I finally tried going grocery shopping for the first time. We stepped into our car, which had been sitting in our driveway for several days, and discussed what our plans would be once we made it to Trader Joe's.

"Ok, you have the hand sanitizer, right?" she asked me. "We'll put on our gloves and masks while we're still in the car, then after we check out, you wait by the doors and I'll pull up with the car. As soon as you take your gloves off, I'll give you some hand sanitizer, ok?"

Grocery shopping had become a strategic activity, and it wasn't because of a good sale or lack of time. There were so many health regulations to follow. I hadn't been around other people

in a while, and I mentally recited all the rules I could remember from social media posts: stay 6 feet away from other shoppers, don't touch your face, buy enough food to last you a week or two, wipe down all the groceries before you open them. Before long, masks became the new normal and the latest fashion accessory, with many brands revealing overpriced masks with company logos or bejeweled masks that seemed like jewelry more than a PPE.

Certain items that once had seemed plentiful and basic became prized commodities. Toilet paper, or, more accurately, the lack thereof, was a comical representation of the growing upheavals throughout the world. In addition to the daily death count and confirmed cases statistics displayed daily on every news channel, nearly as many reports and articles documented the seemingly overnight disappearance of a relatively non-essential item. Dire shortages of medical equipment and supplies combated with videos of people buying toilet paper in bulk only to overcharge needy families for a single roll. It was a twisted example of how people responded to a pandemic in America. Some people were honest and selfless, donating what they could to help healthcare workers and those who were unemployed or homeless. Other people took it as an opportunity to make a profit off of the less fortunate. It felt like a joke. Was wiping our butts as important as providing healthcare workers with proper protective supplies?

We pushed our cart down the home essentials aisle, seeing for ourselves the empty shelves where toilet paper usually sat, then moved on to check out. I had also managed to find yeast packets, another hot commodity, because Mikka and I decided to try and bake bread from home. It turned out that baking bread was a popular activity for many people, and I had seen articles warning that yeast was selling out quickly. I could not believe how this pandemic was impacting everyone around the world. My favorite celebrities were also quarantining at home, also baking bread, also struggling to buy groceries. It was like a very strange dream.

The weeks passed quickly, monotonously, and before I knew it, it was finals week. It felt odd signing off of my Zoom classes, saying goodbye over and over before shutting off my camera. My Narrative Nonfiction class left me feeling empty afterwards. It had been a class I looked forward to each week, an escape to talk about life, read writings from authors I admired, and just think differently about the world. Professor Blanche Boyd had told us that we were all getting As in the class, and so I didn't feel stress regarding my writing. I chipped away at a story I was writing about my family throughout quarantine, one that I didn't end up finishing before the semester ended but one that will keep me busy throughout the summer as I distract myself from having no work or school. I knew that once finals ended, I would need to find a way to stay engaged and avoid sleeping the days away.

I forced myself to be structured with the few days I had to complete all my work. I first filmed the exhausting, yet exhilarating, four-minute long final phrase for my Modern dance class. I managed to avoid hitting the fan and only just missed whacking my head on the ping pong table in a dramatic dive to the floor at the end of the phrase. Next, I checked the weather and planned my Costume class final project photoshoot on the only sunny day in Virginia for over a week. It was a serendipitous moment: the sun shone warmly on our yard, my favorite pink Azaleas were in peak bloom, and Mikka agreed, without arguing, to be my photographer. I tied up my double-sided mint green and coral halter top that perfectly matched the flowers and pulled on my now super flared jeans that had survived my experimental alterations and embroidery. To complete the look, I blended layers of blue eyeshadow on my eyelids, liberally brushed pink blush on my cheeks, and stroked my mascara on in thick layers. I marched out onto my front lawn and laughed my way through the photoshoot, not knowing how to pose or show off my

hard work. I danced to ABBA as Mikka snapped photos, and I wonder what my elderly neighbors thought of the show I put on.

After my fun final projects, I faced the daunting ones. I had an eight-page French paper to start and a Psych final to study for with only four days to do both. My weekends had been packed with hours of Student Adviser training and Dance Club President meetings, but I finally had a weekend just before they were due to cram in all my work. I made myself a study schedule which I promptly disregarded once the time came. I was so distracted, with background noises of my siblings' video games or the chirping birds outside. I took a five minute break every ten minutes to watch a video or scroll through social media. Finally, when it reached 11 pm and I knew I had to finish my essay in order to have enough time to study Psych in the following days, I wrapped myself in a blanket, put on my "Chill Study" playlist on Spotify, sat down in front of my laptop, and wrote. I finally finished around 2:30 am, my eyes burning from the bright screen and reading my scrawled notes from my research, but I stretched my aching back and nearly cried from relief.

The next day, I revised and submitted my essay, then I got to work on Psych. I completed the 12 page long study guide, diligently going through my notes and leafing through my textbook. Once again, I realized how much I prefer researching and writing essays than memorizing a semester's worth of information for a final exam. I would gladly write eight pages about a Psychological disorder or even write more consolidating everything I had learned thus far, but I knew it was for my own good to drill what I learned about memory, personality, human development, and mental health into my brain. On campus, I looked forward to going to lectures and lab, absorbing everything like a sponge. During distance learning, everything was remote. We didn't have live Zoom sessions because there were too many people, so lessons were pre-

recorded and assignments were posted on Moodle. I struggled with teaching myself and pacing my studies without having actual classes, and I felt the uncertainty as I studied information I was not completely comfortable with. The day the online exam was due, I spent 20 minutes hovering over the “Start Exam” button pacing and stressing out in front of my siblings, nervous that I hadn’t studied enough. Finally, I mustered up the courage to begin, and I focused my energy in the 90 minutes I had to complete the exam. As soon as I had checked my answers and hit submit, I jumped up and ran to give my siblings a high five and interrupted my mom’s work day to celebrate being done with my own work. I felt so much lighter now that it was over.

The following week, the Dance Department hosted a Zoom Spring Showing of a few of the senior projects and class final phrases. First, we improvised as a group, building off of each other's movements, and sharing energy through the screen. Then, we sat together for two hours watching each others’ work and celebrating the end of another year. It was intensely emotional towards the end, as we said goodbye to the seniors. They were an incredibly talented group of wonderful people, and the faculty held up signs with compliments and adjectives that described each senior. I had barely gotten to know them, but they were so supportive of everyone in the department, and I admired their dedication to dance and mourned the senior theses that would not be performed. That was one of the hardest goodbyes and most heartfelt gathering.

When I no longer had schoolwork keeping me busy, I had many other projects lined up to focus on. Most importantly, I was preparing to celebrate two birthdays for the first time in quarantine: Zoe’s birthday was on May 21, and Mommy’s was May 22. I had seen people online celebrating graduations, birthdays, weddings, and other milestones in innovative, creative ways, and as the days approached, I wondered how the experience would be for me. As it turns out, I had nothing to worry about. Zoe’s parents and friends from high school invited me to a surprise

social distancing birthday picnic in her yard. By complete coincidence, Conn's housing system had paired two roommates who lived 10 minutes apart from each other in Northern Virginia, so I only had a short drive to make it to her house. I hadn't driven in weeks, and it was strange seeing people who weren't my family for a change. Both my driving and conversational skills were a bit rusty, but it felt refreshing to have some sense of normalcy, even if I had to wear a mask and try to smile with my eyes when I interacted with people. After Zoe walked out of her house, skillfully containing much of the surprised emotion on her face, we sat in a wide circle, roughly six feet apart, eating pizza and cupcakes and reminiscing about high school memories. I didn't know Zoe at all before going to Conn, but she had often talked about her friends at school, and I learned a lot about her from meeting them in person. After two hours, the time finally came to depart, and I contemplated what life might look like whenever the pandemic came to a close, though after nearly 10 weeks of quarantine, that moment seemed evermore distant. I drove the familiar roads back home, listening to my music like I used to do every time I was in the car before, and felt happier and more energized than I had been in a while.

My alarm woke me up an hour earlier than usual the next morning, and I hopped out of bed instead of snoozing it five times. I ran to find Mommy in her work area, sitting in her squishy leather seat.

"Happy birthday!" I greeted her, pulling her into a tight embrace.

"Thank you, my love," she replied with a smile.

After a moment, I stood up. "I'm going to make you breakfast today," I said. "I don't know what yet, but it will be a surprise!"

"I can't wait!" she said, contorting her face into a goofy smile that she often teased me for doing. I mimicked her, squeezing my eyes shut and baring my teeth in a way that appeared

more like a growling dog than a smile. We laughed, and I ran out of her room to the kitchen where a stack of dusty cookbooks lined a bookshelf. I rifled through the pages and stopped at an entry: Eggs Benedict.

I remembered making Eggs Benedict a few times many years ago, once here at home and once at Daddy's house over an hour away. The memory of me cooking in his kitchen with fresh eggs from the neighbor's chicken coop made me realize that I hadn't called him in a while. Regrettably, I was horrible at remembering to call people and keep in touch, especially when I was in isolation. I made a mental note as I gathered the ingredients to send him at least a text later. Today, I would focus on Mommy.

She had been cooking more often now that she wasn't busy driving kids to school, ballet classes and rehearsals, softball practice, or doctor's appointments all the time. She revisited old favorites, like chicken adobo and vegetable curry, but she also introduced new ones, like mango pie and mixed lentil dishes. Viggo, Mikka, and I had also alternated days of cooking and doing dishes, but her food was undeniably the best, though Viggo did win the title of "best dish washer."

I pulled out my phone and searched for an old episode of Alton Brown's *Good Eats* on Youtube to learn how to poach an egg. We had a fancy poaching pan hidden somewhere deep in a cabinet that ensured perfectly round pouches, but I decided to do it the proper way, like a chef would. The egg whites looked like ghosts swimming around the boiling water, and Mikka and I didn't find it to look the most appetizing. Nonetheless, I scooped them out after precisely four and a half minutes and plopped them on a towel to dry. After toasting some bread, laying out pastrami slices, and delicately placing the poached eggs on top, I cheated and made Hollandaise sauce in the blender instead of on the stove top. I drizzled the yellow, buttery liquid over the

toast, pastrami, and eggs, then I sprinkled paprika on top to finish the look. I took some Instagram-worthy photos and called over everyone to eat.

Although we had a dry streak of warm, sunny days for a while, the skies decided today would be the perfect time to rain. We ate breakfast indoors, talking about when we would all give our presents and eat cake, and, thankfully, Viggo and Mikka reined in their usual bickering. Mommy decided that she would work for a few hours after we finished eating, ensuring that she wouldn't be considered dispensable if COVID hit the real estate business again. In early April, her company had gathered everyone in the office to announce that everyone was getting a 40% pay cut, including the higher-ups, to keep the company afloat during the pandemic. They could have simply cut a few employees and let the rest continue to receive full paychecks, but with national unemployment rates skyrocketing to record numbers, they chose to be compassionate instead of greedy like other companies had been. I remember when Mommy told us about the meeting, we were all shaken up. We realized how scary this situation was, not only because of the deadly virus but also the economic impact. She could have lost her job, and we wouldn't have been able to pay the bills, the mortgage, the credit card companies, or even groceries.

Luckily, her company had transitioned to remote work effectively, using innovative technology to continue helping buyers and sellers through virtual house tours and social distanced open houses. After a few weeks, her pay cut was reduced until she received a full salary again, and she could pay off our expenses and bring us back to a comfortable financial state for the time being. We all felt grateful for the fortunate turn of events.

Later in the day, Mikka decorated the customary Devil's Food Cake that she baked each year while I cooked dinner. It's a Filipino tradition to have noodles on your birthday for long life, so I was making spaghetti, one of our go-to quarantine meals. Mommy often recalls a

birthday from her childhood where her family forgot to feed her noodles. Her mom woke her up just before midnight to force her to eat uncooked noodles before her birthday was officially over, and the tradition seems to have worked so far, though Mommy admits it is much more pleasant when they are actually cooked. The sun had fortuitously reappeared just as I finished the meal, and we decided to eat outside on the new cushions Mommy had ordered as a present for herself. We laid out the food, centered the cake on the table, and stacked the presents each of us had made. As we ate, we video-called Alaia so she could join in our celebration, and I propped her up on my glass of water so she could sing with us and watch the unwrapping of gifts.

Viggo, though not the most artsy one of our family, had spent hours creating his first pop-up birthday card. It was a three layered cake with striped candles and the words “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” written on the top and bottom tier. We were all impressed with his handiwork, and he even smiled proudly as Mommy gushed over the card. Mine was next. As usual, I painted a gift, though this time, I illuminated a poem I had written with warm washes of watercolors and tiny flowers framing the piece. It was an acrostic poem using the words “HAPPY BIRTHDAY MOMMY” written vertically down the side, and I wrote about her garden blooms and optimistic attitude throughout our quarantine. I am by no means a poet, and some of the rhymes I included were debatable, but the words were true and heartfelt. She showed the art to Alaia through the screen, gave me a hug, and moved on to Mikka’s masterpiece. Mikka had found some old playdough and molded it into a hyper realistic macaron cookie. She had dyed white clay pink with food coloring then mixed glue and white paint to make the filling. Somehow, she managed to evade the typical cracked texture of dry playdough and sculpted the minute details of a baked cookie. Along with the clay macaron was a canvas painted with the words “44 FOREVER,” in reference to an pivotal birthday of Mommy’s that changed our lives, with a pink flower growing

beside it. We were all impressed with her artistry, and even Alaia thought the macaron was real through the camera.

The clouds returned before long, and a chill ran through the air. We took a selfie with all of us with Alaia's image in the corner of the screen, cleared the table, and returned inside. I surprisingly felt grateful that we were all stuck at home to celebrate together. Taking a break from our typical busy schedule allowed us to just sit, share a meal, and talk. We rarely had moments like this to relax at home since we were always on the road driving from one place to another. This had been the first year Mommy only had two kids under her roof, but now that I was home again, she said, "I feel like I was blessed with one more year with you before you grow up and leave again."

Finding silver linings amidst the suffering and death surrounding us help us stay hopeful. Counting our blessings has become a daily mantra. Fortunately, none of our loved ones has died yet, and we are together at home in a safe haven, a bubble of protection. We have plans for our indefinite future: I am teaching Viggo how to design sewing patterns and sew a t-shirt, and he is teaching me how to draw woodworking plans and build a mirror frame. We are learning to co-exist, to balance spending time together and giving each other space. We take turns doing chores, cleaning, and cooking to minimize arguments and keep the peace. It's a new way of life that has a slower pace than before. We are generally less stressed about school, extracurriculars, and work than ever, but one glance at a news channel or a scroll through social media reminds us of the reality. The national death toll will reach 100,000 people in the next few weeks, possibly even days. I know this as a fact, and it unsettles me that I don't feel scared. I take precautions, like wearing gloves and a mask to Home Depot to pick up wood and nails, and I watch videos of healthcare workers suffering alongside their patients in overcrowded hospitals. I see places like

Central Park in New York City and the Washington Convention Center in DC, where we would go to the National Book Fair, converted into field hospitals. Yet, I just feel unsettled, not terrified. I still hope and pray every night that I can go back to school, even if the reopening is delayed. I dream of seeing my friends again and being a Student Adviser to new students who are as excited and nervous as I was less than a year ago. I want to plan with the two other Dance Club Presidents about our upcoming year and show that we will produce without feeling prematurely defeated by the unknown future. Planning feels pointless, and my favorite thing to do is plan for the years to come.

Today is May 25, 2020. I don't know when quarantine will end, nor do I have even a rough estimate of when it will. I am sitting outside on our deck, smelling citronella candles burning in an attempt to ward off the bugs that bite my unshaven legs. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, and the flowers are blooming. Headlines report that reduced traffic and industrial pollution are healing the Earth, and I can sense it even in my yard. I have started to pick up my journal again because I am finding things to document, finding ways to stay creative and motivate. That's all we can do now. Almost everything is out of our hands now, but I know vaccines will be developed and we will find normalcy once more someday. Someday, I will be able to hug my friends again, and I can't wait for that day to come.