

Forgettable Instances: Moving from Middle School to High School in Pandemic

Zoe Rodriguez - 10th Grade

Waltham High School; Waltham, MA

These scenes are snapshots through my candid lens of pivotal in-school memories during the pandemic. They explain how the pandemic started for me in reverse chronological order, mirroring the displacement of the time. I documented seemingly negligible moments—memories that didn't mean anything then but mean everything now.

Today, I'm a sophomore in high school. In the spring of 2020, I was an eighth-grader whose high school future was up the road from middle school. Oldest of three siblings, I was an overachiever with straight A's. I had high expectations for success in high school as an attention-seeking "theater kid" with stubborn confidence and an obnoxious sense of humor. I wish I were back in middle school, in a bizarre regretful way. I'm not that kid anymore.

Middle School Visit

As a sophomore who felt like an eighth-grader, I climbed the middle school steps on a visit to my younger brother. *This was my school, wasn't it?* It felt like I was here yesterday. *Had it been two years since I walked up these stairs? Was this déjà vu? A false memory?* I pushed open the door with a mask still strapped to my face. I froze in the lobby. The air seemed paralyzed with crushing silence. I wondered for a striking moment if my surroundings were real. Yearning to be back resurfaced like a sour aftertaste. This is my school. The blue-yellow color scheme is etched in floor tile and embedded in stairs winding to the second floor—the library with its isles of bookshelves, dusty collections, and empty chairs.

Middle school shrank. As I turned into the eighth-grade hallway, rows of lockers seemed shorter. The space tightened, and the ceiling hung lower. Bulletin boards no longer displayed my projects. Rooms looked transformed as I passed by, replaced. The hallway stretched in front of me, a tunnel. *Couldn't I walk into a class right now?* But I was a sophomore in high school, a reality lost in my peripheral vision. Half of high school was hidden in the rearview mirror. Blaring memories of finishing middle school, and starting high school online, diminished. Fluorescent light reflected on the white floor tile. Following the light with my shoes, I looked up and stood in a new hallway. The eighth-grade hallway was shorter than it used to be. I walked the entire way without realizing it was over.

Middle School Pickup

I found my name. Every bag looked identical. Isles of trashbags stretched in front of me. Locker items of each kid in middle school left after the shutdown. I scanned the names as I walked, avoiding bags like landmines. I longed badly to stay in school. Only my computer waited for me at home—online school was distant and unbearable.

Yet, I ached to leave. They looked like small body bags scattered across the entire middle school gymnasium. I heard my heavy breathing under two masks. My hands were sweaty, and plastic gloves began to stick to my skin. White light reflected off the black plastic bags, highlighting their misshapen lumps. A hushed alien landscape, like a cemetery. *"They're organized by homeroom,"* said a lady I vaguely recognized. She was not a teacher. *Where were my teachers?* Heading towards my section, I itched with feverishness as when I misplaced something I couldn't find. I was tempted to kick bags to read the names, but I dared not touch them.

Was I afraid the virus would crawl up my leg? My family followed the exacerbating case numbers. Echoes of *"you're responsible for the health of this family"* and *"your brother has asthma"* filled my gymnasium search. As did underlying horror, the worst-case scenario would be reality. Scared of outside. Scared of isolating forever. A rush of new phenomena, to *"stay six feet apart..."* and *"the CDC recommends..."* and *"disinfectant every night..."* the community spread, caseloads, and death count. Could a stray cough mean a dead brother?

Finally, I found my name. I pulled open the bag. Everything was thrown in. Books I'd never finished. Projects I'd never turned in. Locker decorations, gifts from friends. Report cards and certificates. Hall passes, homework, and the script from the musical—canceled almost before opening night. My locker was ransacked and dumped. I looked over two masks and my school year in a trash bag.

Middle School Video

The coronavirus is new. There's no universal treatment for it yet...

I stared absentmindedly at the projector screen. My world history teacher put on a CNN video because "we needed to stay informed." A shot of men in lab coats, pointing at a computer with a dot constellation speckling the screen.

Doctors still have questions about it...

My eyes wandered. Wooden structures loomed in dark corners of the classroom. Scrap wood swords and homemade shields slathered with bright paint. The place was plastered with posters,

sketches, and worksheets. A museum, a student work time capsule from past years. My leg was bouncing. The class was usually more fun than this.

... and Chinese health officials say it can be transmitted from person to person by direct contact and through droplet transmission..."

I hacked, choking out the most guttural coughs I could. My friend eyed me from across the table with a smirk.

...like when someone who has it sneezes or coughs into the air.

We raised a chorus of coughing. Absolutely wheezing, I tried not to laugh. I peered over my elbow to see how it landed with our audience. We garnered a few laughs and some sideways glances. The video droned on. I wasn't paying attention.

School shut down days later. Kids from my year never got to put their projects up in the classroom. We never saw that classroom again. In a year, I would be coughing with actual COVID-19. So would my sister, quarantining together and collectively panicking about our family. No one was laughing.