

A Painting of a Pandemic

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It started as a relief. The feeling came over me, the feeling of being able to breathe. Two weeks of time off was much needed. That was March 2020. I was in eighth grade. Today the year is 2022. I'm nearing the end of my sophomore year in high school.

Sometimes, I feel as if I'm stuck in March 2020. Time after that is a fevered dream. Everything became broken, and then the tiny pieces blurred together. Like when you mix too many colors together, and the result is brown so dark, you can't begin to tell what color you started with.

Since the pandemic hit in March 2020, my life has been a blurry brown painting. I feel as if I keep adding more colors to it. My memories are so blurred. What happened when? Who all got sick? When did that new variant begin?

I remember the sense of panic I got when my headmaster announced we would be moving to online learning. I held my four closest school friends, crying.

And to think, I only thought it would be two weeks of not seeing them.

I remember the summer of 2020. Instead of hanging out with my friends at the pool as I had planned months before, I instead found myself sunbathing in my backyard.

And to think I only thought it would be one summer.

I remember fall 2020—the beginning of high school for me. Instead of my family's "normal" first day back to school photo in front of my school building, a photo was taken of me in my room, laptop open, ready to Zoom into classes.

And to think, I only thought it would last the first month of school.

I remember logging off of Zoom after staring blank-eyed at a screen from the grueling length of time that was 8:30-4:00. I would cry after almost every class. I never could get the hang of participating in my Zoom classes. What if I interrupted the teacher? What if I froze and the only thing that would be heard was the crackling static of chopped-up audio? So I sat, silent and still. The only condolence my classmates and I had was calling each other after every class, most of

the time crying because we knew our grades were taking a hit, but participating in an online setting is more burdensome than one would think.

All those times are blurred into the mess of brown color splattered all across the painting of the pandemic. Those were the times when the thought that every student was experiencing the same strenuous situations sustained me.

It all changed midway through 2021. Masks became optional. People took them off. Mine stayed on. As part of the community of "high-risk" individuals, I had no choice. I couldn't afford to get sick. When a common cold leaves you sick for four weeks, you don't mess around with a virus like Covid.

Instead of the blurry painting that I knew everyone shared, a new painting began to form—an individual one. One full of vibrant colors, I couldn't get them out of my mind. Every time I would miss out on going to a party because the covid numbers were so high in my city, I would add a splatter of color. Every time I made up an excuse not to hang out with my friends because I knew I would be the only one masking, another splatter of color would be added.

Staying six feet away from my boyfriend every time we hung out?

Another splatter.

Keeping my mask at a restaurant while everyone else was eating?

Another splatter.

Saying no to hugs and high fives?

Another splatter

Losing countless friends to the unwillingness to recognize the real reason I couldn't hang out wasn't that I didn't like them, but because I couldn't get sick?

Another splatter.

Splatter. Splatter. Splatter. Splatter. Splatter. Splatter.

My painting was covered completely. Again, none of the colors were muddled and muddy. I vividly remember all of these times. In my mind, I replay them again and again.

Instead of having the shared painting to pull out and show others, to breathe that sigh of relief when I realize that someone shared the same experience, I had an entirely different experience.

None of my friends understood. There was no sigh of relief, only a holding of my breath as I got ready for judgment, for the comebacks, for the confusion. I decided not to share my painting. It was easier that way.

I hope that one day I will pull out my painting. That I take it out, possibly put it on display. My painting of the pandemic may differ from so many, or it may be similar. But we all have our paintings. Each I admire.

Hopefully, I can look at my painting and see a young woman growing up in tumultuous times, making her best decisions to keep herself healthy. A young woman going against the grain of what most people were doing, often getting splinters from it. I hope to see a young woman who persisted, even though she felt so extremely different.