

Heather wrote this piece on May 22, 2020.

INSIDE

by Heather Meyers

I was a nosy kid. Around the age of 9, I rummaged around my Grandmother's closet filled with old hat boxes, an odd looking fox stole with beady eyes, my Grandpa's accordion that made the trip overseas when his family left the old country, and photo albums. Faces of family I never met but I could see those I knew in them. Each of us grandkids had a glossy white album bursting with years of photos. The oldest album, belonging to my cousin who was ancient at 15 years old when I was born, was particularly bulging with black & white goofy grins of lost teeth and birthdays. His sister and my brother had a healthy array of family gatherings and visits to the zoo. I remember how my breath caught when I found mine, wondering what memories Grandma chose to include. It was empty. Being the youngest grandchild, it was probably hard to keep it up, but a disappointed kid doesn't understand that. I felt forgotten. And I never spoke of it. The book disappeared back to the bottom of the pile as if it had never been discovered.

Years later- I'm a mother to 2 teenagers. Well almost. The boy will turn 13 in August and the girl is about to become sweet 16 in mere weeks. Almost at the benchmarks. So many anticipated expectations. But a global pandemic took hold. It inched along for weeks, biting at the borders of each country until it was overtaken by a virus that is as mysterious as it is destructive. My brother and I watched our country shut down from a hospital room where our mother recovered from shoulder surgery, one of the last elective surgeries at that hospital. The staff was very kind but I could see the fear in their eyes. When my mother decided she needed another night in the hospital to help manage her pain- I could see their hesitation. So I stayed, curled up in the fetal position on a skinny couch pretending to sleep while watching reports on my phone as the shelter-in-place was finalized. My brother was asked not to come back because overnight he had driven to Madison to pick my niece up from school. So it was just me and Mom- who was high as a kite as we sped away from the hospital. This would have been incredibly amusing at any other time but I was practically shitting my pants at the thought of standing in line at the pharmacy to pick up Ma's prescription. And I almost did when the old man in front of me raggedly coughed and spit his phlegm onto the floor next to my shoe.

I took a trip to the grocery store. Sitting in my car in the parking lot in the rain waiting for the store to open- I saw neighbors walking to the door. Lining up. We huddled together and talked about what we had seen and heard. It was a great relief to see faces I recognized. And then the doors swung open and we were racing off to find the little treasures on our list. I scored the last gallon of milk and orange juice. But no bread. No yogurt. I doubled up on the burrito shells and PB&J. I was wearing a bandana over my nose and mouth and an old man came in close to me asking "Is

this a stick up?” and laughed, walking away. I almost shouted after him- “Yeah Imma gonna stick my foot up yer ass”. Although I didn’t know it at the time, that was my last outing for 2 months.

It had always been the plan for Mom to stay with us for a week to help her recover and get used to the sling now encasing her arm. I began to take care of everyone- the kids, Mom, my husband who luckily could work from home. The dog was very confused- typically it was just the 2 of us as I worked from home. But suddenly no one was leaving. I was cooking and cleaning tirelessly, continually. I created a new routine around e-learning and Mom’s pills and scrubbing toilets. Instacart began delivering the groceries so we could minimize the possibility of exposure to mom. My girl spent free time flipping through old photographs of us over the years stored on my husband’s computer that we giggled over together. We played board games and like most of America- put together a puzzle on the kitchen table. We baked bread filling the house with wonderful smells. And for awhile everything was chugging along, suiting us just fine. But the numbers of Covid cases climbed as did the piles of dishes and dirty laundry. I began drinking coffee again and eyeing the whiskey that was hidden away on top of the refrigerator. Predictably I was furloughed from one job, and then the other. So I took on the role of mighty caregiver thinking I would keep the ship running so tightly no one would complain and everything would be just fine and dandy.

Posts from friends on Facebook got more and more frantic, helpless, tired. I watched many of my friends with small children struggle to keep their kids occupied while attempting to work from home, manage schoolwork, run a household without any outside help. I found comfort in the thought that at least I didn’t have to watch over my kids. They were old enough & independent enough to log on & do their work. I didn’t have to keep my eye on them. All the while I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor so I could hear if my mother called needing help. There were many midnight conversations with insomniac friends discussing toilet paper, how to make DIY disinfecting wipes, patterns for cotton fabric masks and wondering how long until the stimulus checks would arrive.

Eventually that one-week recovery stretched into 2 months and my mother returned to her home, her kitties, her garden and her life within the boundaries of a “new normal” amid Covid-19. We last saw each other on Mother’s Day. I bought her a plant even though I knew I’d already given her a pretty sizable gift in wound care, scrubbing bodily areas where the sun don’t shine, playing housemaid and giving her safety during the scariest of times. I wondered how long it would be before we would be forced into social distancing when we once sheltered together. Even using those words now seems so odd as those terms weren’t even in the vernacular a few months ago but are commonplace now. I hugged her extra hard.

Our homelife returned to what it was before. For a short while everything felt normal- save the fact I was gearing up like Mad Max to go grocery shopping. I took bike rides with the boy- racing the wind and watching birds fly. The girl is still

practicing for her driver's license so we logged in long car rides to places I'd long forgotten or had never seen before. We stopped to take nature walks together. I made a game of looking at the map of forest preserves and we would go on an adventure. I loved those talks we'd share for miles and miles as the sun warmed our faces. And we were out- not inside- together.

This is the part of the story where social media takes a turn. It is a lifeline- a connection to people, places, ideas so we feel as if we are in this together. I took virtual visits to museums, starting brushing up on my Spanish, watched an archival Prince concert from his legendary Purple Rain tour, even found new friends while posting photos of the sunset every night on a pal's Facebook page. Yes- I watch the sunset every night. And it is glorious. But social media has also become a dark place where people tore into one another for opposing views. Posted photos of local kids gathering & not social distancing. Neighbors taking nasty tones with neighbors. People toting guns around state capitols to proclaim their rights were being violated. Doctors telling true stories about Covid patients dying as they helplessly watched. Misinformation flows as freely as facts- and the river washed us all downstream in a furious wave of uncertainty. And then a local kid commits suicide. The world stops spinning for me in that moment. I am reminded how fragile our mental health is. How long we have been living on top of one another. How long it's been since I've seen another human being. The human spirit can only take so much pressure.

My bestie calls me. We decide to meet up in her drive way. And seeing her is like coming home from a very long journey. We want to hug but stay more than 6 feet apart. We open our camping chairs & sit. We laugh. The sun shines on us. I feel more alive than I have in a very long time. And it gives me hope.

I come home to one kid who is perfectly content staying inside and taking a zoom call with friends to play Dungeons & Dragons. He & his father are very much the same. But not the girl. While she has become a pro at Facetiming with 26 people simultaneously- she is not satisfied with staying in. She longs for the days when she met friends at the mall, went out to watch a movie, ordered from Chipotle effortlessly. So we agree she can invite people to the parking lot across the street from our house. To gather. To social distance. But to see each other. I want her to feel the joy I felt. Less than 10 people. And surprisingly- they are allowed to come. The big day arrives and the girls gather. The joy is palatable. I can hear them giggle. And it sounds good- just like normal should sound. I linger to watch their happiness from the kitchen window for a few minutes before getting back to work inside. I'm not sure how much time passed, but suddenly I don't hear the giggles. It is very silent outside. I look out the window and see a single car. No girls. I text:

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the car"

"That's not social distancing. Come in now."

"No mom- please! I'll come out!"

And suddenly the doors open and 5 girls come tumbling out like a bunch of clowns stuffed inside a tiny clown car. My heart sinks. What has she done? I only asked her to do one thing- one tiny thing. Just social distance. That's all. And in that moment- everything changed.

I waited until all the girls left. But it didn't take long for me to lower the boom. And the boom sunk very low. I heard how all her friends' parents had been allowing their kids to climb into cars with one another. Having sleep overs. Making TikToks on the beach & ordering from the McDonald's drive thru. She was the only one not doing it.

The outside has infiltrated our inside.

I realize now I have never made an official photo album for either of my kids. At least until this point- they'd both been left out. And time is running out. I look through the photos of long ago vacations with sunburned smiles, piano recitals, school plays in funny homemade costumes, soccer games in the fall, dance competitions, little bundles of a tiny baby boy and a tiny baby girl. And I wonder how this will all end.