
In-Between

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Here you were, singular you, and it was just one of the countless moments that would constitute the definition of You.

You reported to the school that you had contact with someone who had just tested positive. You panicked, not because you might catch the virus, but because you had dinner with friends after the contact.

The school asked you to pack up the clothes you would need for 14 days and, of course, study materials. A police officer would escort you to the new place in half an hour. They already prepared a comforter and bedsheet, so just bring a pillow.

You waited for a while longer, because someone else needed a pickup. The sky was heavy, and the wind was blowing through you. You saw him and a 6-seat golf cart. You weren't sure he was the one you were looking for, but you waved anyways. He told you to sit on the seat that faced backward with the suitcase. It made sense because it would ensure air flow. One could not be too cautious even though both of you were wearing a mask, and yours was an N95.

It was a bumpy ride, and when everything around you flew backwards, you tried not to notice people noticing you. You did not understand why it gave you this weird feeling that you *were* somehow responsible. Maybe it was the news reporter who demanded *you* to apologize, or the president who called COVID-19 the "Chinese Virus." You would later discover this was the same feeling you carried when you were the only one, the only Asian on the street wearing a mask. A father saw you on the sideway and took the children to the main road until you walked past them. Anyways, after a few minutes, the vehicle stopped, and the officer watched you get off. The distance between you and him felt more than the length of the car.

The school gave you a suite with a box of food and enough toilet paper. You looked around and everything in the room was pale white with the smell of disinfectant. You were told to get the nucleic acid test tomorrow, not knowing what to expect.

You sat down on the couch and hoped to distract yourself with Instagram or Snapchat. A high school friend in California told you he was walking on the street with his girlfriend when a man shouted "Coronavirus" to their face. You did not experience anything like that, of course, but you did remember the time when you were entering a class and there was an ongoing discussion about China and the virus. You remembered that the discussion stopped when the kids saw you. You told your friend that at least people in America started to take Coronavirus seriously, but both of you knew that the man was not looking for someone who carried the virus, but someone to carry the blame.

You did not hold onto the vague accusation for long because it was not the whole picture of

your experience.

Three months ago, it had been the first Spring Festival you did not celebrate at home. That day Mom called, and through the screen you saw the whole family setting off fireworks. Weeks later, through the same screen, your mother told you that there was a lockdown. It felt like your home was on fire and you could only be a bystander.

You saw the nature of hegemony when Li Wenliang, one of the first whistleblowers, passed away after being silenced by people with power, and when the Red Cross Society in Wuhan kept donating masks from hospitals in desperate need. At the same time, you saw amazing things happen, like a hospital being built in 10 days. You tried to connect with home amid the chaotic flux of information through the screen and finally accepted your powerlessness. You just hoped for the best for the family.

Eventually, things began to go back to normal in China. You grandparents could go out and buy groceries. At a park near the lake, cherry blossoms opened as usual and all your family went to see, along with thousands of mask-wearing tourists. For you, the realities clashed again when cases of COVID-19 began to increase in the states, and the governor of Tennessee issued the “Safer at Home” order. Most businesses were closed and attempts to reopen seemed risky. At night you heard the sirens of ambulances and noises helicopters. Cherry blossoms opened in time along the road from Commons to Highland.

Your friends had left as soon as classes moved online. You stayed because you didn’t want to take classes with a 13-hour time difference and, well, you had to self-quarantine for another two weeks. You were afraid to tell your family about the contact and the quarantine because you knew your mom would panic. So, you pretended that you were still in your old dorm and everything was fine. In this awkward and not-quite-honest situation, you felt the urge to get closer to your family and made even more calls than in the first week of school.

The negative test result came out on April 1st, and it was a relief. The friends you had dinner with were safe and you could finally confess to your family. It was not a surprise since you hadn’t shown any symptoms and Vanderbilt responded effectively in time before the situation got worse. Still, it took eleven days for the result to come out and you knew there were many more people who could not get a testing kit.

The window blinds of Morgan House cut the light from the outside world into strips. There was only a tree up close as if the branches and leaves were meant to stop you from staring any further. After a few days, you felt reluctant to check *The New York Times*. In the news you saw the numbers rise and red dots expand. According to the CDC, the death toll was far higher than reported, but you didn’t see them as other than stone-cold numbers. So, you looked to the direction of home, only to realize that home labeled you as one of the potential “imported cases.” A 14-day quarantine at a hotel was required and that was if you could find a way back. Most flights were canceled, leaving only one direct flight to China from the U.S every week, and purchasing plane tickets became a lottery business. At the fifth attempt you

finally found a ticket that wasn't canceled but you would have to transfer at Amsterdam. Before then, you were stuck between two worlds. It was a chilly spring and you belonged nowhere.

You waited alone in the suite. Not quite. You had screens, and Alexa. On Instagram you saw your friends wearing protection from head to toe before going on planes. Someone told you they were stuck at the transfer airport for fourteen hours and it would be another three at customs. You wondered if it was worth it to go home because either way you were caught up in two realities. In the video chat you saw your grandma. She was just checking in, but her eyes were wet. You knew she wanted nothing more than to see you. Thirteen hours apart, you didn't know what to say to make her believe it was alright.

You told her it was not all bad.

Testing had become more available in each state and Remdesivir, an experimental drug, seemed promising to speed up recovery. You watched through the "One World: Together at Home" concert and were convinced that it was a time when commonalities overcame differences.

You told your grandma you were taken good care of because people here were still doing their jobs, whether it was Randy from the Housing Department who kept in contact to help you move, or the delivery lady from Campus Dining, who always wore a mask and left the meals at your door. One time, you saw a heart drawn on the paper wrap of a chocolate chip cookie. During the nucleic acid test, the doctor managed to calm you down with her soothing voice. She reminded you of other female health workers in the States and back home. No, you didn't see their faces, but you knew with masks on, they were doing the same thing—saving lives. They gave you something to hold on to during the strangest time.

Then there was one little encounter that you couldn't forget.

You were passing through the main door of your old dorm; the old security guard was sitting there. By then, almost everyone on campus had left. You'd seen him a lot in the past year but the only interaction you had with him was to show him your Commodore Card. He was always silent.

You were wearing a mask, waiting for the elevator when he spoke to you.

"Are they letting you stay?" It was a low and firm voice.

"Yes," you said, a little confused.

"Good." He looked a little tired, "I'm so sorry that you have go through this." He continued, "I mean I can't imagine what it is like for you."

“Thank you,” you said.

“I hope there is something I can do to make it easier for you all,” he said, reminding you of your grandpa.

You took off the mask (at a safe distance) and talked for a little longer. You learned that his name was Jimmy and he was 82. He still worked on campus because he lost his wife and would be alone at home. You could not imagine what life has brought him, but you did sense the warmth in his words and realize the importance of that little moment to both of you.

You were both lonely outside that encounter, like millions of others during this pandemic. People were scared to get closer, especially when they had nothing in common at the first glance. However, it was exactly the time when the *right* type of closeness would be most powerful and healing, like how people in a neighborhood of Naples sang the most beautiful choir from balconies. Well, in a dim hallway in Nashville, Tennessee, Jimmy’s empathy gave you a sense of belonging, faint but soothing.

The sun shone through the window blinds. Soon, you could go home, and spring would resume.

You saw hope in the crevice between two worlds.

Can you still see the distance? Can you feel the difference, when you are me, when you are us?