

B L A C K F E A T H E R
M A G A Z I N E

Volume I

May 2020

Empty Spaces



volume I
empty spaces



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Letter From the Editor

Black Feather Magazine has been 13 years in the making. Imagined as an artist's paradise, these pages serve as a space where ideas, stories, and images can find a home and can fuel further art. This magazine is, above all, an ode to the silent artist. It is an ode to the people who can fill empty spaces with stories and find inspiration in the most unassuming, or challenging, of circumstances.

This issue of Black Feather Magazine is an ode to empty spaces and challenges. The past few months have created emptiness out of spaces that have usually been bursting with life. I've walked past empty restaurants where I can almost hear the lingering chatter that used to live there. I've skated through streets where I once sat in traffic. I've spent days without seeing another person. Everything has shifted and a lot of people are just now getting to know themselves. This emptiness has forced this upon us. I wanted to explore this. I asked some of my friends and family if they would like to contribute to this opening issue of Black Feather Magazine. I was surprised at the number of enthusiastic replies. I was even more surprised at the unveiled stories, thoughts, and experiences that they wrote about. I was surprised that many contributors didn't know how heavy the burden of isolation and quarantine was until they wrote about it.

And so, dear Reader, I invite you to read these stories and really feel these images. I invite you to get to know yourself through the lives of others and the emptiness that has suddenly come to define our lives.

I welcome you to the world of Black Feather Magazine and would like to remind you that "even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise."

Michelle Assaad
Editor

RIDE SAFE

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THOUGHTS FROM A VENETIAN

Andrea Acampora
Venice, Italy



All'improvviso ci siamo dovuti fermare. Abbiamo sospeso tutti i nostri impegni, progetti e hobby. Molte cose importanti e apparentemente urgenti sono state sospese immediatamente.

All'improvviso ci siamo dovuti fermare.

Per proteggerci da un nemico invisibile, apparentemente lontano e per alcuni addirittura immaginario. Le nostre priorità si sono capovolte e forse si sono riallineate con i veri valori quali famiglia, solidarietà e collaborazione.

All'improvviso ci siamo dovuti fermare.

Questo evento ci sta insegnando a non dare per scontato alcuni elementi per nulla banali come la libertà di muoverci, la salute e le piccole cose della

nostra quotidianità. Ci ha insegnato l'importanza di prenderci il tempo per noi, i nostri cari e per pensare alle famiglie che stanno soffrendo. Ci ha insegnato che il tempo non si ferma e mentre noi siamo costretti a restare in casa la primavera è sbocciata più forte che mai. La natura e gli animali si stanno riprendendo i loro spazi arrivando nei centri città.

All'improvviso ci siamo dovuti fermare... ma la vita no.

Ed è così che ogni mattina mi sveglio accanto a un pancione sempre più grande, che ospita un bambino scalpitante che non si vuole fermare.



Suddenly we had to stop. We have suspended all our commitments, projects and hobbies. Many important and apparently urgent things were immediately suspended.

Suddenly we had to stop.

To protect us from an invisible enemy, apparently distant and, for some, even imaginary. Our priorities have been reversed and perhaps realigned with true values such as family, solidarity and collaboration.

Suddenly we had to stop.

This event is teaching us not to take for granted

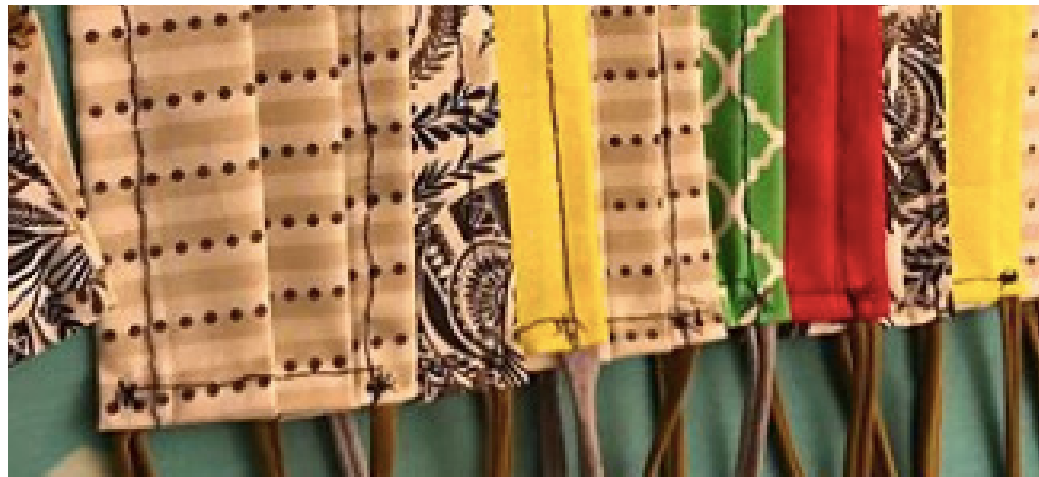
some elements that are not at all trivial such as the freedom to move, the health and the small things of our daily lives. It taught us the importance of taking the time for ourselves, our loved ones, and for thinking about the families that are suffering. It has taught us that time does not stop and while we are forced to stay at home, spring has blossomed stronger than ever. Nature and animals are claiming their spaces, arriving in the city centers.

Suddenly we had to stop ... but life didn't.

And that's how I wake up every morning, next to an ever-larger baby bump, which houses a pounding baby that doesn't want to stop.

THOUGHTS FROM A PHD CANDIDATE

Christina Hotalen
Tarpon Springs, Florida



I began quarantine around the second week of March. My sole goal was to revise the hell out of my dissertation chapters, and hopefully begin the last chapter shortly thereafter. Throughout the first few weeks of quarantine, I spent (too much) time mindlessly browsing Youtube, Reddit, Twitter, and Instagram between working on dissertation revisions in small chunks. I remarked on Twitter how inspiring it is to see how people were getting creative in quarantine: making music, inventing, recreating masterpieces with household items, embroidering, sewing, and painting. I decided that if we were going to be in quarantine anywhere between two to four months, I was going to utilize every moment of the day keeping myself busy so that I did not become anxious, depressed, and bored. I also needed motivation to help me get through the revisions by having something pleasant to look forward to in the evenings. I would work from the time I woke up until dinner, and then took the rest of the evening off for creative activities like putting on makeup and embroidery. A few weeks before everything shut down, I purchased a jean jacket for \$5 at Goodwill with the intention of sewing a back patch for a concert I was planning to go to in April. That patch must have disappeared in the midst of moving last year, but with no other options and nothing else to do, I decided to start embroidering the jacket. I started working on it in chunks after a long day of dissertating to keep myself preoccupied and serve as a creative outlet. Currently, the back of the jacket is almost covered in doodles, eyes, and moon phases. The front and sleeves are mostly embroidered. There is nothing more relaxing to me than embroidering, having a good playlist or television show in the background, vaping, and having some much-needed alone time.

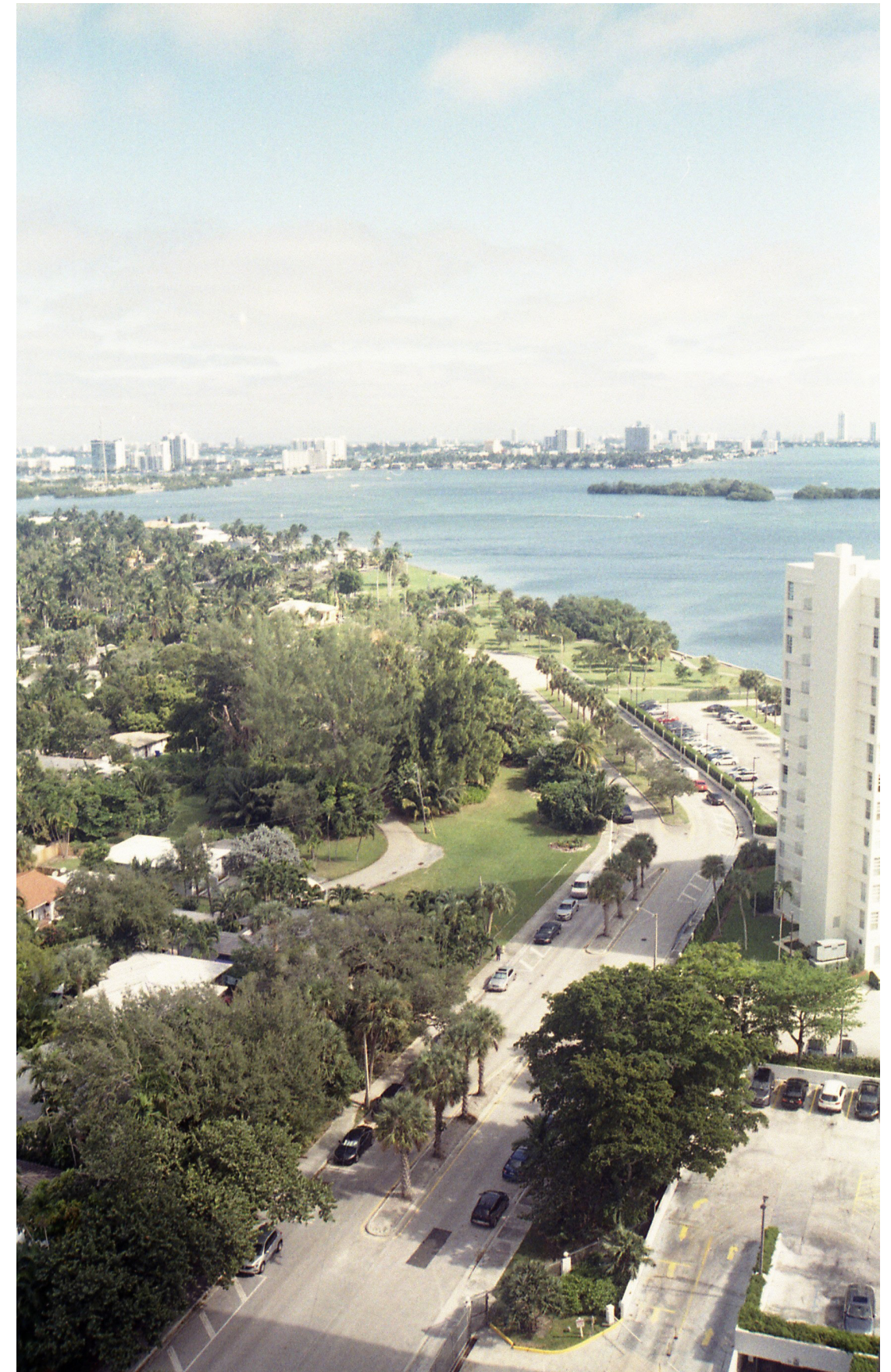


When news about medical supply shortages started breaking, I felt depressed and hopeless. When your radiologist sister tells you the things she has seen and heard, from her own experiences, as well as her friends in New York and elsewhere, it was devastating. These workers—medical, grocery, retail, custodial, delivery, etc.—all deserve to have protection for working the frontline. When I heard about local crafters donating masks to medical professionals, I was compelled to learn how to sew. At that point, I did not know how to and only knew how to embroider and cross stitch. I felt that even if I did know how to sew, I did not own a sewing machine and would not be able to produce vast quantities. After thinking about it non-stop for a few days and watching a few video tutorials, I finally got the motivation to figure it out and after a few days, hand sewed thirteen masks. I posted my masks online and received generous praise and validation from the mask-making community. That following weekend, I ordered the first affordable sewing machine that was available online. Fortune must have been on my side because I apparently bought the last refurbished model! Working with the sewing machine has inspired me to sign up for classes when businesses reopen. Ideally, I would love to make my own clothes and incorporate my own hand embroidery, which is something I began much earlier in quarantine. It is ironic that I am thinking about this now, as I am in the middle of reading on dress theory for my dissertation, but I digress.

I recognize that at some point I will run out of space to embroider on the jean jacket. So, I decided to finally pick up something I have been meaning to do for a few years now, but never got the opportunity to sit down to learn it. If I did, I always made excuses to not pick it up. I bought a guitar a few years ago and I am just now learning how to actually play it. It is probably one of the hardest things I have tried to learn that is not academic-related, which is saying something, considering I complain about everything. I used to never be this person, but when I say I want to do something, I do it and I mean it. I want to follow through with everything that I say, because if I do not, then I will feel like a fraud and as an academic, I constantly deal with imposter syndrome. I also believe that because it is so new and out of the norm for me, it may actually do me some good to try new things and push myself even further.

Ever since I started this Ph.D., I have been feeling a little more adventurous with the things I want to do and determined to accomplish as much as I can. Ultimately, I want to walk away from quarantine knowing that I used my time productively and learned a few things I did not think I was capable of doing. I realize that I could have used this time to learn how to cook a proper “adult” meal, but I feel the need to act on this creative impulse while I have it.

My creativity has been dormant since I started graduate school five years ago, if not longer. I appreciate having this time to explore my creative side and try new activities that I never had the time to learn. I can still manage my dissertation and online class during the day and still maintain personal enjoyment at night, when I feel my most content.



THOUGHTS FROM A PILATES INSTRUCTOR

Emily Bench-Lahrssen
Miami, Florida

“...Everything will change very fast and life will never be the same.” This was the message that a friend of mine, a doctor, sent me on Saturday March 14th. I had just asked him a question that my heart already knew the answer to.

“Should we close our Pilates studio and go online even though the government hasn’t said anything?”

I went for a run to clear my mind and on my way back I asked the universe for a clear sign, “Please! give me something!”

I called the elevator and SEVEN elderly neighbors came out of the elevator... That was it! That was the sign... right in front of my face! I told Guillermo, my husband and business partner, “This is it, we are closing Pilathon and going online.”

He looked at me for a few seconds with doubt and then he nodded.

“I also think we should, too.”

Back then, some people were still underestimating the effects of COVID-19. Clients were still thanking us for not closing “their temple,” as some refer to our studio. I even thought I was

closing the studio to protect my elderly clients and neighbors. It was never about my own health, not even about my husband’s health.

Today everything is very different.

Everything happened within hours. Guillermo and I sat down and studied every scenario. Once we tested the new system and decided what to do, it was time to talk to our team of teachers who were still thinking they were going to teach regularly for at least another week. We went online and had our first ZOOM meeting! I could see and felt they were worried... Worried about the unknown. They had all sorts of questions: “Are we going to drive to the studio and teach from the studio?”, “Are we also staying home?”, “Are we going to get paid for teaching online?”, “Are we going to get paid less?”

I’m a natural born leader and even though I am not a mother, I am. I take very good care of my people, so after answering their questions and finding ways to make this situation as easy as possible, we were all in the same boat and rowing together! I realized, “I HAVE FOUND MY DREAM TEAM!”



It was time to practice teaching online. Guillermo suggested creating a pilot group with regular clients-friends that would give us the most honest feedback ever. On Sunday March 15th at 5:00pm, we had our first online class... SUCCESS! They were all extremely happy and we saw it was completely doable. We sent an email to our clients. Some were ok with it; others were sad that they weren't able to go to their Pilates paradise for some time. But, in the end, everyone agreed that it was the most responsible and sensitive decision. We let some of them -the regulars- borrow equipment from the studio and so on Monday March 16th at 8:30am, I taught my first online group class ever!

Until now everything seems ok... weird but ok. A week passed by... no other human contact but the two of us and our buffer, JoJo the cat. Clients were signing in but not with the regular attendance... it was time for another difficult talk with the dream team... Payroll! Oh gosh! Guillermo spent days calculating what we concluded was the best we could offer our staff to be able for them to carry on teaching rather than me teaching all the classes. We were always thinking that we want the whole team to be able to teach some of their classes so that the comeback flows naturally and also for them to feel and know we are here for them and we will do what's in our hands for them to be Pilathon!

So after a week of being online, after a week of studying the attendance of clients and noticing that no new money was coming in because most of the clients had already paid for the month, we had to tell the teachers that we had no choice but to cut the hourly rate by about 30%... THEIR FACES. They thought that being at home would mean more classes for them to teach since they had more time, but it was to the contrary... we had to reduce our number of classes in half and our pay rate too... However, we are OK! This too shall pass, and I believe that we are like water... We take the shape of whatever container we are in... we flow! Once again... they showed me that they are my Dream Team.

Week two... WAR at home! it's been 14 days exclusively at home. I haven't even been in the elevator of my condo. The first week I was wired on top of things: working, reinventing, helping other studio owners to do the same, recording videos for social media... Busier than EVER for two weeks and then... all of the sudden the new normal hit me... "this is it?..."

You see... I'm a doer. I like being productive, exploring, seeking, creating. I can't stand not doing anything. I can relax, yes...but to me, relaxing means a little while and afterwards, having something else to do... Guille on the other hand can relax all day like our cat, JoJo...

"These aren't vacations," I would say, "Pizza? Really? for delivery? the virus lives in cardboard for hours. Here we are at home not going anywhere and you bring the damn virus in!"

I would scream like a maniac.

"I can't eat more soup," he would complain, "I want meat! I don't want more salads!" He would scream at me...

"Then YOU cook because that's all I am preparing... I cook and eat healthy foods only."



Home was a war zone for two days... we hated each other, and, yet, we had to sleep together because our second room which is normally the tv room turned into the Pilates-yoga and meditation room... that was a good thing... because we apologized on the morning of day three, so it ended there.

We spoke and set up rules... My sister told me that if he was doing 50% of the work he was on track and to be fair to Guille, he was and is doing way more than 50%...

Peace came back... we are back on track. We've had dinner nights, movie dates, Guinness night, Spanish night, Mexican night, Indian lunch and lots of cake... we have received cake from clients, and they have all been delicious... Yes, I toned down on the healthy foods a little... We can't be so strict in life and I know that...Guille prepares breakfast on the weekends and sets the table every day, and so that I don't miss my dad so much, he prepares my cup of tea.

Oh God! time to go for groceries again. I'd rather go on my own. I know I can deal with this, but I need bit of time and space on my own. It's the first time in 20 days that I've left my house... I took my own cart and bags of course...Lysol in spray (which is a luxury item nowadays. Literally people looked at my can as if it where the last Patek Philippe watch hahaha I had to hide it...) no gloves but I did wear a mask. It was incredibly stressful to be surrounded by people disguised as if it were the apocalypse! No one looking each other in the eyes... people forgot to say hi, excuse me, please or thank you... until I arrived at the cashier... She was wonderful. I truly felt for her, having to deal with so many maniac, paranoid customers asking her HOW to pack their food, what to touch and what not to touch... I decided to release her a little bit from my own tension and went for self-check in. It took me ninety minutes to go through self-check out and put everything once clean in my already cleaned bags in my own cart. Yes, I was that person (I can't believe it). Once in my car I screamed... I couldn't believe it! "This is crazy!!! what the hell..." It was one of the most stressful

times I have experienced... I'm Venezuelan. I lived the Chavez years so...I know stress.

It was nice to arrive home after that stressful moment and find that the kitchen was cleaned up as well as the living room and our bedroom... Guille is a gift! Now our fridge is packed again with vegetables and fruits for more soups and salads for the week. We will misbehave on the weekend...

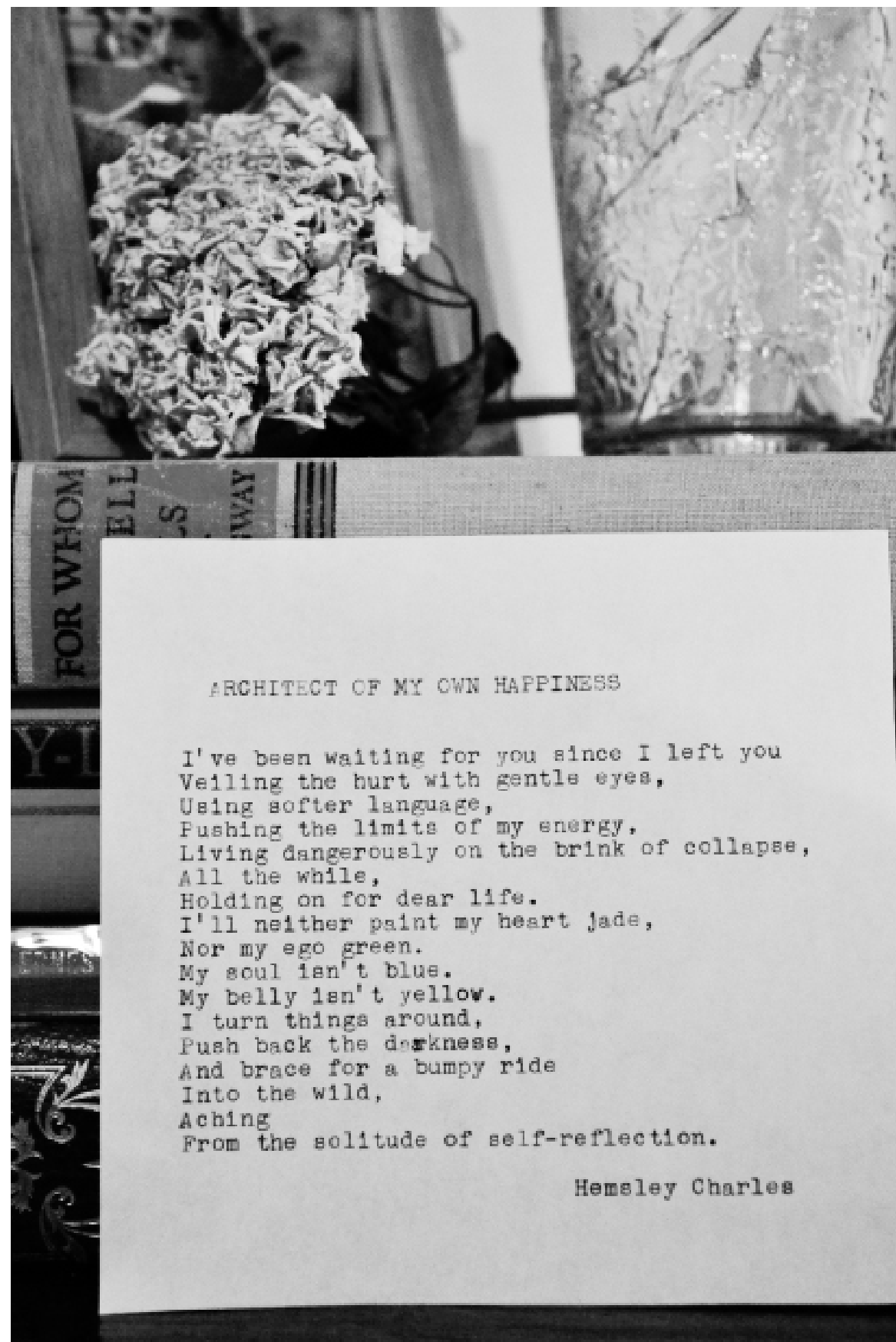
I'm sorer than ever... I have been teaching Pilates for five or six hours a day while demonstrating the moves. WOW Mat Pilates is so humbling. But I'm tired. My body is feeling it and my eyes are exhausted by 5:00pm. I have a headache a day and, of course, I think "I have COVID!" but it's really just the screen time... I'm a movement professional... I see people every day, make them move mindfully, I guide them into meditations and I'm barely on the phone, never on the computer (I consider myself LUCKY for this). I love people! I love seeing them heal and become a better version of themselves... I live through the words of Joseph Pilates: "Change happens through movement and movement heals" ... well, that's what I do every day. I help people become healthier more conscious and happier. I am still doing it through the screen but now it's more taxing for me and I have to also deal patiently and lovingly with those who think we should charge less because it's an online class. They just don't understand. I teach them, explain to them that it's the same amount of time but, honestly, it's more effort and more dedication because now I have to make people feel that I'm there with them! Almost touching them while guiding them through moves., my eyes are fixed in front of a screen making sure that they are moving successfully! Some get it and appreciate it... Some others just don't see it... the time will come...

I dearly, dearly miss my parents. I keep wondering, "When am I going to hug them again?" Swiftly followed by, "Am I ever going to again?" it breaks my heart. I feel a knot in my throat, and I burst into tears but in a few minutes I'm back! I call them talk to them, see them through the screen... they are happy and healthy! I will see them soon! and hug them tight.

I miss human touch! I'm a squeezer. I don't just hug! I squeeze people heart to heart for more than 20 seconds! and I verbalize that... I miss my day to day Pilathon family. I miss high five with my condo's front desk... This is weird.

I LOVE the sounds of the city! It's so quiet... that's a beautiful sound. SILENCE and birds chirping. The sky is free from airplanes, the ocean is flat and pristine! oh my God the SUNSETS have been incredible. I love being home! I love being able to witness sunrises every day without having to rush to the studio. I can watch the sunset every-day... I am witnessing my cat's life! he is so awesome. Guille and I are like a couple that recently met... we are in love (again) and we both love being home but we both need VACATIONS! in a place with no WIFI no Social Media NO SCREENS! just Sunscreen.





THOUGHTS FROM A RECENT GRADUATE

Ines Said
Tampa, Florida

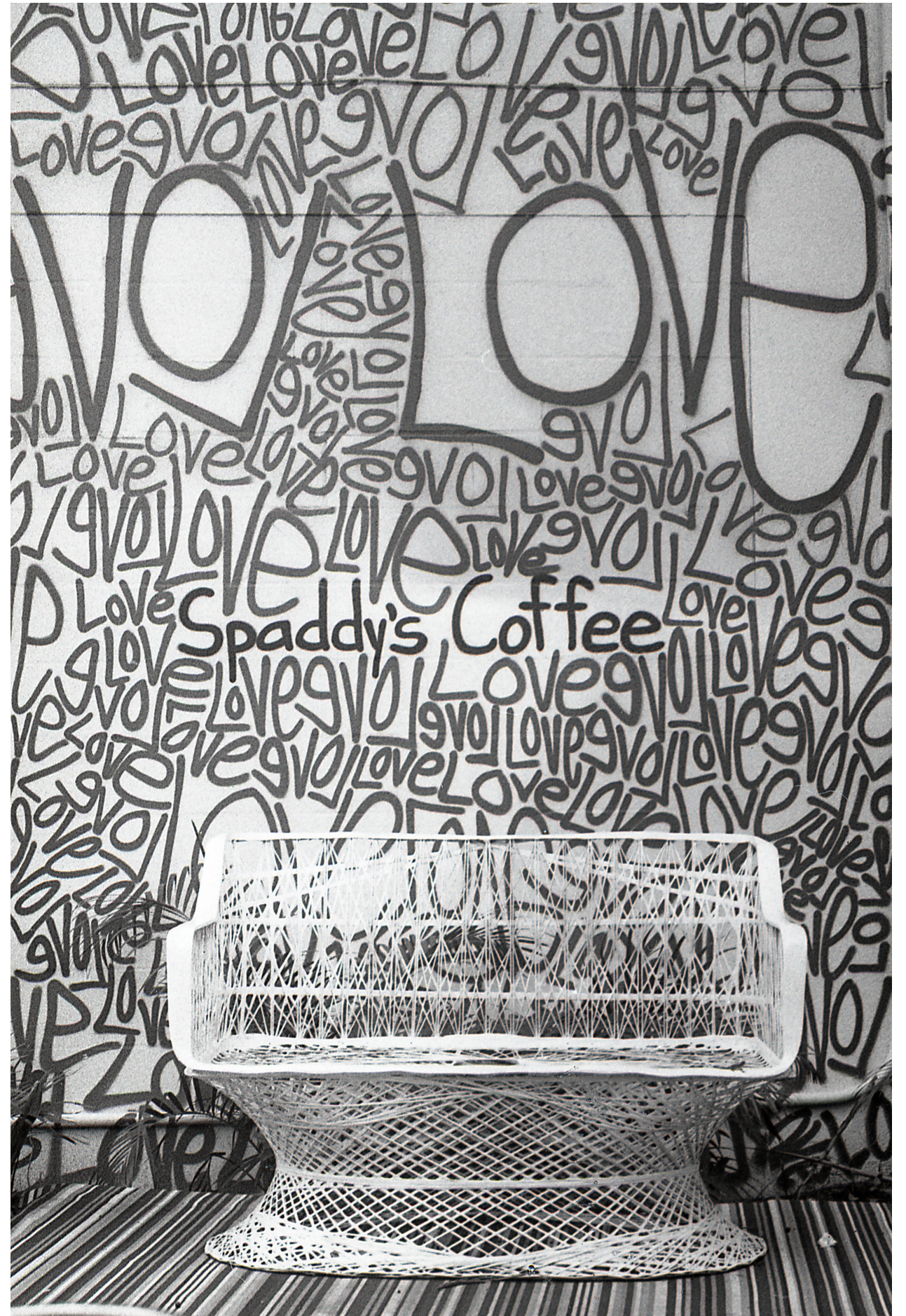
I never expected the virus to become a pandemic. I never expected the quarantine to really happen. I've been reading news articles since January. I heard a lot about the virus and I even got ready for a pandemic way early. All the way back in February, I bought soaps, sanitizers and even n-95 masks. With all that, I thought I was exaggerating, and nothing would really happen.

By the start of March everything started to change. The virus was spreading further and further. I remember feeling sick to my stomach when I heard the virus overtook Italy. My whole family is in Tunisia, right next to Italy. And I knew that if Tunisia was to get affected, the country would not have the resources to fight it at all. It would be the end. It's no doubt this quarantine time has been extremely stressful for me. I'm constantly worried about my family. I just graduated and it's impossible to find a job. At this time, it's even hard to just find the motivation to do anything.

I started the quarantine weeks before the US declared a State of Emergency. Mostly, I was worried about putting other people in danger more than being worried about myself. I don't think that I would be able to live with the guilt of somebody dying because they caught the virus through me. This quarantine has been very stressful and very emotionally demanding. I don't think I handled it in the best way. I feel like I wasted a lot of time and missed out on so much that I could've done. I found an escape in Animal Crossing. You can play online with your friends and virtually visit other places. I think I played the game a little too much. And it's weird for me, because I never really played video games before. But after all, I didn't have many other things to do. I was still applying to jobs constantly, but I did not have any hope at all of getting one. At some point, I just turned my efforts to creating an art portfolio and applying to University of Florida. I spent many days of the quarantine creating a portfolio, drawing and making art. I got a decision really fast. I got accepted. But what should I do with that?

On social media, everybody is making it seem like the quarantine is the best time of their life. They're saying they have all the time to take care of themselves, time to work out, time to organize and plan for their life. Yet another fake life on social media. I have had to completely stop posting on my Instagram for over a month now because, in the beginning, I was being told that I was being negative. I think I was just being real. I did a lot of self-care things too. I took guitar lessons, I joined a dance group, I ate healthier, I learned to cook. But all that does not even matter that much to me. I just can't wait for this time to be over so I can get back to my normal life. At this point, I'm starting to doubt It's going to be over.

I miss my friends, I miss my family, and I miss nature.

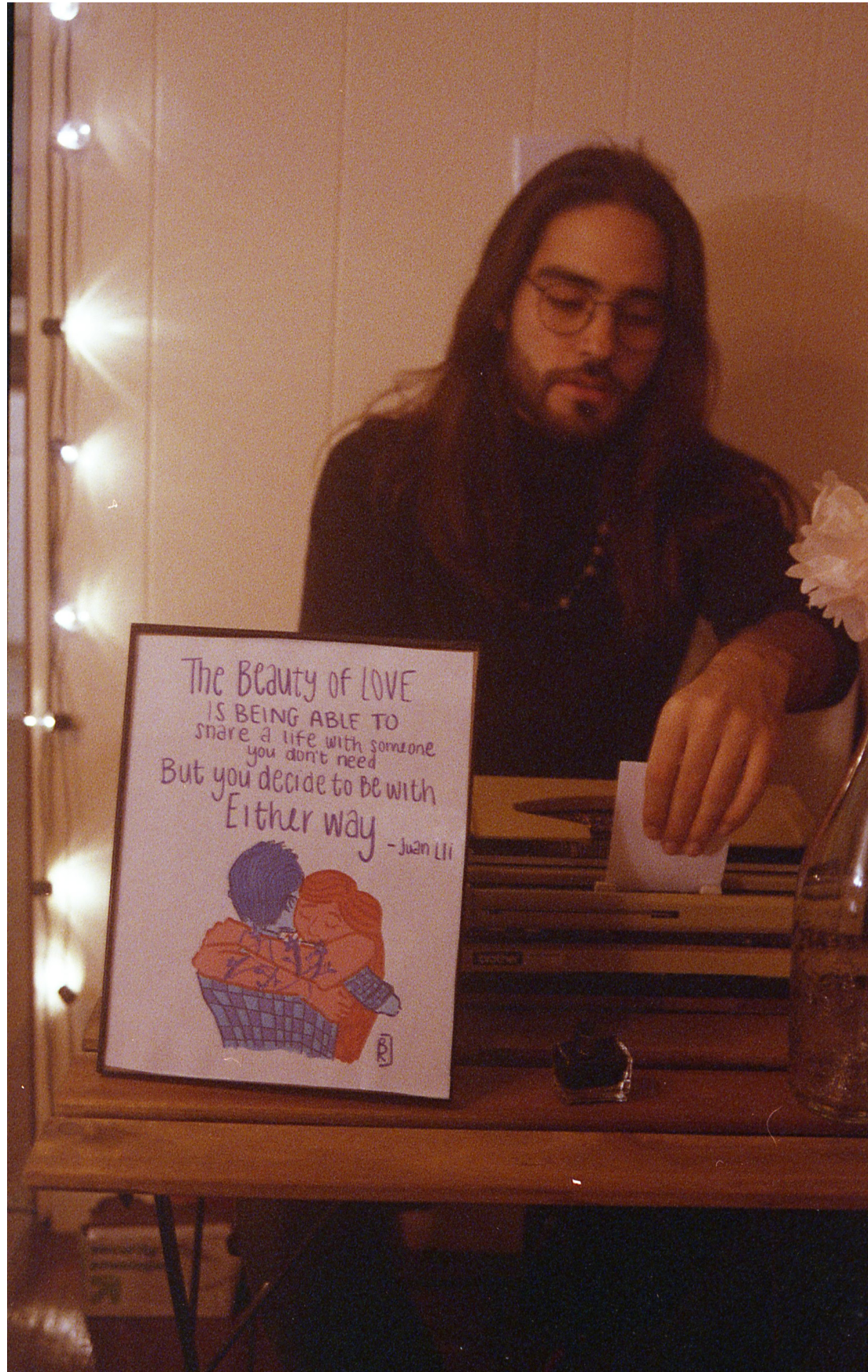


THOUGHTS FROM A PHOTOGRAPHER

Joshua Torres-Negron
Tampa, Florida







THOUGHTS FROM A POET

Juan Carlos Lli
Tampa, Florida

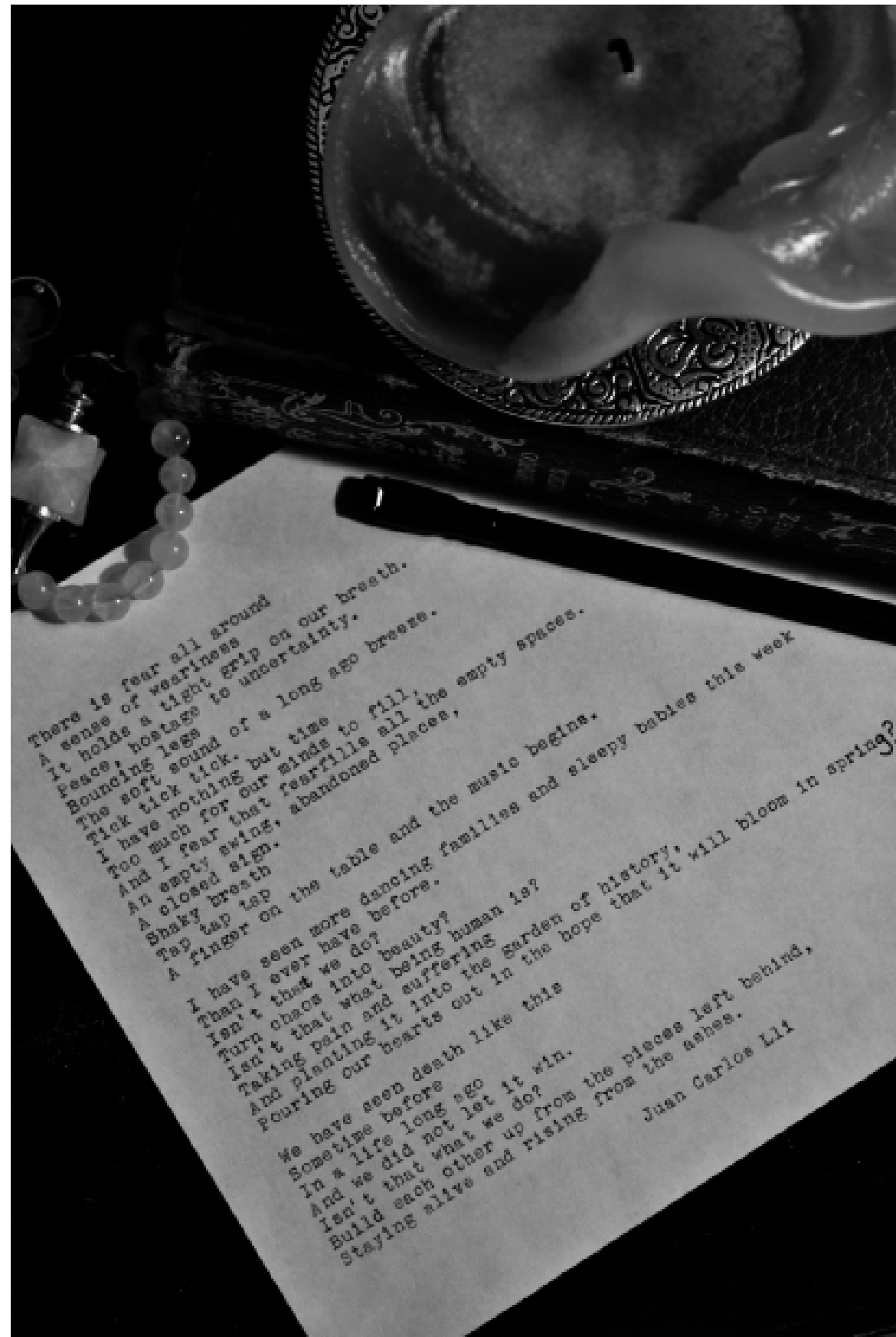
It's a bizarre thing to be stuck in one's own room and call it prison, but those are the times we live in.

It has been a few weeks since I started to keep to myself, hidden from the pandemic; for the best interest of, not just me and my family, but also of those who I serve. I work as a server at an assisted living facility. I wonder many times, although I should know by now, how they are holding up. I complain of these four walls that confine me, but there is more to this house, and I have many forms of entertainment. I am still allowed to go out for walks. I am not prohibited from enjoying social interaction, albeit, through a screen. But still. I am surrounded by a fortune in a time when little is enough.

I have been paying close attention. It is quite sad, you see; the few joys they have are the activities throughout the week and their reunions in the dining room. Activities have been cut to the bare minimum. It's not a risk worth taking.

To top it off, they have been divided in groups and they now sit individually at their table. Not much can be done about it, really. Not until the situation settles down. Their Easter was limited to their nice lunch on their single sitting table, a disposable placemat and old movies in the community living room with limited sitting.

Of course, visitors aren't allowed anymore. But that hasn't stopped them. I have seen family members stand by the residents' windows, talking through phones, trying to remove the walls between them. I bet they are aware of the risk of the situation. They have probably heard by now about the many deaths in nursing homes this virus has caused, the way it spreads and sweeps with such might. They probably know this is also their best bet. I hope they know we are doing our best. I think the residents notice the toll this is taking on us. Even with masks on, covering half our faces, they can see the weight on our shoulders, how we adjust and try to keep them safe and sane. They seem to smile wider now. I think that's their way of doing their part.



THOUGHTS FROM AN AMERICAN IN SPAIN

Lorena Hernandez
Lucena, Spain

Day 35: Lucena, Cordoba, Spain 2:30 PM

It's spring now. The crisp air is creeping in and all we can do is melancholically look out from our balconies. How did it get like this? I ask this every day. Three months ago, I was having the time of my life in Ireland not giving a single thought to illness. Not worried if a person who walked by me was sick. No paranoia. Just carefree. A stranger could have sneezed on me and I would have politely forgiven them! No one could have foreshadowed this enigma of a situation. A month later, at the end of February, I went to Poland...I was a little more conscious of what was happening but because it wasn't happening in my country of residence, Spain, I was still able to relax and not overthink everything I touched and the individuals I interacted with.

During the beginning of February, news of COVID-19 cases broke out in South Korea—where I used to live a year ago—I reached out to friends who were still living there and they assured me they were fine but that the government was being strict and issuing a mandatory stay-at-home rule. School was cancelled right away. I was still living in a snow globe fantasyland kind of world. I kept thinking that there was no way that the virus would reach Europe. But maybe I told myself that to calm my anxiety. I sent out my naïve sentiments to my friends in Korea, skeptical of the paranoia that was spreading there. As soon as the first cases appeared there it seemed everyone went on lockdown. My friends would post IG stories of empty streets, subways, bars, and restaurants. I remember thinking, “is it an overreaction? Well maybe better safe than sorry.”

Shame on you, former Lorena

The first week of March, life in Lucena was still a bit normal. At school people made light jokes about what the situation of COVID-19 in Spain would be like. Some did this for comic relief, others as a coping mechanism as the virus made its way into Europe. At that time Italy was experiencing their first cases and deaths and every week the situation just got more dire. My friends and I still went out to bars and I still guiltily gave the double cheek kiss when greeting coworkers and friends. My unconscious always reminding me that maybe it wasn't a good idea.

March 16h: Cordoba goes into quarantine.

remember that I went out for a long run to clear my anxiety the weekend before the 16th. Hearing what was happening in Madrid and Barcelona I knew soon I'd find running to be a luxury. Soon enough, the government banned all types of recreation activities; we were



only allowed out for groceries, doctor visits, post office, and emergencies. We were told that the government would start issuing fines if laws were not followed. (Not a bad idea to be honest). I think it helped people understand the seriousness of the situation.

The groceries stores set up hand sanitizer and glove stations right away. As soon as you walk in there are signs asking you to put on gloves and grab a towel, sanitize it, and use it to wipe your cart down. Everyone obliges. Lucentiños went from joking around the week before to, still happy and social, but following the new basic protocols: keep your distance and wash your hands (not everyone was wearing masks right away).

Week 2: more people started wearing masks.

Week 3: almost everyone was wearing a mask (and gloves). A month in, it became socially acceptable to wear one and a social taboo to abstain. It's ironic to say, taking in the situation we are living through, but it's beautiful to see a community come together and do its part. I have grown to appreciate the essential workers even more. Not that I ever looked down on them, but just saw them, in their well-deserved spotlight. They work very hard. After they check out a customer, they sanitize their workplace. Always with a smile and compliment of “gracias, guapa, buen dia” I even left my wallet there one time (during Corona lockdown) and the employee of Mercadona chased me down to return it to me. Maybe it's small town hospitality but it could also be that quarantine is making us more empathetic.

March 23rd: Rays of hope

This week, president of Spain, Pedro Sanchez, announced that they will start to loosen restrictions. On April 27th, children will be allowed to go to parks and take walks during selected hours. Yay! As of right now, we still don't know when school opening up again. Were there ways to handle this situation better? Well the government sure got their fair part of berating from some citizens, but I think, in the end, most governments are trying their best. And I sincerely think Spain is. In the end, it's up to us to flatten the curve. Governments can list all the rules they want but if we don't follow protocol there will be no fast recovery. As of now, Spain seems to be slowly recovering (thanks to strict measures) giving us all hope to go back to a normal-ish life. Time can only tell.

I'm doing well and slowly learning to cope with isolation being far from family. Shout out to Zoom and Tik-Tok videos, the technological MVPs of this situation. It's great to see many people still enjoying themselves and finding creativity in the worst of times.



THOUGHTS FROM A MOTHER

Mandy Mehanna-Sugar
Boston, Massachussets

What weird times we are living in these days, aren't they?

Quarantined in our own homes trying to stay safe from something we can't see or feel.

Disinfecting everything that enters our homes, especially ourselves, to make sure we aren't contaminating anything or anyone around us.

Sometimes I find myself looking around and wondering if this is real life or if, somehow, I am going to wake up from this dream or what I would describe as more like a nightmare.

Let's take a step back and give you a little info on who I am.

My name is Mandy. I am Lebanese-American and my husband, Mario, is Lebanese. We have a daughter and a son is on his way in just a couple weeks.

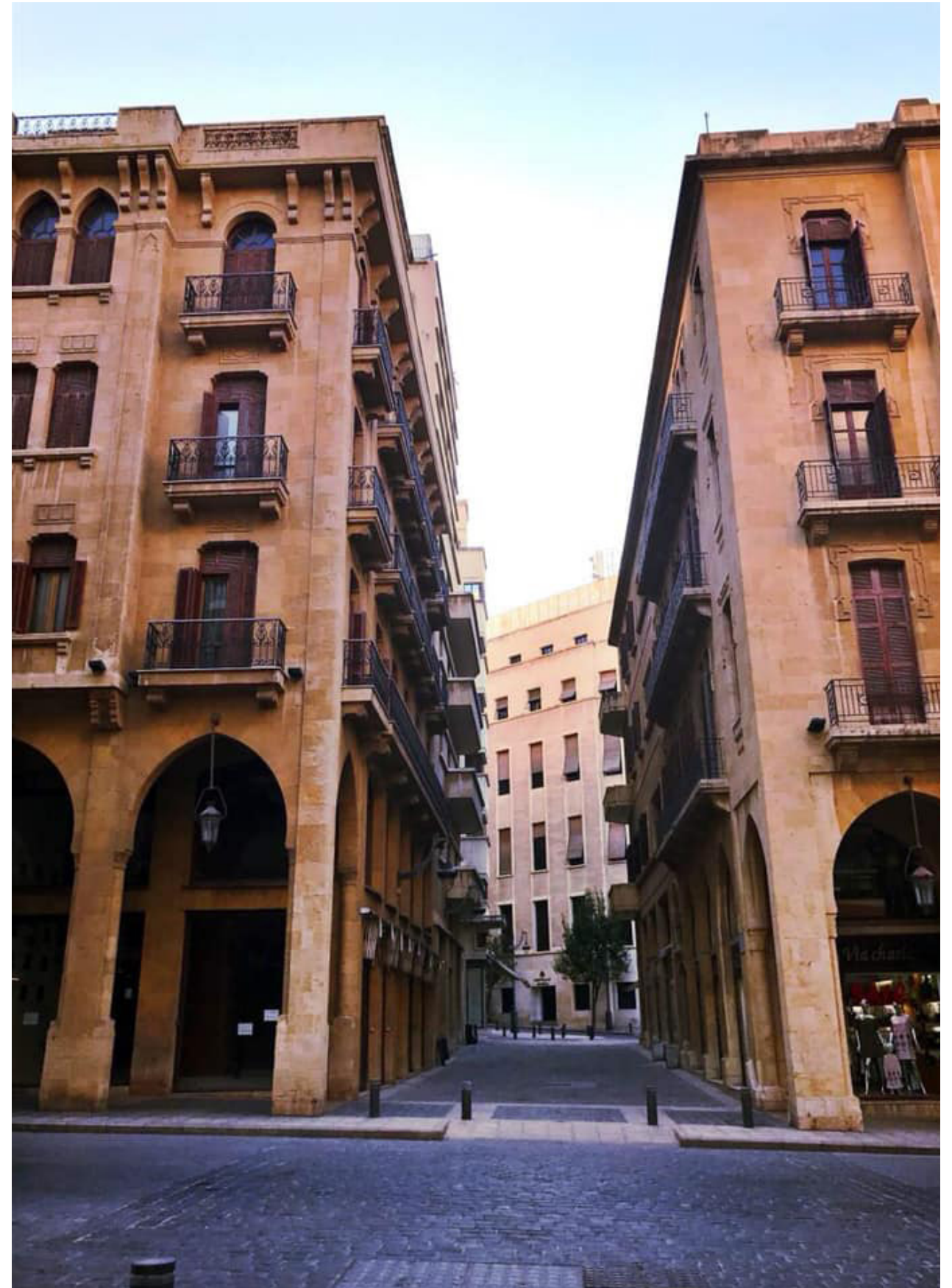
2020 has been super adventurous for us. Actually, it started in October 2019 when we were still living in Lebanon where a massive revolution started in Beirut. That was when Mario and I began to think about trying to see if maybe living in another country might be a better plan. 5:30am on October 15, 2019. I knew it was the perfect time to take my pregnancy test. I thought to myself if it came out negative again, maybe it just wasn't meant to be, and that maybe it was

time to take a break. 5:31am Positive. I'm pregnant again! This little Sugar family of ours was growing just like we wanted.

On October 18, I woke up at around 6:30am. Melody, then just 14 months old, woke up and it was time to start my day. I made her milk and we sat back in bed together. As she was drinking her bottle, I opened social media to scroll through and see what everyone was up to. It was then that I realized that my Lebanon had changed. Shit... I can't believe I am pregnant, and a revolution is happening.

The revolution had started due to major corruption, economic disasters, poverty and so much more. Burning tires, blocking roads, angry people all in the streets crying for change is just a very short and quick version of what was happening. At first, I thought to myself that it was about time people in this country got what they deserved and that politicians were finally paying for all the harm that they had done, but at the same time, I knew what violence has done to Lebanon, and I began to panic.

Mario and I began contemplating about leaving for a few months and seeing whether living in the United States might be a potential option for us for the future. We decided that if things hadn't changed for the better by February, that we would go to the States for a few months, pass the time, make sure we keep Melody safe, and just explore



our options and see... if maybe our kids may be happier or more at peace in the US, safer in way.

And so, we did. March 1st we were on a plane on our way to Boston ready to check out what kind of a life there could be for our family of four if we decided to settle there. I was six months pregnant, stressed to levels that cannot be explained, but ready to find peace even if it were just for a few months. Or so I thought.

We had heard of corona by then, we knew it was out there and many countries like China and Italy were suffering in major ways and that the virus was starting to spread like crazy. I thought that if it got to the United States, that it could be contained. But I was so wrong.

We got to Massachusetts, bunking with family for the time being thinking that we would spend some time there and then go to other states and visit more family and friends and see if any of these places seem like a place that we could call home. We were super excited and ready to explore, and we got about a week of fun and then it hit. Cases start rising and the numbers begin to escalate in ways I never thought possible and so the panic arises in the USA.

We start trying to stay home thinking that it shouldn't last too long but better safe than sorry. Just a couple weeks and it will pass, but no, we were wrong. Going to the supermarket was like fighting for dear life. People having to stand 6 feet apart and be masked to enter. Just getting the essentials you need on a daily basis was an adventure. People were just buying products in mass numbers to make sure that they would be good to go for the next who-knows-how-long leaving nothing for the rest of us.

I couldn't believe that toilet paper, disinfectant, and baby wipes were nonexistent. Finding diapers for Melody felt like an accomplishment and a celebration. Flour and frozen veggies and meat and chicken became like a treasure hunt. I kept thinking to myself, "is this for real? Is this really the world we are living in right now? Fighting tooth and nail to get what we need when it used to be a walk in the park?"



It's been 2 months now and we haven't moved from Massachusetts since airports are on lockdown all around the world, and even the thought of going into an airport is terrifying because who would take the risk unless it was completely necessary. We were thinking of finding a place to rent even if it's just for a little while because we can't keep invading these poor people's home. But try finding a place to rent when nobody wants to be in contact with strangers is like a needle in a haystack.

I have also had to make peace with the fact that I will be giving birth in a strange and unfamiliar hospital with doctors I don't know and knowing that I might actually have to do it all alone without Mario if the pandemic becomes worse. On top of that, the purest of panic that there might be someone infected walking down the halls in the hospital while I am there with the baby. Everything changed. It's like a bad thriller movie that just won't stop.

I strongly believe that the media is making it worse and that the panic could be way less if the media would just report things the way they truly are for once, but that is like hoping for a miracle that someone is going to pop up on TV and say to us that this was all a test and we are all fine and life can go back to normal.

It is truly crazy to think that we are living in a time that we disinfect everything we touch everything we buy everything that comes in the mail. We may even be opening the mail with gloves on in case the mail man was a carrier of this virus. We wear masks everywhere we go, and we look like surgeons. I sometimes think to myself that maybe I am overreacting I should just chill out but at the same time how can I take the risk and wing it? Can I even do that while being pregnant and having Melody in my arms every day?

Life has changed so much in such a short period of time. The way we live. We may or may not appreciate it. Spending quality time with family is a definite plus and the fact that this virus has made people all around the world stop and just look around and appreciate what it is we truly do have. But at the same time, it has made us fear each other and distance ourselves from everything and everyone to keep our own selves safe.

I do hope from the deepest part of my heart that somehow this will end, and life will find its way back to, in some ways, the way it was. Where we can be around each other and hug one another without fear, where worry is back to paying bills and waking up on time for work, words I never thought I would say. But this pandemic has given me the time to realize how short life truly can be and that living it to the max is all that we should do.

It made me also realize that I truly could not do any of this without Mario by my side. It made me see how much we are a team and how even in the worst of times we can find our way into our own version of happiness even if it's in a bedroom that we now share with our Melody. It made me look and truly see the purest of things like my daughter's contagious smile and just enjoy it while it is still innocent and full of joy.

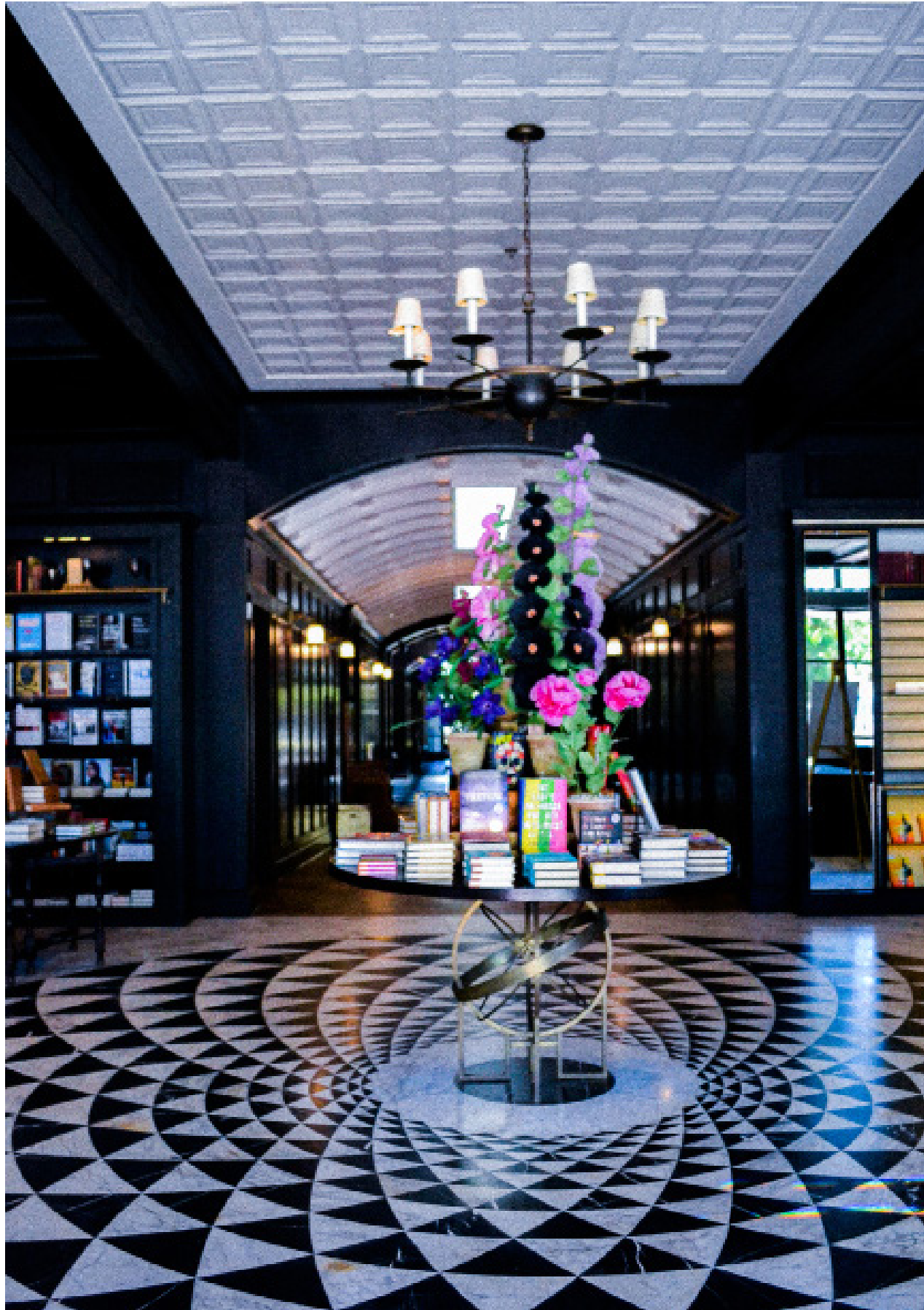
THOUGHTS FROM A PHOTOGRAPHER

Maria Rivero
Savannah, Georgia









THOUGHTS FROM AN OVERTHINKER

Michelle Assaad
Tampa, Florida

I keep thinking about Venezuela. About my grandmothers, both of whom sought asylum in lands that they never thought that they'd spend their old age in. I keep thinking about my maternal grandmother who would wake up in the early morning so that she could stand in line at El Excelsior, the supermarket in the Los Palos Grandes neighborhood of Caracas. She would wake up so early that the usually noisy streets, full of yelling and horns and birds, was silent save for the sound of the Avila slowly rising from its slumber. Yet, as asleep as the city sounded, when she got to El Excelsior, the line already snaked its way down the street. The people stood with red, sleepy eyes looking nowhere but straight ahead and thinking of nothing except maybe about the past and the fork in the road that led them to standing in line for milk and toilet paper at 4 in the morning. I keep remembering one story in particular. She told me that all the canned goods were gone but the fresh fruits and vegetables were left to rot and one day she found a small rat sleeping sweetly amongst the potatoes.

I keep thinking about Paris. Sitting in Café Lomi and being able to write page after page, looking up every once in a while, to watch people cross the Place Louis Baillot and then writing them into my novel because I was writing about my life and they had come into my life. I keep thinking about writing. I keep waking up at 5 in the morning and staring at my notebook and my sharpened pencils but the

words don't come. I keep making coffee and sitting in the sunshine. I keep reading books. I keep going for walks. I keep meditating. I keep counting the days since I last wrote anything of consequence and it feels like I'm losing myself to a web of nothingness. I feel like a dead weight without being able to spin my own web of words. I keep embroidering little flowers in the hope that a silent mind will eventually be filled by the words that I so desperately need to write.

I keep thinking about the way that things should be. Where I should be. He drove away before me and I caught up to him at the light. We mouthed goodbye and blew each other a kiss through secretly sad smiles. In the pit of my stomach sat the familiar feeling of things ending and in my throat was a knot and in that moment came the whisper of a story. I keep wondering what would have happened had he stayed. I keep thinking that this is a good story to write, but the story is still playing. And sometimes we look at each other like we're sorry for the way that things might have been. These are my favorite types of stories to write about.

I keep thinking about society and injustice and wealth. This is something that I always think about. I keep looking at my paycheck and I keep wondering why my life is worth so little. I keep reading the news and seeing how much a hospital stay is and I realize that my parents

don't have health insurance and my dad is an essential worker who works with his hands. The skin on his hands is thick and his nails are flat. I once tried to clean the grease out from underneath his nails, but I eventually had to give up because I think that it's a part of him now just as the soil under my mom's nails is a part of her and graphite is a part of me. I keep thinking about blue- and white-collar work and how this is only widening the divide because essential workers work with their hands and their bodies and they have to be exposed or else they starve. I keep thinking about the old man who works at Whole Foods and cleans the carts. I can tell that he's smiling even though he's wearing a mask. I hope that he can tell that I am smiling back even though I'm wearing a mask and I think that I look interestingly frightening. People are not insured or they're under insured and I keep wondering why people are fighting to make this vaccine and this treatment free but not all other things. I keep asking myself if I'm the only one who is making this connection. What is the difference between illnesses? Is it ever anyone's fault if they get sick? I really don't have an answer to that, but it is something that I keep thinking about.

I keep thinking about empty spaces. I take my camera everywhere I go because I want to record this for my grandchildren. Sometimes, I take a picture and I think that they're really going to like it. I can still hear all the chatter in the restaurants and the books shops that I love going to. I think that everything that ever happens lingers in place. I walked to Oxford Exchange and finally got a picture of an empty entrance, something I had wanted for years.

I keep thinking about Venezuela. And it really is no surprise that I keep thinking about Venezuela because, for me, all roads always lead to Caracas and if I follow the road in my mind just a little bit longer, I end up in the dirt road in El Hatillo. There's a snake in my path and I'm wearing little brown sandals and I know that I'm never coming back. On that road, I'm little and I have a dry cough and my parents are young and brave and my dad is holding my little brother and my mom has my little sister in her belly and they have no idea what's going to happen. All they knew right then was that they couldn't stay anymore. I keep thinking about this. I guess that I keep thinking about this because I keep wondering when it is that a person knows that it is time to move to a different place, and what it takes to force a person to flee everything that they're ever known.

I keep thinking about how reality is flexible, and humans are adaptable and how maybe I've already grown used to small groups and not seeing anyone for days at a time and being quiet and not being able to write anymore. I leave the house armed with sanitizer, two masks, and paper towels so that I don't have to touch anything. I get home and I throw my clothes in the washer and I scrub my hands and then I think about what to make for dinner but this is a thought that I am very tired of. I bought Anthony Bourdain's cookbook to help with this. Tonight I am making ratatouille. Tomorrow I am making Vichyssoise. I especially thought about Venezuela when we couldn't find chicken or eggs or flour in my neighborhood. Again, when I stood in the empty toilet paper aisle in Target. Again, when I found myself looking at a posted list of what was not available and what would be strictly rationed at the store. Again, when we went to three places to find flour and I finally gave up and bought cake mix to make banana bread. Again, when I stood in an empty canned goods aisle. And then again, when I found myself telling my roommate that maybe we should wake up early so that we could be the first in line at the supermarket.



THOUGHTS FROM AN ENVIRONMENTALIST

Nathalia Assaad
Lutz, Florida

At first, what seems another lifetime ago, I dismissed the coronavirus crisis as an exaggeration and I kept comparing it to other health problems that we have, like the air pollution that kills 4 million per year, or the influenza virus that despite having a vaccine and good treatments, kills thousands of people each year, every year. What I didn't know back then was that the rate of contagion of Covid-19 was very high and that the effect of it being so easily transmissible was that it made it an exponentially growing virus. Once I figured that out (not thanks to the US government), I understood the seriousness of the problem and decided to pay more attention to the experts.

So, what did I do?

I traveled to Mexico to visit my elderly parents. Yes, I know. Crazy. This trip had been planned already and my husband's visit had been canceled last year, so to cancel it again would have sent a bad message to my parents, like he didn't like them or something. I was between a rock and a hard place because, still in mid-march the crisis wasn't as serious as it later became so I thought: "if we use common sense and think scientifically, we should be fine and we won't take the disease with us to our 80-year-old parents; after all, millions of doctors treat very contagious patients every day and they don't get infected. Find out how they do it and copy their actions."

So that's what we did. We researched and researched and found out that soap disintegrated the virus' outer membrane, that alcohol had a similar effect, that surgical masks are useless unless you're already infected, that UV light destroys the virus, etc. Everything very scientific and very practical.

We set out to get alcohol, or hand-sanitizing gel, but of course we were too late to the party and we didn't find any.



Masks were also nowhere to be found but we found out that the dust masks for our shop projects were the perfect ones: the famous N-95s. The ones we are NOT supposed to be hoarding or buying because nurses and doctors needed them more. Also, I found some 70% isopropyl alcohol that I normally use for cleaning the mirrors, so I put the little bit that was left into a tiny spray bottle and hoped it would last long enough to get us to Mexico uncontaminated. We practiced with our masks, we learned what to do. We thought of every possible scenario. What to do, what not to do. So far, so good.

Once we left to the airport however, theory became practice and I found out that I learn theory quickly but am not very good at the practice. My husband had to keep reminding me not to touch my face, to spray alcohol every time we touched something (passport handed back to me, safety belts buckles, window screen). We saw with horror how the lady preparing my hot chocolate at the airport Buddy Brew didn't have a mask and was talking while making my drink. Normally I wouldn't even notice that. Paranoia starts setting in and we're not even out of Tampa! We hear someone sneeze or cough and look at each other telepathically saying: "Oh. My. God. There's the virus."

Once on the airplane we pray that no one will sit down next to us, but our prayers were not answered (of course they weren't. By whom? AT this point we are completely convinced that THERE IS NO GOD); luckily my next-seat neighbor had a mask but Moreb's neighbor didn't, so he gave her one of ours (we took extra dust masks for our parents and for us, just in case). 'We're down one mask', I think selfishly. Now self-preservation starts to set in. We're about to take off.

Once in Mexico things felt better as the atmosphere was less stressful but not devoid of information. People just seemed more relaxed. So, we went out for dinner, we visited a cenote, all the while taking tons of precautions. At this point we realize that the "relaxed" atmosphere is pure denial of what's happening, because the warnings are everywhere but people, including my parents, are dismissing them. We decide to do an intervention and by the third day there we conclude that we can't have these old people mingle with all those other irresponsible or misinformed folks.

They.
Will.
Get.
Sick.
And.
Die.

And it'll all be our fault, and my siblings will never forgive me for having killed our parents because of my irresponsibility. So, what do we do?

We lock them in. We never again let them out. Literally. After we left Mexico they actually stayed at the rental house where we'd been. All reservations had been cancelled for the foreseeable future and their apartment is tiny so it seemed like a good idea for us (siblings) to pay for them to stay in such a lovely place so that they wouldn't feel the temptation to wander outside. They had a pool, a garden, an oven (very important) and we found them an organic store that would deliver the food for them.

Perfect! Now we must train them. Easier said than done.

By then they had seen all the signs of the crisis but not quite grasped that it was real. Literally, at their doorstep. So, we had to show them articles, videos, documentaries about viruses, about Covid-19, how to dismiss fake news (they're very easy targets); we had several heated arguments where the generational gap became so evident that it was painful. We are now the parents and they are the teenagers who refuse to listen and rebel against the orders of not going out. But there was nothing that we could do. After we left, we simply hoped that they would listen to us and do the right thing if only so that we wouldn't be blamed for their demise. And listened they did! They're alive and well. Upon our return to Tampa it was decided that I make too many mistakes when I go out, so I should stay home while my husband tended to our business which, it turns out, is an essential one. With his obsessive-compulsive measures, he has been able to continue working with hardly ever coming in contact with anyone. So even though business is less than half of what it used to be, we are surviving. All we need is to cover our monthly costs, keep our employees working and we are happy. Because our overhead is low, it is not a difficult goal to achieve.

I am enjoying the quarantine. Maybe too much. I enjoy the new-found silence. So that is now my new point of anxiety. I'm proactively suffering the noise that will eventually come and I am secretly hoping that Covid-19 lingers a while longer. Maybe forever. But then I think of all the people that are suffering and dying. I'm OK because we can still buy food, pay our mortgage, etc. But what about the others? I am always saying that we must have consideration for others and here I am hoping that people will continue to die so that I can enjoy the silence and the birds. Not nice. But those are my feelings. I am grateful to Covid-19. I really am. If nothing else, it has showed (some of) us how vulnerable we are and how terrible the US capitalistic system is to our well-being. Maybe that'll change some people's minds about the system they defend so much. I realize the hypocrisy of my saying this since I have benefited much from this capitalistic system. But it's not so much the system that I criticize but the shape it has taken. The degree to which people have taken advantage of it. I believe that we have exploited the system to a degree that has become unsustainable, even criminal, and I now realize that economic growth for growth itself has ruined our society (by the exploitation of the lower tiers of our people) and our planet (by exploitation of our natural resources). I blame using marketing as a tool to obtain economic growth for growth itself. Damn marketing... Brainwashing people one advertisement at a time. From how to obtain happiness from a drink that'll kill everything in its path (including the drinker) to how the oil industry is trying to save the Planet. Brainwashing people to obtain things that they don't need with money that they don't have to impress people that don't matter. Where did I hear that?

I am not too far away from who I normally was; I don't buy shoes to fill in a void, or drink to drown my sorrows, or smoke to release anxiety or stress. In other words, I don't self-soothe, so I carry my worries, my anger, my sadness and my joy always on my sleeve. I live the realities of the world, I don't sugar-coat things, I like my news raw. I want to get to the bottom of things, not half-ass my knowledge. That in itself is painful. The truth is painful. And many people avoid me because of the way I see and say things. That has isolated me quite a bit since I was young and I don't mind it, so "isolation" to me is not such a novel concept; I've been living in a part-time isolation mode most of my life. This forced isolation actually releases me from the guilt I constantly live with of not being



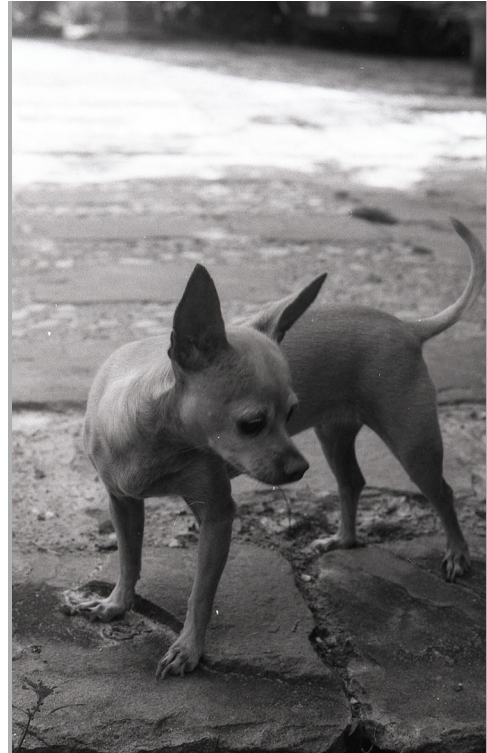
more socially active.

It's been going on for a few years now, but I have become even more aware that I am not compatible with my environment. The "American way", that positive-no-matter what attitude is not for me. I'm not sure at which point I started to dismiss Disney feel-good movies. I used to like them, and then I realized that they had become too much part of people's culture, blinding them, and that there was no real culture that characterized the American society. It was all make-believe. Cartoons. Plastic. Except for the natural beauty of this geographical area (what little "economic growth" has left over), I now realize that I have not been able to appreciate any other thing or trait this society has. And that realization is painful to me. I keep going back and forth between the thought of staying to fight and make things better or abandon all hope and move somewhere that is more compatible with my world viewpoint. Or rather, going somewhere where money isn't the only thing that matters, because that aspect of American life bothers me so much that it makes me unhinged. And that's the central point of the society I live in right now. Seeing the "American exceptionalism" melt away with this crisis has sealed its fate with me. Realizing that money really does matter more to Americans than life, is more than I can bear. And I realize that there are heroes out there doing the work that I could not do, but there are still too many people that I simply can't accept as my peers. Too selfish, too ignorant, too aggressive. Bullies. Do I fight them? Do I "give them their country back"? I feel like I don't really belong here, even though I earned my right to be a citizen of this country. I feel like a second-class citizen.

But to me, this coronavirus situation has been a piece of cake. I have fixed my native plant garden which was very unkept. I have

cleaned my house thoroughly which I hadn't done in a while. I have been taking advantage of the extra time to study more so that I get better grades than I would have under normal circumstances. My husband and I have started a vegetable garden which, we are determined, will survive this time around! The hardest part has been stepping "out of the shire" to realize that the same number of cars are still on the streets. I make my own graph everyday with the official Health Department data and I see the curve slowly creeping up instead of flattening. This is in line with what I see on the streets: people not really respecting the isolation measures, coming to our shop and not wearing masks, not respecting the 6-foot rule, a client actually coming to the shop only a few days after being released from the hospital with Covid-19.

Having said that, going to Whole Foods has been quite the shocking experience. Seeing those shelves half-empty is quite a sight to behold and wearing my N95 mask (and seeing others wear their own masks) is not something I have ever experienced. I realize that my quarantine has been "privileged". I have plenty of room to roam in my house and many things to do, so I'm never bored out of my mind like some other people have been. While under normal circumstances my husband and I work together all day and then come home and are together again (except for my hours at school), at the moment we are separated during the mornings and reunited in the afternoons, so it's not much different to what we are used to. And we are not ever in each other's way because there's plenty of space and we have different things to work on. Nothing about this quarantine has been challenging to me. What's difficult is imagining the "normalcy" that was before and might come again. Where people keep ignoring the effect that they have on everything else and keep doing things wrong.



Where people keep ignoring the effect that they have on everything else and keep doing things wrong. To me having people locked up like this is ideal. They can't ruin anything. Letting them out is hearing them again revving their Ram trucks. Seeing them again with their single-use plastic cups, grocery bags, and straws. I want them locked up. Forever.





THOUGHTS FROM A PHD CANDIDATE

Sina Azodi
Washington, D.C.

The ongoing crisis has greatly impacted my life in a sense that I am finding it difficult to locate a suitable environment to work and study. Over the years, I have gotten used to working from libraries and cafes. The closures have forced me to look for alternative spots such as yards and very few places that have remained open. In that context, I also find it difficult to concentrate, usually ending up procrastinating on the internet. I have found that most of my peers also go through the same problem, but for me it is unique in a sense that I don't work from home. For me, home means watching movies and staying busy doing nothing. The experience has nonetheless been instructive in a sense that we take many things for granted. While six months ago nobody imagined that going to a Starbucks or a happy hour at the local restaurant would be a privilege, many including myself are seeking the status quo ante. That means that we as a society, have for long taken many things for granted.

I have also come to learn that people during the times of crisis find ways to take solace in each other's company. As I have been taking walks in the Georgetown district of the nation's capital, I see that people walk together, drink wine, play sports in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure. I believe this demonstrates the importance of socializing for human survival. I am further concerned with the post-Corona political and economic environment, as the pandemic will change our way of life as we know it.

THOUGHTS FROM A PLANNER

Valeria Gonzalez
Houston, Texas



Planners, lists and calendars get me excited and hold me accountable in most areas of my life. I don't even type into my "Reminders" or "Notes" applications suggested by Apple, Inc. I handwrite tasks, chores and more into a little notebook every single day. Each December, when Christmas shopping madness takes over, I get myself a little treat- my new-year planner.

My 2020 planner was simple with a Kate Spade flair- beige all over and black polka dots and in the smack-down center in a tasteful cursive, "Planner," is indicated in the front cover in a gold font. As soon as I sat in my office, I wrote anything and everything I knew needed to be done that day: update excel spreadsheets, cook the sweet potatoes we bought a few days ago, teach my Wednesday Pilates class at 6 p.m. Even if I did something and it was not in my planner, I would write it in after. And the satisfaction of crossing each item off was exhilarating.

Fast-forward to March 17, 2020. I was sent home and told there was no return date in sight. It was my second anniversary and Jesus ran to Target very thoughtfully to celebrate with frozen pizza and ice-cream since our restaurant plans were cancelled. I had to cross that one off my planner list without our date at Postino's actually ever happening. The first few days were promising: I kept up with my weekly goals that I set every Sunday: Not errands, but goals I have for myself each week to be a better person. Wake up on time without snoozing, meditate for 7 minutes every day, and do my best to not feed into work anxiety. I wore work-out clothes, made breakfast a few days a week and brushed my hair. I kept my planner up to date somewhat. I was still crossing things off. Somewhere in the middle between weeks 3 and 4 I was mentally swamped. Swamped with work, swamped with my emotions and all of it didn't fit in our 820 square foot apartment.

If we both have phone meetings at the same time, one of us has to run out of our kitchen-island makeshift office and into the bedroom so that we can each try and work in some silence. Some days my work hours extended into the night. The newish job made me anxious and not having physical access to my team worried me and made me doubt my success. I haven't hugged my family or friends and if you are an affectionate person you know this is a gap that can be filled with nothing at all. Not even banana bread.

I no longer wake up early. I hope I don't totally oversleep and stumble out of bed at 8 am in pajamas, run to my laptop, turn it on and run to make some tea. The days run their course and I pray to God I am doing alright in this job that I have not yet mastered. I had a meltdown once. I have made banana bread twice.

I have learned things about my husband- he curses and is quite vocal on phone meetings (in corona-free reality I'm the one that usually speaks out of turn), he is obsessed with playing Halo with his friends online and might curse even more when he gets killed in the game than with anything work related, but he has a great attitude most of the time even when he is stressed with work and his graduate school work, and he is really, really smart. I have known for a long time that he is better at waking up on time and he manages to still do it and make us breakfast most days of the week. It is because of him that I have managed to still have a semi-positive attitude each day. We don't have time to argue and make up anymore. Not that we argued often, but the circumstances nowadays do not really permit for much "space" in all senses of the word. We have played Scrabble, binged-watched The Great British Baking Show and gone on long walks around the neighborhood. We cook, we clean, and check on our feelings together. This is our new normal.

Our social interactions have been limited, but I am lucky to teach Pilates virtually, have Zoom calls with friends and even Loteria parties online. I call my parents twice a day and when we visit them, we elbow-bump. It feels alien. I really crave my mom's and dad's hugs. I hate to say it but I don't have the extra time so many people talk about. I work much more since the industry I work in is under much stress. I constantly think about what we are eating next. And when I am not working, I look for ways to calm my brain. Usually involves a cooking show. And then it is time to sleep. And check Instagram and the Corona Virus map and statistics. It is exhausting.



I know I am lucky, and I am well aware that I am safe in my home. I have a job, I have a supportive partner who is also hardworking and healthy. But I also know I am stressed. My hair is falling at an unreal rate. I am tired most of the time. I am sad about vacations I have looked forward to that have been cancelled. I am human. But I am trying. And a lot of people all over the world are trying. Trying to be productive, kind, compassionate, successful, available, careful, realistic, positive, energetic, busy, responsible, loving. And our brains are adapting but they are also aware of the new dangers outside our walls. Aware of the panic the media and all communications throw at us. We are flooded with alarming and contradicting facts. It is a strange time for our bodies and our minds. I am a swamp some days- mushy, dense and inundated. But other days I am made aware of the cloth that holds me together. My husband, my parents and brother, my grandparents and family and my friends. Not the things I own, not the clothes I wore, not the superficial things I had in mind before I was forced to focus on only the things that I need to survive. I am thankful for this awakening. While this pandemic wasn't in my planner and I won't have the satisfaction of crossing it off, this is an experience that I hope I will never forget. I hope that I remember to always pay attention to what is important and never take anything for granted.