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"You Can't Go Home Again"...Until You Do

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March 22, 2020

I wake up tense, feeling exhausted despite having slept eight hours. I immediately reach for my phone to check the BBC's live reporting of the new, highly contagious virus spreading across the world. Eleven days ago, when the virus was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, I was in New York City for a meeting on the UN Commission of the Status of Women, a plan I'd made months in advance. The event was canceled, but my plane tickets were non-refundable, so I traveled there anyway and treated it as a vacation and an excuse to visit friends. I rode the subway, went to Mass at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, ate in restaurants, took the last tour of the UN building before they were called off, and saw *The Lion King* on Broadway days before the theaters went dark. As soon as I returned to my home in Dubuque, Iowa, the college I teach at told us that our spring break would be extended for a week as we moved our classes online...and New York Mayor Bill di Blasio announced that everyone in his city should consider themselves as having been exposed to the virus.

And so, I quarantined, wondering if the cold I'd picked up in the Big Apple really was just a cold. But today, while my physical health is fine, I have new problems. New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo has issued a stay-at-home order for all, with the strictest rules for elders. But back in my original hometown of Buffalo, NY, my two parents – aged 78 and 80 – have not been following the rules.

“Don't worry about us,” my mother says on the phone. “We're all right.”

“How are you going to get your groceries?” I ask. “People over 75 are not supposed to leave the house at all.”

“If we have to pay a fine, we'll pay a fine,” my father says.

My shoulders clench. My parents are Trump-adoring, Fox News-watching despisers of Andrew Cuomo. Later, when my father admits to me that he and my mother went to Mass at their parish and received communion – a Mass held against the orders of Buffalo's Catholic Diocese, well after public worship services had been officially called off – the knots in my stomach tighten further as one question races through my mind: what if I never see them again?

March 24, 2020

I've spent two days writing emails and talking on the phone to friends. In general I'm an external processor of thoughts and feelings, someone who can't make any decision without asking at least five people for advice. As an only child, I have no siblings to consult. Friends in Buffalo have offered to bring my parents food and other basic necessities, such as the ever-more-precious commodity of toilet paper. But they can't oblige my parents to stay home and follow the rules. “You cannot parent your parents,” my ex-partner's mother, still a dear friend and confidant, asserts. “Put them in God's hands,” my spiritual director says. “Surely they're doing the best they can. We all are.”

But alas, the only words that offer any comfort are those of my therapist, a Lacanian psychoanalyst and self-proclaimed cynic. “Every choice we make is an error,” he says. We’re speaking by phone; I’m sitting in my car outside a mechanic’s garage, where I’ve just taken it for a minor but necessary repair if I’m about to embark on a twelve-hour drive from Dubuque to Buffalo. “Take comfort in that. No matter what decision you make, it will be a mistake. But you still have to choose. It’s called being a grownup.”

I burst into tears. The thought of driving to New York State – global epicenter of the pandemic – fills me with the real fear that if I go there, I might never make it back to Iowa alive. I’ve read reports of young, healthy people with no previous medical history fighting for their lives on ventilators. I think of the Polish-American cemetery in Buffalo where my grandparents and other deceased relatives are buried. There’s a set of three graves where two of my father’s siblings who died young – one at 33, the other at 45 – are buried. The third grave has remained empty. It’s unclear what dead body will be placed there, as my parents just recently – with my involvement – reserved a different spot for themselves. A chilling thought comes over me: could that spot beside the bodies of my deceased aunt and uncle be meant for me? I dismiss it immediately. But nothing has ever been as clear. I need to go to Buffalo. I need to do all I can to try and keep my parents alive.

When I call my mother and ask her if she’s okay with me visiting for an indefinite period of time, she sounds relieved. “Please bring food,” she says. As much as the grocery store has come to frighten me – I picture shelves and shelves of food covered with germs – I head over to stock up.

March 26, 2020

It’s 7 a.m. I’m throwing an array of items – mostly books – into a suitcase. I have no idea how long I’ll be in Buffalo, but I nervously toss in one summer dress, just in case. I load the car and then check my phone. There’s a text from my friend Kalissa in reply to my message sent last night about my plan to go to Buffalo. “That is the most badass thing I’ve heard all year,” she writes.

I text my therapist and let him know I’m terrified. “There are few defining moments in our histories,” he replies. “This is one of them. Go ahead. Face your fear head on. Life will prevail.”

And so, I do. And as soon as I get on the road, I feel relieved.

I’ve made the drive between Dubuque and Buffalo before, and I can do it in a day. What frightens me most is the thought of all the surfaces I will need to touch along the way: the button I’ll press to go through the toll barriers on Interstate 90 in Indiana, the gas pump I’ll need to handle when refueling in Ohio. Previously a highly tactile person, I’ve gone for two and a half weeks without embracing anyone – my last hug was with my friend Ruth in New York – and it seems like eons ago. Now, any surface I might touch

has become an object of fear; the entire human world has become a dangerous place, jarring, what the Germans called *unheimlich* – which we translate as “uncanny,” but which literally means “unhomey.”

The world has become unhomey while most people have been ordered to stay at home. It may be my imagination, but it seems that a disproportionate number of the songs I’m hearing on the car radio – from Adele’s “Hello” to Lynard Skynard’s “Sweet Home Alabama” – prominently contain the word “home.” I wonder if the DJs in states with stay-at-home orders ran some kind of software scan for the word “home” and chose their playlists accordingly.

And then, I see the spray-painted letters on a billboard: “THANK YOU, TRUCKERS.”

Indeed, other than truckers, there aren’t many vehicles on the road. And in that moment I am filled with gratitude to those who are out working so that others might stay – or go – home.

March 27, 2020

“Is it okay if I eat some oatmeal?” my father asks me. It’s his attempt to inject some levity into what might otherwise be a tense situation. As soon as I reached my childhood home – at 10 p.m. when both of my parents were asleep – I saw that while my mother’s car was in its usual spot, my father’s was parked in the street. I stealthily parked my own car behind it, ran to the house, let myself in, pulled his car keys from the cupboard, moved his car into the driveway, pulled mine in behind him, and then proceeded to confiscate and hide all of the keys.

“You can have them back when you prove to me that you’ll follow the rules,” I tell my father when he realizes what I’d done. “I’m no longer just your daughter. I’m your jailer.”

“Anyone can be a jailer,” he retorts. “The question is, are you a good jailer?”

Turning it into a joke mitigates the aggressive impact. “You won’t believe what Jeannine did,” my mother chuckles to her friends. “She has us under lock and key.”

However, keeping them imprisoned means that I, too, must remain imprisoned. My only outings are for absolute necessities: to the grocery store, which I do enter with a mask and gloves, to the bank (which we drive through), to my parents’ tax accountant (I accompany them to make sure they will not go inside). But for me, it is impossible even to take a walk around the block. My mother suffers from severe separation anxiety; she has difficulty being alone or letting loved ones out of her sight. And so, as I struggle to adjust to online teaching while trying to dodge my father’s unwanted political commentaries and calm my mother’s fears, I get more and more frustrated.

But then, one Saturday morning as she is on the phone with a support group she attends, I manage to take off and walk to a nearby park with a lovely stream and waterfall. The spring air and green grass are incredibly refreshing as, for a few brief hours, I am able to feel like an autonomous adult again, free from having to hold my tongue during my father's pro-Trump diatribes and assuage my mother's anxious desire to know where I am or what I am doing. I begin to seek these walks wherever I can; they become my sustenance, my way of coping with the stress of feeling like a 36-year-old child trying to protect my parents from a changed world.

April 14, 2020

Easter Sunday. Normally this day is one of the most important in Buffalo, a heavily Catholic, Polish-American city known for its Holy Thursday pilgrimages to several churches, its food-buying frenzy at a traditional European-style market, its raucous celebration of Dyngus Day – a kind of reverse Mardi Gras celebrated on the Monday after Easter with a parade, polka music and plenty of beer.

None of that is happening this year. My mother and I watch a Mass livestreamed from a Dominican convent. I make risotto, which we share along with my mother's kielbasa. The day is quiet and low key, but it is the first Easter I've spent with my parents in five years.

Later, I take a walk by the waterfall in the park and post pictures to Facebook for friends and acquaintances to see. "The most beautiful house of worship is the earth itself," I write. Back home I mention to my mother how vivid the tulips' colors seem. She smiles, agreeing that she has never quite noticed spring's flowers as clearly as she has this year.

April 26, 2020

I'm lying in bed, waiting for the results of a much-dreaded test. After a long wait, COVID-19 tests have been made available in the county for anyone who believes they need one. For a week now I have been ill; I've canceled all my meetings with students; I've spent my afternoons lying in bed binge-watching *Breaking Bad*. My symptoms are strange – fatigue, nausea. After a while I decided to make the call to the county, get an appointment to drive through the testing center, and take the test. Now I get the result: negative. It's probably just one of the usual springtime viruses making its rounds.

Extreme social distancing is getting old. It's the end of April but there's still snow on the ground, so gathering with friends outdoors is not possible. For a month now I have seen no one other than my parents. My friends are all overwhelmed with their own lives. I cope by baking cookies and delivering them to the neighbors, or getting my father to turn off Fox News and watch Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. I do not listen to President Trump's daily briefings. When my mother writes what to me is a sickeningly pro-Trump letter to the local paper, I faithfully type and submit it for her, silently

praying it does not get printed. I cope by reading, by writing, by phoning friends when they – many of whom are now raising and homeschooling children while working – can find the time to talk. But I am tired. I want to go – where? Not back to Dubuque. Maybe to Toronto, where I lived for seven years as a graduate student? To Uruguay, where I did a Fulbright grant in 2006? To Poland, which I’ve visited eight times? I laugh at the thought. For the first time, I am filled with an eerie awareness that, at their core, all places in the world are the same. There is nowhere to run, no place for me to go. Just one world that we’re all in – not in the same boat, as the internet memes say, but on different kinds of boats in the same polluted water.

Sunday, May 10, 2020

It is Mothers’ Day, the first one in years that I am actually spending in my own mother’s company. Spring has come at last; it seems that every tree in Buffalo is in bloom. My mother may be a Trump voter, but she’s a generous Trump voter: for Mothers’ Day she has bought a huge tray of geranium plants, which she suggests we take to one of Buffalo’s most impoverished inner-city neighborhoods – the neighborhood her parents came from, the neighborhood she still claims as her home. I enthusiastically go along with the plan. We set the flowers on the ground near a bus stop with a sign - “Happy Mothers’ Day – Take One!” attached.

We then park on the street and watch what happens next. Within minutes, a passerby is stopping, lifting up one of the pots. My mother smiles. It makes her day to do this, to share what she has with others. This is the mother who raised me, who brought me up to share and generously give. How such a mother could bring herself to not only vote for, but enthusiastically support and adulate Trump, is beyond me. He seems to point toward the past she misses, the time when her parents lived in this neighborhood – what she sees as simpler times. Though forty years her junior, I do understand her yearning. I wonder if, a few decades down the line, I will feel as nostalgic for these awful pandemic days in the same way that she feels nostalgic for her childhood in the 1950’s. Alas, I fear it is so.

May 30, 2020

It seems the world is exploding. Five days have passed since George Floyd was killed. Now, his image can be seen everywhere from London to Syria. Black Lives Matter protests have erupted everywhere, including in Buffalo, and my feet are itching to stand up and march.

But I don’t. It’s been a month since I gave my parents their keys back, and we’ve settled into a mutual agreement: they won’t make any nonessential outings if I don’t. I cannot risk exposing them to the virus by marching in a crowd.

Instead, I write. I draft an essay for a Buffalo-based blog I’ve contributed to for years, stating that it is time for the city to have a harsh reckoning with its legacy of

racism. I attend a meeting of alumnae of my extremely white-dominated all-girls' Catholic high school alma mater, which is finally reaching the point of deciding that maybe most its students are not getting the greatest education if they are surrounded by others who look like them, while a few are left to be simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible.

Meanwhile, my parents bemoan the protests. "How can this be allowed to go on – rioters taking over a precinct?" my father says. "It's not my country anymore."

"No," I respond, rolling my eyes. "It's mine now."

June 4, 2020

It's my 37th birthday. I have now been with my parents for over two months. I remember when I was in my early twenties, navigating those initial post-college years. I told myself that I would never live with my parents for more than three months, give or take a little, and I am determined to stick to that. I have never managed to escape their influence, their closeness – even when I lived on the other side of the world. Without siblings I have no one to turn to for immediate help in managing their affairs, in arranging their care. How I yearn for it to be otherwise. I would have liked to be married by now, to have a companion in this responsibility, but it has not happened. I have many friends, but none close enough to assume a co-caregiver role; they have families of their own. The buck stops with me. It is the reality I have to live with.

I celebrate my birthday by drinking wine and eating takeout in a park with my cousin. The Black Lives Matter marches are still occurring daily in Buffalo, and I yearn to be a part of them, but I don't go. However, I've now been able to have some socially distanced one-on-one meetups with various friends outside. The situation with my parents has calmed down for the moment; it seems the spring weather has eased the tension on their end as well. We invite my aunt over for a picnic in the yard; another day, my mother's old friend Liz comes over. For the time being, the numbers of new cases in the Western New York area have been going down. I take my mother into a grocery store for the first time since I came home. She is initially shocked – all the arrangements of food look different from what she remembers. She finds her mask uncomfortable and pens a letter to the editor thanking the grocery and other essential workers who wear masks all day, even when in a hot or otherwise unpleasant environment. Unlike the letters she wrote praising Trump, this one gets published.

July 4, 2020

Independence Day. My bags are mostly packed. After three and a half months with my parents, it is time for me to leave my childhood home and return to my adult one.

I've always been ambivalent about celebrating the fourth of July. Particularly since the seemingly endless post-9/11 wars, I have found it hard to drum up a strong sense of patriotism. This year, seeing the way our leadership has handled the COVID-19 virus, is no different. And yet, I love my country, just as I love my family. It is in the setting of family and community – no matter how flawed – that most of us first learn to love.

For the fourth of July, I ask my parents to join me on an outing to Niagara Falls. During my time with them we've taken several excursions to nearby parks, but the Falls are what I most want to see. Growing up forty minutes away from this wonder of the world, I often took it for granted. I also took for granted the ability to travel to Canada whenever I pleased, an ability lost now that the border has been shut. Now, as I walk along the river and admire the rapids, as I stand at the edge of the foamy American Falls, as I look across at the crowds on the Canadian side of the border, I am filled with immense gratitude for the beautiful place I am from, for my childhood home that still stands, for my parents who, despite their age and health problems and what to me are some abhorrent political views, still love me more than anything.

That night, the neighbors have an outdoor party and shoot off a fireworks display that rivals the professional ones our town is not doing this year. My father and I watch them from our side of the fence, just as we watched the town's display from my aunt's yard when I was small.

July 6, 2020

Today my childhood bedroom is cleaned up; my car is packed. I hug my parents in the driveway. My mother anoints both my face and my car with holy water, as she does before every departure I make. When she steps away, my father says something that chills me. "Well, I hope I see you again."

"You will," I assure him. He always seems to be more resilient than he thinks.

But I am keenly aware that one day, I will not see him again. And I have no idea if I will ever repeat this experience of staying with my parents for three months.

After pulling out of the driveway, I stop at my old hairdresser to get a haircut. On the high end of any list of dangerous activities, it is something I have not done since February and want to do before the new academic year starts. My hairdresser cuts my long hair to chin length, as I imagine this will be my only haircut for a year at least.

And then, I return to my car, wind through suburban streets to the highway, and begin the daylong journey back to Dubuque.

Epilogue: February 21, 2021

By the time you read this, over a year will have passed since the pandemic was declared. When I returned to Iowa in July, cases here were on the rise; at one point in the late summer we were declared as the worst place per capita for the virus. “I just can’t get enough of this virus,” I joked. On the contrary, I tried to be cautious, only meeting friends outdoors and at a distance. When the school year began, my university was officially holding class indoors in person, but I got permission to teach outdoors in the warm weather and online when it rained. These precautions were not enough; in the middle of September I did test positive for the virus. Upon getting my result I was terrified, wondering just how sick I would become, nervously asking colleagues to cover my classes and checking my blood oxygen levels every day. Thankfully, fatigue and some gastrointestinal issues were my only symptoms, and in two weeks I was back to normal. At Christmas, after a negative test, I visited my parents for a week. We played cards, made pierogi, and drove around admiring Christmas lights. I returned to begin my second semester, teaching fully online.

Several elders I know have begun to access the vaccine, but my parents are refusing it. My mother listens to radio programs that bombastically speak of its potential dangers and reads online conspiracy theories about Bill Gates trying to implant a chip. My father, though much more scientifically minded, chooses to follow where she leads. Nearly a year after I made my trek to Buffalo to “save” them, the words of my friends are echoing in my head: “You can’t parent your parents.” Last year, I laughed at that claim and retorted, “Watch me.”

But now I have accepted that I cannot impose my will upon them. After letting her hair grow out in a way that resembled a Polish flag – white over red – my mother recently returned to the beauty salon to get her hair dyed again. They have resumed eating in indoor restaurants. With a sigh, I accept their choices even as I disapprove. It would not have been possible to do that last year at this time. Before even thinking of letting them go, I had to hold onto them as tightly as I could.