

Sick Before This

written by Guest Contributor | April 22, 2020



With corona at our door if not already among us, my housemates and I take a frantic and far from complete tally of who social distancing doesn't mean staying away from. Typically, over a dozen of us live under our roof – yes, we're already going against the CDC guideline on gatherings – plus a person who has a history with us and comes by every day to eat with us and help keep the household running, and then people's partners, though not the relationships that only recently started, and outside visits only from the one who hasn't yet finessed work from home status.

I try to be honest about the ways this exercise does and doesn't translate to "family". I am not equally close to everyone within these walls, a reality we tend to attribute to a lack of time spent together. And I'm reminded, as people voice their fears for their parents and grandparents, that my most uncomplicated biological ties extend only as far as my brothers, neither any older than me. This feeling eventually fades; I find myself with people to worry about, even if they're not exactly kin. It leaves behind something a little harder: the understanding that so many losses long before these were easily preventable, too.

So I skip the surprise stage, but it's not that I don't care. My dating profiles often include the description "good in a crisis." This competency spin is the closest I can come to confessing trauma. Having to do what we can to get through right now is a familiar feeling to me. These days, it's much easier to extend my list of what needs to be done. I join mutual aid groups on Facebook and pour over spreadsheets; I don't speak up on Zoom calls when folks wonder aloud at all the volunteers coming out of the woodwork. The things I faced before didn't look like this, I want to explain. It still hurts, to hear the word "homelessness", to be helping strangers when I couldn't do anything for my mom. But I can direct most of my attention to the immediate threat.

And I'm so glad to have something to direct my attention towards. The month before this hit I was lethargic, struggling to surface from a depression that had me slipping out of my body for spans and not especially eager to return to it. Now I have adrenaline to ride. Building other mechanisms for making my way through has been a long-term project, but for the moment it's nice to

have found an easy way out. It's a dramatic but blink-and-you'll-miss-it shift, and I find myself wondering how many people will even notice and what they'll make of it when they do, whether they'll grasp that adjusting easily now comes from having been hurt before or count only present pain as real.

Even though they've chosen to participate in a project that's one step away from a commune, in moments like this I see my housemates as more or less normal. So I'm feeling somewhat disconnected from them even before I get exposed to a suspected corona case and have to retreat to my room.

I was offered options besides my room. Coronavirus has coincided with several shifts to our house's geography and prompted others. The guy who moved into the house a week after me goes back to Turkey, my trans friend who was subletting gets his own place, a cancer survivor comes. We dig up our backyard to rid it of its bamboo once and for all – the satisfaction of getting something physical done wards off one housemate's depression, but the rapid changes make another who struggles with anxiety realize he can't stand to live here. The final touches to the landscaping are rushed: one of our members is driving down to Florida to be with her aging parents for the crisis, and her partner, who spear – shovel? – headed the project goes with her. When the woman who's recovering from a brain tumor and has spent a long time searching for somewhere bearable to live moved out, I pondered taking her place upstairs – it's lofted and delightfully shaped and much bigger than my room – but ultimately decided any friends worth having shouldn't mind visiting me somewhere smaller. When the recession hits, I breathe a sigh of relief that I didn't double my rent by taking up residence there.

All this to say there are multiple spaces for me to stay in for my quarantine. And this has always been a house where rooms can be created – my room, its main door a literal hole in the wall, only exists because of a dinner conversation. My housemate Emily and I speculate on whether we could build a widow's walk leading from my window to the balcony, and the discussion is only part facetious. If I decide that preparing food is a priority, there's the third-floor kitchen. Only one person is left up there, so it's relatively safe. When I descend to the second floor, which more people inhabit, to get to the balcony, I can mark the route I travel from my room to these sites in blue tape on the floor, to remind people to breathe a little less, to keep their hands away from the railings, when they tread there. Or I can displace the girl in the neighboring room and the fledgling work-from-homers from the office and take over a suite, my territory expanding to fill three rooms plus a bathroom and that balcony.

But I feel safest in my room, even though it's six feet by nine feet, about the size of a parking space, and my ambitions for it have yet to materialize. No space-saving bed or hammock here, and I haven't gone about painting the walls charcoal so everything against their background will pop – they call it a jewel box room on Instagram, but really it's a compromise with my high school self on the black bedroom we've wanted ever since visiting theater spaces. I have mustered some small pleasures here: the ivy tendrils growing just under the window, the trans flag I use as a curtain, the trunk I brought

back home with me from Portland after my mom's funeral. But I haven't hung up a single poster and I stack my books on the floor. Then there are the practical problems that remain unsolved: my partner has to bring me up a fresh outfit every morning, because I've been keeping my clothes in his closet.

Being confined here brings further inadequacies into sharp relief. I haven't swept once since I moved in almost two years ago, the bedding that accumulated when my friend was subletting weeks ago hasn't been dealt with yet, I've been careless about disposing of needles, letting them collect loose on a shelf. These are all things I told myself I'd deal with eventually. I'm realizing too late the importance of staying on top of the small things so you don't have to deal with them on top of everything else when the shit hits the fan, in case those who take care of you can't help without risking infection.

One day when this is all over, it will be history. At moments it feels too soon to think like that – not all of us will make it through this to tell the stories of what it was like later. Still, I find it comforting to think of how maybe one day I'll find myself clearing off some surface, and I'll explain to someone younger than me that as an autistic person once unused to having a room of their own I haven't always been this tidy. This is a lesson I learned from that time of sickness, I'll say: make sure wherever you are is somewhere you're comfortable being for a while.

For now, I kick myself for not doing more when I was well. One of the corners smells mildew-y – my sense of smell returning is a good sign, I tell myself – so I burn incense until I'm strong enough to do some straightening up. I get the extra bedding out of there and delight in having bed-folded-up-in-front-of-trunk-table as a new sitting position I can shift into break up the monotony. My friend who's experienced in medical isolation matters warns me against losing my distance vision if I spend too long here. I come up with hacks: leave your mask dangling from the door knob so you remember to slip it on before heading out, stick your socks in between the radiator slats so they're warm when you put them on. I wake up early, long before anyone else, and in some pain, and there is no way for me to go downstairs to get the medicine I need. I tell myself it's another step of prep I missed, but it's a reminder that no matter how much I figure out, there will always be these moments of helplessness, that figuring out how to handle them is as valuable as anything else I could do to get ready.

It's not that I'm not close to many of the people I live with. It's just those feelings of affection normally don't translate into physical contact. I share a bed with my partner four nights a week and I welcome touch with the developmentally disabled person I care for here, but they are the exceptions. With everyone else, just sitting near them is enough, and sometimes more than enough. Six feet away won't be so much of a stretch.

When people talk about how they're holding up under isolation, I can't shake the sense that this trial they're having to endure is my life more or less. A

few tweaks: normally I take the metro two or three times a week for therapy and sign language class and maybe to visit a friend, I meet with the kids I tutor in their home instead of over video chat. I know what people might really be talking about is the fear and uncertainty. But I can't claim to miss normal. For political reasons, yes, but I can't pretend they're not also personal.

Maybe by the time this period ends, I insist to myself, we'll all have gotten really good at video chat. We'll write letters again. We'll have to learn how to mourn without being able to hold one another. I tell myself some of these are skills I might have useful insight for folks on. But I can't help thinking and feeling that if the ways I am are most applicable in a time of disaster, they aren't too adaptive at all. Evolution allowed autistic people like me to survive precisely for moments like this. But this will be over, eventually.

When I was little, young enough to put my shoes on the rack and crawl through the plastic playscape tunnels at fast food restaurants, my twin brother and I would play a game: go as long as you can without letting anyone touch you. Sometimes the other kids would figure out we were avoiding them and give chase, but usually people just assumed we wanted to be left alone, and they weren't exactly wrong.

Our house meets over dinner – I phone in – most nights to discuss updates to the virus protocol. I wince at discussions of the celebrations we'll have when I emerge. "Please don't make a big deal of it," I plead. People want confirmation about what symptoms exactly will prompt us to urge them to hunker down – they want to develop at least a fever or cough before taking such a measure. I get it, I really do. Intellectually, I mean. Some people get comfort from other people's proximate presence. In times like these, we need all the comfort we can get.

I tell myself I deserve comfort now, too. I think of my mom calling me a martyr. Maybe that's what I'm doing here and now. Sometimes I find myself missing the people I live with: when they play that game where you draw pictures and caption them and leave the finished product outside my door, an artifact of hilarity, when someone starts sobbing and I can't tell from the voices alone who it is or how heavy. I pick at the worry driving me to stay in my room: is it that I don't want over a dozen people in general exposed to the virus because that would overwhelm the medical system, or these dozen people specifically because I care about them and for once in my life I can take an action to protect the people I care about?

But it's more of an instinct: people are dangerous. The house is a bomb that could go off, has been one for always but especially now, but here I can take shelter and sort through spreadsheets of strangers names instead of stepping out the door, putting my arm around someone's shoulder, saying "I'm here."



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