

Group Affect When You Are Alone

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Intro

When I began work on this project I was daunted by the scope. I had never written anything like this before in my life and had serious doubts about my ability to complete a project of this length. The anthropological work I had consumed up to that point had been dense in theory and research. It had been crafted thoughtfully and from a lot of experience. I felt like I had none of that. I didn't even know where to start. Then we read a piece called *Worlding Refrains* by Kathleen Stewart. It completely reshaped my view of what anthropological work could be. The way she was able to weave her hyper personalized narrative with larger anthropological issues gave me the inspiration I needed to complete this project. Without it, I'm not sure what I would've done. So in the vein of Kathleen Stewart's work I decided to write about a period of time that I have still not been able to get over in my own life. I hope you enjoy it.

Beginnings

It was spring when the pandemic started. I remember that vividly. After months of that beautifully harsh New York City winter the world had opened up once again. The brownish gray snow had finally retreated into the storm drains. Leaves returned to the trees. My hands would no longer crack when I left them out in the cold too long. Lighters would work on the first try instead of the fifth and won't leave your thumb feeling like you rubbed it across sandpaper. The signature summer stench of the city is creeping back. That familiar combination of the trash left out on the street mixed with piss, body odor, and god knows what else. By August I'll hate this smell more than anything in the world but right now I love it. As much as I care for the winter it really wears out its welcome by the middle of February. The sense of wonder goes away after the holidays and you're just left with the brutal cold. I really need this spring and I'm gonna cherish it.

Televisions tell a different story though. Ever since January news of a potentially deadly virus has littered just about every news outlet. Stories about town wide lockdowns in China drum up a foreboding sense of approaching disaster. In the beginning this was easily ignorable. In fact we've all been through this before. Remember Ebola? A disease so viscerally terrifying and contagious it harkened back to the bubonic plague. When two nurses contracted it on American soil it felt like it was all over. The beginning of the end. The great American empire would crumble in on itself while its citizens barricaded themselves in their homes and cut off all contact with anyone outside of their immediate family. All from a disease I first heard about on Vine.

But none of that happened. Once again America found a way to make a story about the incredibly depleted medical resources of West African countries like Liberia, and Guinea into a paranoid screed about the end of the Western World. This has become a pattern for America. See an issue that was caused in part by the vicious imperial politics of either the U.S or its allies in Europe and extrapolate it into a potentially existential threat, not to the people of that region but to us. Then in three to six months when it turns out that the issue was largely contained to the region it started in, move on to a new existential threat. It doesn't matter if it's an American kid joining ISIS, North Korea doing a missile test, Iran possibly having Nukes? Anything that stokes that quintessential American paranoia. That despite our comfortable position atop the hierarchy of nations we're just one misstep away from total collapse. A collapse that will allow all the

enemies we've acquired over the years to laugh at our demise and loot our corpse. The little Richard Nixon that lives in all of our heads. Subtly directing you to give in to the delusion. To lock yourself in your home with nothing but tape recorders and a trusted confidant only to babble on about how the walls are closing in. Everyone's out to get you.

I won't be fooled. As a "savvy media consumer" I've convinced myself that I can see through this. The one thing I've learned about American life is that it stops for nothing. Wars, disease, riots, mass shootings, nothing has been enough to get people to stop going into work. And this disease isn't even happening in America. In fact, it seems like one of the rare disasters America seemingly has nothing to do with. Plus this is my last spring in High School. Not only did I finally have a social circle I felt happy and comfortable in but I'd also finally been released from the odd experiment that was Manhattan Hunter Science High School. No more metal detectors or handing my phone to a security guard in the morning. I am a Senior now. And being a senior at Hunter meant one thing. You took all your classes at Hunter college instead of the MLK building. It was the reason everyone in that high school went there. Suffer through the 3 years of windowless classrooms and ugly uniforms and we'll send you to college. Apparently that was such an appealing offer that we were one of the most selective schools in the city as my friend once explained to me through bouts of wheezing laughter. Imagine that, kids lining up to get into a school that makes them show up 20 minutes early to go through TSA in the morning. I mean Lagaardia's just across the street.

Senior year was great while it lasted. Showing up to take an intro to Psych class wasn't fun but the hours of ping pong I could play in the game room afterwards sure was. But I need to get to what this paper is really about. Things began shutting down in March. I remember when I left class on a friday afternoon and there was a palpable sense that people didn't know if we we're going to return on monday. I hung out with some friends of mine that saturday. I remember riding an almost completely empty subway up to Washington Heights during the middle of the day. I think that's when I knew it was real. Sure the crowd on the A train starts thinning out around 125th but I had gotten on at 34th and it was basically empty. By the time I got up to 181st there might have been 2 other people in my train car. They sat as far away from me as possible. The next day we got the email that we were not supposed to go to school.

In the beginning I was admittedly a little excited. It's very privileged and voyeuristic to say but this was a legitimately new experience for me. Something had become so serious that it had paused the everyday movements of life. Something had finally stopped us from going to work. I didn't think it was possible. Just about everything was up in the air. Absolutely no one knew what was going to happen. And all I had to do was sit in my home. I immediately reverted back to a state of adolescence that I hadn't realized I missed so much. For what seemed like my entire high school experience I tried to force myself into every social situation I could in an effort to get better at simply being around people. To try to get rid of that constant foreboding sense that I was one wrong step from fucking up any social interaction. Now I not only didn't have to have those social interactions, I was actively told to stay away from them. And as a result I dived into the familiar and much easier social dynamics of the Xbox live party chat.

That first month was a bliss. I spent what seemed like all day in front of my monitor talking with people I'd known my whole life and people I hadn't spoken to since I was 13. All

the stakes of any given social interaction were completely out the window. I couldn't fuck up any of these relationships if I tried. Where were they gonna go? What else are you gonna do? This is basically the only thing that exists anymore. The flashing blue, green, and red lights on your screen. It's your entire world now. That game you always wanted to try but never got around to. Play it now. The tv series you wanted to watch but it had like 9 seasons and you were already busy with work and school. Watch it now. That movie you had your eye on but could never convince your friends to see with you in theaters because it just looked too strange. Why not watch it now? Consume to your heart's content. The worlds ending anyway, why not spend your money?

With this context I can't fully conclude whether my fall back down to earth about 2 months into the lockdown was the result of me in particular or the people I was speaking to on a day to day basis. But I do know that the precarity of the position we were all in was finally beginning to dawn on me. The magical haze I'd been lulled into by the screens that littered my new existence didn't feel novel anymore. It felt like a never ending transitory phase. I also now had to confront the real possibility my mom might not have a job very soon. As an after school coordinator her job relied heavily on in person dynamics. Its entire existence revolves around the market of parents who can't pick their kids up right when school ends. What happens to a job like that when kids don't have to be picked up from anywhere? I remember she was able to continue some of the classes she had set up for the kids over zoom but it just felt wrong. I could hear her whenever I walked to the kitchen trying to get kids to pay attention and stay in front of their screens so they were visible. I knew this couldn't last long. Public schools are notoriously underfunded and I had a feeling if anyone was first to go in the inevitable wave of layoffs that would come from the lockdowns it would be the director of a program that didn't even run during school hours.

By the third month my little Nixon had fully emerged. The combination of constant screen time, physical isolation and the weed pen I'd begun using almost every morning had turned me into two distinct styles of person. The first one was an empty vessel sitting in front of a monitor for hours on end only temporarily interrupted with an almost zombie-like pilgrimage to the fridge to get some water for the near constant headache I had. My body felt like it was permanently covered with a layer of sweat that wouldn't go away no matter how many times I showered. I spent most of my time waiting for the sun to go down in the hopes that it would bring me one step closer to this whole thing being over. The second person was a hyper pretentious and unendingly paranoid child that spent the hours of 11 to 3 in the morning rambling about pure nonsense to people over a microphone. My topics of fascination ranged from reddit conspiracy theories about how the CIA had orchestrated the pandemic and blamed it on China in order to start a war to screeds about how all my childhood video games had been ruined by incessant nerfs and patches that were meant to balance all playstyles but instead made them laborious slogs. The walls were closing in. All my friends were tired of me. I could feel it. I had gotten everything I wanted and I was miserable. Remember what they did to the Kennedy boy Richard. Blew his brains out in front of his wife. And they loved him. What will they do to you?

Bubble Boy

Thank god for basketball. Just when I thought the world would never return to normal the NBA announced they'd be completing their season in Disneyland. A proposition equal parts hysterical and fascinating. I had fallen out of favor with watching sports before the pandemic but now I really had nothing else to do. The NBA also had something I had been yearning for ever since the pandemic started. Some sense of normalcy. And LeBron James. There has been no stage of my life separate from LeBron James. As long as I've been conscious he's been one of the best basketball players in the world along with a real litmus test of my maturity. When I was a kid and LeBron was in the midst of his villain arc in Miami I postured like I was above being a fan of his. He had betrayed his hometown team in Cleveland to play with two all stars after all. He'd taken the easy way out. I didn't understand front office politics or the fact that Cleveland had never built a good enough team around him for him to win. I simply thought he, like every good thing that comes out of Cleveland, had abandoned it for the greener pastures of a coastal climate.

But it was now 2020. LeBron had proven himself not only as the greatest player to ever touch a basketball but also as the mythological hero of Akron, Ohio. The title he won with Cleveland in 2016 after coming back to the team was like the plot of a corny sports movie you watch with your dad when you're 8 and even his biggest detractors had to admit he was at least one of the two best players of all time. This combined with the fact that he won this title alongside my favorite player at the time Kyrie Irving made me fully come around into being a LeBron truther. His title run in the 2020 Disney bubble is seen as highly fraudulent by many but I see it a different way. It was a rare moment of continuity in a time where everything was up in the air. Sure, this pandemic has broken through everything else in our world. It caused millions of deaths, crashed economies, and caused mass digital psychosis. But it couldn't keep LeBron James out of the NBA finals.

An Inlet in New York

It's strange how difficult to recall the actual timeline of the lockdown is for me now. In my head I've almost perfectly mapped out a set of little day or week long memories that I use to stitch together just what I was doing during this era. When I think back I can rationalize what was happening in the world by remembering where I was and what I was doing. But upon actually looking at the real timeline of lockdown I realize that my memories have melded together and created a completely incomprehensible set of word associations and dates that only vaguely resemble what the internet tells me was actually going on. For instance I remembered this NBA Bubble taking place right at the end of my last year in High School when the virus was really at its apex. I distinctly remember being in the city watching it in my mom's living room. But when I look up the actual dates it tells me it happened over the Summer and ended in October of 2020. In my shoddily constructed memory of the past there was no way this thing was on for that long and in that period of time but now I'm just forced to accept that the thing I thought I remembered so vividly has been completely rearranged in my brain for reasons I can't even begin to understand.

Anyway during this time I would've left the city and been in a small town in upstate New York called Inlet. The towns called that because, you guessed it, it's built around an inlet. When I

say built around an Inlet I don't mean that it was originally constructed around an inlet and then expanded into something larger I mean that it is literally and currently constructed around an Inlet. The actual town is what would convert to about 3 or 4 city blocks worth of space. I can't even call it your prototypical small town because it's just too small to be a small town. It's like an extended roadstop. A little beacon of mild consumer goods for people whose houses are just a little too far from the next closest town, Old Forge, to drive there to pick up groceries.

My family, my moms side that is, has a pretty long relationship with Inlet, New York. I've heard a bunch of vague stories about some old relative coming from Norway and building some houses in the woods there. He might have worked for Con Edison or something like that. It's one of those family stories that you've heard enough to have some idea of why we come here most summers but not enough to have any concrete relationship to the town or the land. But what I know for sure is whoever this person was, he must have been pretty wealthy because he ended up constructing three houses, a boathouse, and a tennis court all in this patch of the woods.

Today most of this stuff is pretty decrepit and distributed between the disbrite branches of the family based on who was doing the best I'd assume. The crumbling boathouse with a concave ceiling belongs to the family in the middle house which also happens to be the nicest of the three houses. All I know about them is they were an older couple with enough of a familial relationship to us that we'd have to go say hi to them maybe once or twice every time we're up there but never really hung out with them. Next are the Schulbergs who live in what I'd call the second nicest house. I have much more of a relationship with them given that my mom and the patriarch of the family, Peter, were cousins growing up. Then there's my mom, my uncle, and my step uncle who share the last home.

I've always had very contradictory feelings about this place. I remember enjoying it when I was little. I attended the camp they ran in town that gave kids baseball, tennis, and swimming lessons. I remember having a great time with baseball and tennis but basically refusing to ever go swimming. The lake water was always freezing and since I didn't actually know how to swim I didn't get to just fuck around like I did while we played baseball or tennis. But as I aged out of the camp and aged into being a bratty teenager I began dreading coming up here for a couple reasons. For one the house had no wifi. As a kid I made this work by just watching the same Home Alone 2 tape over and over again but by the time I was 14 I was spending an unhealthy amount of time online and couldn't bear to be apart from an xbox for a day let alone 2 weeks. There also just wasn't much for me to do anymore. Without the camp I had no way to meet or hang out with people so I'd end up just reading old books that were littered around the house and asking my mom or aunt to take me to Old Forge. Not that there was much to do there either but at least it was a little adventure.

This brings me to 2020. I don't remember what prompted it but my mom decided we were gonna stay up there for longer than normal this year. About 2 months to be exact. While I had misgivings about this at first my mom promised I'd enjoy it more then last time for a number of reasons. For one, we'd have wifi this time. At this point there was still some debate about whether schools would be opening up in the fall and my mom had to prepare an after school schedule in case they did. Therefore she needed the internet. But this alone didn't really convince

me I'd like it. At this point I had actual friends in the city and freedom of movement. Going up there I'd yet again be stuck in this little area without a car. To fix this we decided I'd get a job.

Employment and Free Food

I felt good about this suggestion. I'd had a job the previous summer as well when I was 16 and it was great. Granted the actual job was a pretty bog standard camp counselor gig and I was making well under minimum wage, but I didn't really care. I had my own money. It was an addictive feeling. I didn't have to ask for things anymore or scourge through my dad's weird quarter jar when I wanted stuff. I could just buy it. And I did. I burned through that money basically as I earned it. When that summer ended I was back to square one. But now the seal was broken. I kept working through senior year of high school. At first I'd just help out on days where someone called out of my mom's work and she needed staff but it got to the point where I was there almost everyday after class. It felt good to have money in high school. That along with the fact that I had finally cultivated some beard stubble on my face made me feel like I was a full formed adult. I had even learned how to save some money. Then of course the virus hit and I was back at square one. I didn't have to ask for things due to my savings but as the months went by I started to realize that in order to sustain the habits I'd picked up when I first started making money I'd have to make some more..

The job I ended up getting in Inlet was at the local motel called the Woods Inn. In a lot of ways it felt like the first real job I'd ever had. Camp counseling is fine work but it can feel kind of adolescent. You mostly work with kids your same age and the actual labor involved feels very minimal. This job wasn't that. There were definitely a good deal of people working there who were around my age but there was an equal number of real adults working there as well. I also had two separate roles at this job. One was as a housekeeper and the other was as a dishwasher. Out of the two the workload as a housekeeper was much more manageable and I could wear headphones while working. But I preferred the dishwashing shifts for two reasons. For one they fed me. I remember after my first shift when they offered me food I picked one of the cheapest items on the menu. I didn't want to create more work for the kitchen staff and was very cautious about pushing the limits of this job too far and getting fired. But as time went on I crept further and further up the menu. At a certain point I decided to just try my luck and ordered the most expensive thing on the menu, a Pasta with lobster and some sort of garlic sauce. For this one I asked the main chef directly expecting to be laughed at but he didn't even miss a beat. 10 minutes later my pasta was ready.

The second part of the dishwashing shifts I loved were the walks back home. The nice thing about a small town is when 11 or 12 o'clock at night rolls around the whole place becomes a ghost town. I assume this is a no shit kind of observation for people who don't live in huge metropolitan areas but I really had never experienced this before. A whole town where nothing is open and seemingly no one is around. The only noise you'd hear at that point in the night were the occasional cars that went by along with the cicadas and crickets that created a persistent background noise to whatever music I listened to in my headphones. After my shifts ended I would take off the plastic apron and rain pants that I put over whatever I was wearing to protect me from the splash of the dishwasher and stroll through the empty town. I created a habit of stopping by a bench near a little marina and rolling a joint to walk with the rest of the way home.

It felt weird to do something that would be a flagrant offense during the middle of the day so openly but I never had a problem. It was bliss.

Precarity and Suburbia

On the flip side of this was the experience my uncle was having. Most of the time my mom and aunt would coordinate times to come up to Inlet that would overlap slightly, but leave enough time for my aunt and uncle to have time to themselves. As much as they might've loved me, they are a childless couple who certainly wanted to not deal with a hyperactive kid for their whole vacation, at least in the past. I was always in awe of them in my youth. My uncle was a former architect who quit his job to open a studio with my aunt where they made this weird but beautiful kind of geometric art. I never really understood it but apparently it all involved a lot of calculation and measurements, stuff that I didn't understand then and still don't. This wasn't new for my uncle who had been hand crafting very intricate things since he was young. In his late teen years he won multiple model yacht races where he hand crafted little electric boats. He was even flown to Durban, South Africa in his youth to compete in one of these competitions. All this to say he was your ideal child of an upper middle class New York family. He was conventionally successful but also artistic and an intellectual.

By the time covid rolled around though his days of architecture or art making were over. He had gotten incredibly sick around 2014 or 2015 and his condition was progressively getting worse. From what I've been told it started as a side effect of him not treating his diabetes correctly but I've never really had the balls to ask. What difference would it make now the damage is done. I'd just be picking at an old scab. This illness derailed the studio venture with my aunt and basically forced her to have to take care of him for the past 6 or 7 years. Definitely not what two successful people in their mid 40s wanted out of the second half of their lives. I like to wonder what they'd be like today if they didn't have the illness to deal with. Would the studio have worked out? Would he have gone back to architecture? What would my relationship with him have been? Would he have just been another older member of my family that I was too intimidated by to have a real relationship with?

There's a certain guilt I can't get past when I write about them. I feel like I'm airing out dirty laundry for a school paper. I was up visiting them the other day and was once again presented with how real a situation both of them face. When I write about it I feel like I'm abstracting their experience, contextualizing it into a little depersonalized narrative that I can selfishly use to complete a project. My aunt and I spoke about Covid when we were waiting at the train station. We talked about how she didn't have to commute for work anymore due to covid and how that helped her take care of my uncle. I wonder if she would approve of what I wrote, if I'll have to change it later because of the embarrassment. I wonder how Kathleen Stewart's son thinks of her writing or if he's ever read it. She mentions his struggles with addiction throughout *Worlding Refrains*. Not in a judgmental way mind you, but she writes about it all the same. Did she have a right to do that? Do I have a right to do this? It's too late now though I don't know what else I can write at this point.

My aunt can be a similarly intimidating figure though not on the surface. She's a bubbly and fun person to be around. But she also had lived a life by the time she was my age that I

couldn't imagine. Not especially traumatic from what I've heard but with so much moving and upheaval I don't know how she handled it. She was born in Korea in the late 50s to a Korean mother and an American, maybe, father. By the time she was 7 or 8 she was adopted by a German family and lived there for the next couple years. Then after that she was taken in by her birth mother once again in Hawaii where she spent the rest of her teenage years. After that, as if she hadn't been moved around enough, she went to Pratt in New York for art school. All of this bouncing around left her knowing 3 languages by the time she was 20. She also performed in her high school drama club in Hawaii and somewhere along the line learned to sing while also playing the ukulele and piano. She was such an impressive person, in fact, that one of my moms aunts was apparently shocked that she agreed to marry my uncle.

So these are the people I found myself with for that month. My mom, aunt and uncle in a tiny upstate New York town. It was a tense time not just in the house but in the little world that surrounded it as well. When we went upstate the Black Lives Matter protests had just begun in cities across the country which meant that the subsequent news broadcasts were informing the Inlet residents about the Fallujah like state every American city had descended into. The stereotype of a deeply deranged outer borough or upstate New York resident that had been ingrained in me while living in the city was now potentially all around me. I heard stories of Long Island parents who would shell out hundreds of dollars on Ubers just to not let their kids ride the subway or Westchester residents who wouldn't leave their cars while driving through the city. I always attributed that to the suburban psychosis that begins to develop when you live in a largely risk averse homogenous community for most of your life. But actually coming face to face with these people and speaking to them paints a different picture.

I remember having a conversation with a woman in the local bakery about what was going on in the city. I don't even know how it came up but she mentioned that she had wanted to take her family, who were visiting out of state, to the city but was too afraid of riots to go now. I really couldn't imagine that. I mean I understood she'd have a different view of the city than I did but I couldn't imagine not following through on what must have been a couple month long planning process because of what was on your tv. But in the same breath how could she have known different. Even the ostensibly pro-protest cable news networks just couldn't help themselves from showing boarded up Whole Foods and trash strewn on the street. I mean when something is conveyed to you on the same medium and with the same level of gravitas as the devastation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan how can you not take it seriously. What did I really expect? Where was she supposed to get accurate information about the "real" state of the city? How many of the protests were in parts of the city they probably wouldn't have gone to anyway? And what about me? How was I any different? All the information I had about people like her who didn't live in large metropolitan cities was mediated through my screens and the stories of the people I knew? I don't mean this to be a, oh we all just have to come together and talk, type of revelation. It's not that. It's more a reflection on how I expect people to act. What would be my preferred opinion for this woman to have. That the Tv was lying to her? I ended up just politely nodding then leaving with my donut. I didn't know what to say.

I continued to kind of dissociate while I was there. I'd work for 5 to 6 days a week and on my days off I'd kind of awkwardly mill about the house until my mom or aunt gave me some yard work to do. I didn't leave the house much unless it was to work for fear of catching

something and infecting my uncle. I don't really know where this fear came from because Inlet as a whole barely had any Covid cases and if they did they were definitely passing through the hotel I was working in. The reality is I didn't wanna go out. You can only go down to the ice cream shop or sit on the beach for so long before you realize that you need to go home, even if it's just a day or two.

I can't remember what excuse I used but I was able to convince my mom I needed to go to the city for a weekend. I think she could tell I was going a little stir crazy. But the real reason I went was to pick up more weed. When the summer started I brought what I thought would be enough to hold me over for two months at least. But I didn't plan for how slowly time would move in Inlet and as a result I had burned through my bag in just under a month. Pot had become a crutch for me in the city but now it was like a reward. It was the little treat I'd give myself after each shift. I knew without it that I wouldn't be able to get through them.

Re-up

The city was exactly what I was hoping for at that moment. It wasn't anywhere near as busy and colorful as it had been pre pandemic but it did offer me the freedom of movement that I didn't have in Inlet. And my friends seemed to all be there. But the city I was coming back to wasn't the same one I left. There was a noticeable tension in the air. I remember walking down 7th avenue, a street littered with the big commercial stores like Best Buy and Bed Bath and Beyond, only to see wood barricades in front of or replacing the glass windows of the stores. This usually bustling commercial avenue was almost empty and nobody was cycling in and out of the store. But this state of affairs would only be temporary. These stores wouldn't stay closed or empty for long. Now when you walk down 7th avenue people are once again patronizing these stores and moving up and down the avenue. The real lasting change that came from the political unrest of this summer was the police presence, especially in the subways.

Growing up there was always an unspoken rule, at least for me, about what subway stops you actually needed to pay to get into. If there was one of the booth things with an operator inside it the proper thing to do was pay the toll. Even if you could hop over the turnstile and be out of sight before the operator noticed it you'd still feel kind of guilty willfully ignoring the person whose job it is to make sure you don't do that. It doesn't matter if the operator probably sees at least 10 people do that a day. But guilt only gets you so far. I'm sure most people don't even feel this guilt when they hop. Why should they, the operator more than likely doesn't care. That's where the cops come in. In previous years you'd only really see cops on the subway in the most populated stations. Grand central, Times Square, Union Square, Harlem 125th, those types of places. But now they were everywhere. It felt like any station you saw that had no police presence was an anomaly. I remember being on the A train once again going up to my friend's apartment. That same A train that four months ago had about 5 people in my car tops was now filled with 3 police officers that would go back and forth between the cars as the subway moved from stop to stop. At 125th they finally got off and the train went back to normal for the last couple stops. But when I got off at 181st and walked through the exit I saw 2 more police officers in full uniform standing right by the turnstile.

If I were to pinpoint one definitive change to the city caused by Covid it would be this. After nationwide protests against the immense and unchecked power cops have on city streets caused by the broad daylight murder of black man, the police presence on those city streets rose dramatically. To this day that police presence has remained. It's pretty hard to ride the subway without seeing a cop or two now. About 3 months ago now I saw, on that same A train, a cop with an anti-terror decal on the back of his uniform. Not in Grand Central, where most New Yorkers have gotten pretty used to seeing heavily armed guys in army fatigues, not near the new Freedom Tower, the Empire State building, or even Penn Station/MSG. An anti-terror cop, whatever that means, on the A train going to Washington Heights and Dyckman. Neighborhoods that I'm almost sure no person who wants to commit terrorism would even know about let alone target in an attack. But there he was. Sitting on the bench like just another person you're riding the train with. I wonder if he stopped any terrorism.

Hudson Yards

I almost forgot one other change in the city that affected me deeply. This one was much easier to miss for most people compared to the cops in the subway but it non the less affected a good deal of lives. This change was the construction project entitled Hudson Yards that started just before the pandemic and was finished right before it started. It was a massive effort to turn a little used part of the city into a sort of fusion between an upscale shopping and living area. A newer Saks fifth avenue if you will. This project included a number of park areas along with a mall and a bunch of giant residential buildings. There were also a couple strange structures that accompanied this project. Some of them were built into the parks while others just stood on their own. It was all done to create another bustling and economically lively part of the city. But its opening was permanently stunted by the pandemic. The wealthy people who were supposed to patronize the mall full of upscale brands and live in the residential buildings could no longer do either of those things. The whole thing had to be shut down and as a result sat unused during the pandemic. The real poison pill in this whole situation was the fact that the original plan for this area was to build rent stabilized or otherwise affordable housing for lower income New Yorkers.

At the time I had very little idea that any of this was going on despite Hudson Yards being very close to my moms apartment. There was nothing there to do. But during this trip I discovered it. I was walking along the Highline, an old above ground train line running from Gansevoort St, to 34th and 8th that was converted into a sort of urban garden. The first thing I noticed about Hudson Yards were the protruding apartment complexes with mostly darkened windows. They were such large buildings that it seemed crazy to me that I'd never really noticed them before. As I descended into the neighborhood, if you could call it that, I found a little park area in between 2 residential buildings and the recently constructed mall, which was closed, that led into the Hudson Yards subway station. In this little park was a large bronze honeycomb-like structure with ramps and stairs lining its insides. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why it was there. I later learned that the structure was called the Vessel and it had opened up in 2019. In the following 2 years 4 people committed suicide jumping off it. It was then closed to the public in July of 2021.

I don't know if the evil aura I associate with Hudson Yards was there the first day I visited but It was definitely there when I returned. I've also returned many times since. Something about it keeps drawing me back. It's become a staple of my late night walks around the neighborhood. The funny thing is it began to grow on me. Once the mall reopened I started perusing the stores every once and a while. It feels like it's not advisable to buy anything in a mall these days when you know you can get whatever you'd want in the mall for cheaper online. But it's still fun to browse through a place that seems stuck in time even if you know you can't buy anything. The real customer base for this mall is tourists from what I found. When travel opened back up in the city I'd often find myself surrounded by tourists moving through this mall. It was a fun little game for me to try to identify the language of each passing conversation I heard. But the fact still remains this place wasn't really built for anyone here. It doesn't matter how nice the parks that surround this area are or how creatively they illuminate it for the holidays. Whenever you walk through there you just think about those empty apartments looming above you. Most of which no one has ever lived in in their 5 to 6 years of existence.

Back to the Inlet

As you can tell I've gotten off track. In order to wrap up my Inlet thoughts I'll just say this. After my visit to the city I went back up to Inlet. In this next month my aunt and uncle left and came back while my mom and I stayed upstate. I did much of the same things I was doing before. Working, pacing, and watching television. The only brief moment of conflict I remember is my mom leaving me alone for a weekend. Under normal circumstances I probably would've been fine with this but under this circumstance I was not. I was about to run out of my supply of the other vice I'd picked up during the pandemic, nicotine. In one of the more embarrassing little episodes of my life I tried to buy cigarettes with no ID at the local gas station. In the city it's pretty easy to just walk into a random deli, ask to buy some age restricted product, and then at the mention of ID come up with some excuse like, "Shit I left it in my car", only to walk out of the store and never return. Up here it felt very different. I remember walking up to the counter and on the request for ID I just kinda sheepishly tilted my head down and walked out. When august was coming to an end my job offered me free room and board with them to continue working up there. I could take my zoom classes there while working and most importantly continue to be around people on a day to day basis, an option school was not giving me with an online curriculum. It was a pretty great deal. But I thought about that exchange in the gas station and decided to go with my mom back to the city.

College

That would prove to be a terrible decision. When I returned to the city most of my friends left. They're schools we're opening. This was expected though and enough of my friends weren't going to college or were taking classes online to make sure I wasn't completely alone. The problem arose in my lack of work. In the two months back I decided to just focus on school and not distract myself by also looking for work. But as those two months passed I realized I was once again draining my bank account without putting anything back in. I decided to look for work. This was a struggle. The job at the Woods Inn had come from an Indeed application so that was the website I used in this search. Since my resume was already attached to my account I would just send out 5 applications a day and hope for the best. I think in 3 months I got maybe 2

interviews. I don't know if it was the quality of jobs I was applying for or the severe schedule limits I had due to my course load but I just couldn't find work for the life of me.

I spent the next 7 months once again doing basically nothing. I spoke earlier about how your memory warps as time progresses and events are rearranged from their original timeline to fit in your head. This warped memory is the only way I can truly engage with this period of time. I do hope I'm not alone in that experience. The political fervor that broke out over the summer of 2020 was a long time coming. The increasingly militarized police of the urban centers of this country had been getting away with murder for years. This combined with a sudden almost universal precarity enforced on the population from an unprecedented disease made it inevitable. The explosion of protests, riots, and violent suppression of these protests by the police was bound to happen. It was only amplified by a Trump administration that had essentially entered its last and most brutal phase of political action. I remember stories of unmarked vans grabbing protestors off the street and constant threats from the White House to call in the national guard. It was a time that radicalized, whatever that means, a lot of people. I remember a lot of distinctly political discussions with a lot of my apolitical friends. It seemed like something had to happen here, something had to change dramatically. The inherent contradictions of American life had to be resolved or at least eased dramatically in some way. There was no way we could ever return to some sense of normalcy after this.

Then Joe Biden got elected. At first this seemed almost triumphant. People banged pots and pans outside my window in Manhattan. Wherever you went online people were either rejoicing in victory or laughing at what remained of the Trump Coalition trying to scramble for votes. The older members of my family were particularly ecstatic. I didn't care for Joe Biden but I will admit that it was nice to see some comeuppance for the Trump administration. For years it felt like he could just bend reality to his will. He could just say and do whatever he wanted and there was nothing you could do. But in the end he just couldn't get past Covid. In fact he probably got a good deal of people who would've voted for him killed during the pandemic.

Months passed and that sense of normalcy I thought we could never go back to began to set in again. There were hiccups along the way. The entire vote stealing saga along with January 6th seemed to threaten a return to the chaotic early Covid year. But these just turned out to be lethargic and desperate attempts to have power handed back to Trump and his team. The inauguration of Joe Biden was inevitable. He was going to bring back normalcy no matter what. Because that's what everyone wanted. That's why they voted for him. That's what he represented. A guy who you wouldn't hear about in the news everyday. The unfortunate reality of Joe Biden's election was that it wasn't spurred by some mass effort to fix American politics. It was just a temporary band aid so we wouldn't have to keep looking at the cut. I think that's what Americans want more than anything else. They just don't wanna look at the cut.

Covid began to slowly creep away. Not the actual disease that is but the general idea of Covid as a state of mind and a time period. A set of restrictions to your movement and an inherent danger that lies in everyone you meet. That idea began to slowly leave the consciousness of everyday Americans. I don't say this as a generalization entirely. I saw it in the people around me. I saw more people outside everyday and less masks. I saw stores begin to reopen and some even dropped their mask mandate. Sports were on again and not in the way

they had returned previously. This time they seemed to be in full force again. There were no more bubbles. Fans flooded arenas again. Teams traveled from place to place. Full seasons of each American sports league were played.

God, I Hate Tom Brady

Perhaps no league demonstrated this better than the NFL. During the unrest of the election and the reopening of the country the NFL season was always on in the background. And with that came the clearest evidence of a return to normalcy in the transcendence of Tom Brady. If LeBron James is my sports Christ then Brady has to be the Antichrist. A completely unassuming but also unstoppable force that, similar to LeBron, had been a staple of my sport watching experience since I was a child. The only championship I've ever seen a New York team win came against him in 2011. Since then, as the New York Giants fell back to earth after a pretty unprecedented championship run, Brady and his Patriots had remained at the top of the league emerging every year or two to win another championship to the great joy of New England and the chagrin of everyone else. Much like LeBron it felt like nothing could keep him out of a Super Bowl for very long. He even had a remarkably similar Championship comeback in 2016 that saw his team surmount an incredible deficit to win in spectacular fashion. But unlike LeBron's Championship comeback which read like the story of a great mythical hero Brady's comeback read like a Greek tragedy. The 28-3 comeback that his Patriots pulled off felt like a killing blow to the Atlanta Falcons entire franchise and existence. After years of being a relative bottom feeder in the league the long suffering Falcons had finally put something together and found themselves up by 25 at halftime only to slowly choke away any chance they had at their first Super Bowl ever. The Falcons haven't gotten past the first round of the playoffs since.

When Brady won in 2021 it was much less dramatic but even more crushing. In the summer of 2020 during the peak of Covid, Brady had left his team of almost two decades in the Patriots to go where most people from the east coast go to retire, Florida. But he wasn't retiring; he was joining the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, another long-suffering team that had quietly been assembling a pretty stacked roster in the previous years. Even still there was doubt around whether Brady would be as effective here. He had only ever played for one team and was now trying to start anew at 44, an age that when most pro football players reach they've already been retired for a decade. He'd also left New England on pretty bad terms after forcing the front office to trade the backup Quarterback coach Bill Belichick had been grooming to take Brady's place. But none of this ended up mattering. The Buccaneers breezed into the playoffs with an unassuming but still good 11-5 record. There was some struggle in the first couple rounds but non the less the Buccaneers found themselves in the Super Bowl playing the Kansas City Chiefs and their quarterback who was rapidly ascending to take Brady's place in Patrick Mahomes. The Chiefs were heavily favored in this game up until it actually started. The game was a blowout from the beginning with the Buccaneers defense smothering everything the Kansas City offense tried to do. And just like that, Tom Brady was cemented as the best quarterback in the world once again.

This is what normalcy really meant. Over Covid I, and a great deal of other people, had concocted a rose tinted vision of what normal life used to look like. The ability to hang out with people and enjoy the bread and circuses of our empire. This is what I wanted to return when I

would wish for the end of Covid. I wanted the idealized life that I had fully tricked myself into believing I actually lived before any of this kicked off. But as it began to wind down and I got the things I thought I wanted back I was confronted with the realization that normalcy has its own problems that I'd forgotten about. The example of Tom Brady is a superficial one but I think it's quite telling. After everything that had happened, the disease, the murders, and the protests, it seemed impossible for us to come out the other side as the same country. There were just too many contradictions that had been building up for years that were completely unresolvable even in our old status quo. But I overestimated how much everyone just wanted to forget. To go back to normal.

I Finally Caught Covid

I'm no different. During the summer of 2021 my Grandmother was brought over to visit. I was unaware she was even coming over. I had gone back to normal almost completely. I was going out and hanging out with people again and spending a good chunk of my days just wandering around the city picking up germs. If everyone else was gonna pretend that nothing really happened why shouldn't I. Shit I spent a year at home taking school online while most of my peers actually got to attend their schools. Sure there were heavy restrictions on them but they had built social circles and went to parties pretty regularly; they just had to keep them quiet to the faculty. I was immensely jealous. And as a result I did an almost full 180 from how I experienced the summer of 2020. I was not wasting one of the last years of my teens sitting at home again.

I was in my room when I got a call from my aunt who lives upstairs, my fathers sister not my mother's sister in law that I mentioned earlier. She said my grandmother was outside with my uncle and they needed my help getting her up the stairs. Part of me was annoyed that no one told me she was coming over, a kind of reminder that despite my technical adulthood I still wasn't considered important enough to be informed of. But I went out and helped her up the stairs. At that point her dementia wasn't as bad as it is now so I could have a bit of a conversation with her. I don't remember what we talked about. When I got her upstairs my aunt and uncle thanked me and I left not thinking much of it. It was a routine I had done at least a couple dozen times ever since she started needing a walker to move around. I went back downstairs and phased out in front of another screen.

It was the next day that I began to feel symptoms. I woke up with an incredibly dry throat which isn't out of the norm for me but did start to concern me when it wouldn't go away throughout the day. Then I started coughing. At that point I think I fully realized what was going on. I texted my friend who lives next store to me asking if he had any covid tests. He was one of the few people who you could say actually benefited from the pandemic. He had gotten a job as a Covid tester and as a result seemed to always have a spare test. I took it and I got the result I was afraid of. During the height of the pandemic it seemed like I always found a way to avoid catching it despite occasionally being in very close proximity to people who would test positive shortly after. I got complacent and as a result I had gotten it at the worst possible time. I texted my aunt to test my grandmother as soon as possible and then waited.

The tension I felt waiting was only a bit better than the tension I felt after she got Covid. I thought the uncertainty of not knowing whether I'd spread the disease to my grandma would be worse than just having it confirmed but I was wrong. I kept trying to convince myself it wasn't really my fault, I hadn't even known she was coming over after all. How was I supposed to know I had Covid. I didn't feel anything. And I didn't even offer to help her get up the stairs I was asked. I was just being polite. But none of this really helped. No matter what excuse I came up with I couldn't help but feel like it was entirely my fault. I knew the pandemic wasn't really over yet I still went back to living my life as if nothing had changed. I should've gone back up to Inlet. I had even promised my boss at that job I would return the next summer. I didn't and I haven't been back up there since. I'd let everyone around me down without even realizing I was doing just that. As the days went by my Grandma started to develop the same symptoms I had. All I could do was wait.

When it was all said and done my Grandma ended up being fine, at least to my knowledge. If there were any lasting complications I haven't heard of them but also how would they tell. How can they know that the conditions she has were triggered by aging and not catching Covid at such a vulnerable age. My family was very gentle with me which just added to my guilt. They said there was no way I could've known and if she didn't get it from me she might've gotten it from someone else. I felt belittled. I felt like I was once again being treated like a child you have to be extra cautious with to avoid hurting his feelings. I wanted to be yelled at and ridiculed. It's what I thought I deserved. I wanted absolution. As I realized later this was a profound act of narcissism.

My grandma got better and is still alive today even if she's less mobile. I'm sure most of my family has forgotten about that episode as well. There's no reason it should be as lodged in my mind as it is but it's there all the same. I think it's almost a sense of retroactive paranoia. What could have happened? What if my Grandma hadn't recovered? What if I had to live with the fact that actions I took contributed directly to her death? What if I had gotten my uncle sick? Even in his younger age it would've probably been a death sentence for him. How would my aunt have reacted? How would my mom react? How would I then live with myself after? Could I? There's presumably thousands of people out there in a very similar situation to me. Some of their loved ones might have even died as a direct result of their actions. How do they deal with it?

Normalcy and Paranoia

This retroactive paranoia sometimes manifests as retroactive curiosity when I examine the pandemic and its effects on us. What would've happened if it shook out differently? What if we had contained it from the beginning and the death count was minimized as much as possible? Would we remember it less or more? Would we have come to terms with what we experienced or would it have been all the more reason to just move on and put it behind us? There's a real motivation in American life to just put everything you've experienced behind you as soon as possible. It's a survival instinct. If you don't, if you let yourself get too caught up, this system will eat you alive. You just can't grieve for too long, you gotta go to work. You gotta pay your bills. You have to keep consuming. We have no room for those caught up in the past unless they find a way to monetize it through profitable creation. The only avenue for confronting our

societal problems comes in the media. We have conversations about inherent societal conflicts through the context of our mass media then we move on when something new emerges. Our avenues of electoral politics have proved incapable of helping us achieve these things so all we're left to do is talk about them for as long as we can until we get too tired or beaten down to continue. In 2020 it was a desperate call for some sort of accountability for a police force that seemed immune to consequence. Today it's a plea for some sort of reprieve from the unending violence one of our closest allies is inflicting on their captive population. Both were greeted with essentially the same response, empty words and police batons. As I wrote that a woman was escorted off my train for sleeping.

I also wonder what would've happened if we had reached some final confrontation in that summer of 2020. If the intractable contradictions of our society had reached some boiling point that we couldn't return from. Maybe that would've manifested in Trump winning again. While it might've not been the original point of the protests, the way they came to be interpreted pitted them directly against the Trump presidency. Would another term of his finally have caused the boiling point to be reached. Is there a world where a mass movement can be enough to unseat a president? What would this conflict have looked like? Would it have caused any meaningful and positive change? How much violence would have to take place before that? Would it be worth it? What would I have done?

Today I find myself walking through Hudson Yards a great deal. There really is something that keeps drawing me to it. Maybe it's just its proximity to the highline or it being a nice place to smoke but I seem to find myself there at least once a week. Sometimes I walk through the mall and sometimes I just sit and look at the Vessel. I was in that area the other day with a friend of mine who said that his college buddy who isn't from the city is aware of the Vessel. I found that pretty shocking. I didn't think Hudson Yards would ever break containment. Its creation and general aura felt so artificial that the idea it would ever become just another monument in the city seemed impossible. But I guess it is now. In that respect I guess the development worked. Who cares about the empty apartments if you won the marketing game. I guess normalcy has finally come for the last not normal place I had left.

After the Summer of 2021 I finally went to college. Somehow those first 6 months felt more isolating than any point of the lockdown. I had desperately wanted to go to college during the last year to finally escape from my room. But when I actually got there I realized I had basically forgotten how to build social bonds with other people. I also just simply found myself scared of my peers. It had been so long since I was around a large group of people in my age range that I just forgot how to talk to them. It's cliché to say but there's a real intimidation factor when you talk to someone who's not just your age but also smarter or more talented than you and it seemed like Purchase college was full of people like that. As I look back now I see this mostly as my fault. Most of this isolation was self-inflicted. I didn't want to join clubs or do anything extracurricular for whatever reason. I did it to myself. But I can't help but believe that something happened to my social skills when I was inside for all that time. Something decayed and needed to be built back up. Unfortunately I wasn't up to the task.

Conclusions

Today everyone seems like they either want to forget about Covid or have already forgotten. It's an understandable instinct. The entire event felt like a fever dream. I know in my own personal experience that my memories of that time became so blended together that it was hard to parse when events even happened doing this project. From those I've talked to this seems to be a common theme. But with that said I believe it's essential to remember. We have to remember what the world was like before and what it's like now. We have to remember how we dealt with it and how we coped. We have to remember how we used to talk to people and how we talk to them now. We have to remember how the way we socialized completely shifted when we could only do it through a screen. We have to remember the precarity we felt when the normalcy so many of us have grown used to was stripped away. We have to remember how we were essentially abandoned by our institutions, just given the instruction to stay inside without being given the resources or security that would be required to do that. We have to remember the constant threat of a lifting of the eviction moratorium and how long it took for us to even get one check to hold people over financially. We have to remember how the police presence in our major cities changed. At the end of the day there is a certain comfort in the idea of normality but it still won't save us. These last 3 years have essentially seen us return to normal and we still have the same problems. I don't know how to fix these problems but I think we have to start by remembering.

My college experience is at an end now. I took my last test yesterday and once I send this to my professors I will officially have nothing left to do for college. I've decided I'm not going to the graduation ceremony. I didn't have a graduation ceremony for high school and I don't want one for college. I'm done with convincing myself things are back to normal. That didn't work for me before and I don't think it will this time. There is no normal. There has never been a normal. I need to embrace that if I hope to do anything with my life that I'll be proud of. I've wasted so much time trying to build a life in a world that doesn't exist anymore.

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