

I remember the day I knew it was over. I sat on the floor and I took in the defeat. It started off distant. Far away, it wouldn't affect us. Then it got uncomfortably close. The hand sanitizer bottles scattered about. As if they would help in the long run. I remember my roommate driving away. We didn't know it was for good. I walked the campus and I took pictures to try to save this feeling. I look back on them now and I wonder where our masks were. And then I was 15 again. Trapped in my home, hours from my new adult life. Isolated and afraid. I remember the day they said that we wouldn't come back. I didn't even bother leaving my bed. I didn't listen to music, I didn't see people, I didn't feel anything. I scraped through the rest of the semester. Things I enjoyed felt pointless. Breathing the public air felt forbidden. I was a shell of myself. There was no good news. There was sickness and fear, conflict and public unrest. Nowhere felt safe. I remember begging to just go out and drive, to try and regain some sense of feeling like myself. I remember putting off the return to college, to move the rest of my life back out of my dorm. Never to return. My first year of sweet freedom, ripped out from beneath me. Even the drive felt illegal. Cool spring turned into warm summer. Time passed, yet it didn't. Finally I was able to return to work. I lied to my parents so they would feel safe about me leaving. How dumb I was. To escape my own thoughts I worked myself into the ground. Seeing no one, doing nothing. The steamy days passed by in a blur. Entire weeks and months of my life, I waited in desperation to escape. But even once I did, it wasn't better. I moved back to college, but for some reason, the anxiety remained. Why? Why couldn't I get rid of the deep feeling of dread within me? I lost friends, relationships, opportunities, moments. I lost pieces of myself that I will never get back. Desperate summer turned into anxious fall turned into listless winter turned into impatient spring. One year of masked expressionless faces. Of fear in public. Of hand sanitizer that makes me feel sick at the smell. Of eyes darting around above strips of fabric. Of temperature checks and health scares. Of isolation. Of standing feet apart from my peers. Of disinfectant. One year of a desperate wish to breathe the sweet, fresh air again without unease. The me that I was one year ago wouldn't recognize the me that I am now. Through all of it though, I've grown. And despite the circumstances, I've changed for the better. If I ran into me from a year ago, I'd lower my mask and smile at her. And I'd tell her that things might just end up okay.

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