

It is. It isn't. It is.

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This piece was written in late July 2020. Stay-at-home orders had been lifted a couple months prior in Minnesota, but both the state and the country were seeing a steep rise in COVID-19 infections. No viable vaccine was on the horizon.

I wanted to play with chronology in this piece. Spending fourteen months inside the same set of walls makes both time – and memory – slippery. Hard to wrestle into a recognizable shape. So the events of these two days are told in a chronological jumble that more closely resembles how I recall events of the last year. And while Zoom, in its pandemic ubiquity, doesn't make an appearance, the electronic communication channels – texting, social media – that we all leaned on even more than usual in our year of isolation play a central role here. Hopefully this piece serves as a tiny record of the communication strategies and rocky interpersonal contexts so many of us navigated in the pandemic.

All names have been changed.

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A thin branch on the tree next to our porch – the room where I have spent 80% of my waking moments in quarantine – has grown sideways into the side of the house. When the wind blows just right, it makes a cartoonish, haunted-house sound as it scrapes against the siding: *Creeeeeeeeeeee. Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

My sister texted me last week. *How would you feel about some distanced hangs this weekend?* She lives fifteen minutes away. We usually see her and her husband James once or twice a month, but I have only seen her twice since March 16. *James is making dinner! Saturday? Sit and sweat in the backyard?*

OK. This offer fits the guides my husband and I have set for seeing people socially, something we've done...twice now? They are:

1) No seeing anyone who is being a dummy about this, under any circumstances. I see you, Facebook friends who post an unending stream of house party and restaurant selfies.

2) Outside only. Zero seconds sharing air with anyone in an indoor space, even if the windows are open.

3) Lawn chairs are plunked in the grass six feet apart from other households.

Masks are for indoor spaces with other people: grocery stores, doctor's offices. My husband and I have based these thresholds on what we've read, checked in with each other about them, decided we're OK with them. Setting them is like plunging a grappling hook into a cloud. We are keenly aware they're based on current understanding of a virus that has never appeared in the history of the planet, understanding that could shift like sand with one Washington Post story.

I reply to my sister. *Sounds good!*

My friend Trevor texts me. *When can we see you before we leave?* Trevor is my oldest friend. 28 years, 6th grade. Three years ago, Trevor was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and underwent a full gastrectomy. His esophagus now connects directly to his intestines, and he eats between four and six small meals a day. If he drinks beer too fast, he'll go from hammered to hungover to square one in the space of two hours. Trevor's cancer diagnosis was revised a year ago to Stage IV after it metastasized to his liver. His type of chemo allows him to keep his hair, but he will have a monthly infusion of it the rest of his life. Sometimes the chemo makes red-hot blisters bloom on his palms and soles. Trevor is music faculty in western Wisconsin, and after five years of a 192-mile daily commute from Minneapolis, he and his wife and kids are moving to a place minutes from his campus. *We can grill. Disposable, individual everything. What do you say?* Trevor has been vocal about COVID on Facebook. Angry. As someone with an immune system in tatters, he posts nearly every day, excoriating people who don't wear masks. He reserved some extra-profanity for the lieutenant governor of Texas, who argued the elderly and immunocompromised are a suitable sacrifice for the re-opening of the American economy, as they cost more to maintain anyway.

I reply, *We'll be there.*

All right. My sister on Saturday and Trevor on Sunday. This is good. A nice little weekend. It will be good to see people. Will it? It will. Of course it will. And we'll be safe. We're being smart about this. But safest of all would be to stay home. Everyone agrees on that. So what are we doing? We have FaceTime. We have Zoom. Isn't that what we should be doing? No, that's no way to live. Fauci says outside is fine. Osterholm says it's fine. Fine-ish. But not totally safe. But what is totally safe? Not rollercoasters. Not swimming in a lake. And certainly not driving, even before the pandemic, and I never thought twice about doing any of those things. So this is fine. It's fine. It's fine.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Saturday afternoon. A text from my sister dings into my phone, and then my husband's. *Uuuuuugh it's supposed to thunderstorm this evening. Inside with masks on?* My husband and I look at each other, and there's no discussion, just a simultaneous sag of our shoulders. I text, *Sorry. We're not there yet,* and then try to find the appropriate emoji. My sister is far from

careless, but her perspective is just different from ours: having been deemed essential employees (food shelf non-profit), she and her husband have gone to work, masked, five days a week in an indoor office since the beginning of the pandemic. I continue: *What about a happy hour in a couple hours, before the rain? Cocktails? Backyard?*

The reply comes in a couple minutes later. *Blugh. That won't work.*

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

We show up at Trevor's with some cheese, crackers, pickles, and cherry tomatoes from the garden. We ignore the house and walk around to the back where the chairs are set up, six feet apart. Trevor comes out of the house with a HA HA HA HA WHAT and points to his chest. We're wearing the same damn shirt, red plaid short-sleeved button-down, Mossimo collection, Target, circa 2014. Their daughter (7) is full of opinions about constellations, the color of her new bedroom, and Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood's Masterclass on Netflix. Their son (3) runs out of the house, tears around with the dog for a bit, and then stands next to me in my chair and puts his hand on the crook of my arm. Um. I look up, needing guidance from anyone: *what now, guys? How do we play this?* I pull away, but Elton is, well, three, so he grabs my arm and pulls it back on to the armrest, laughing. His mom smiles. Trevor does too. *OK. OK OK OK. They're fine with this. I'm going to take my cue from them. Wait wait wait wait wait. Trevor's white blood cells are shot. This is dumb. I'm getting up. This was a mistake. But Trevor's family knows his immune system is weak. Plus, they both work from home, and they talk about how they go literally nowhere, getting groceries delivered. And they know my husband and I have been working from home for over four months, doing basically the same thing. So they're fine, and we're fine, and this is fine. Is it? It's not. It is. I-*

Elton smooths the hair on my arms, then pushes it back the other direction, then smooths it again. He mashes his fingertip into two moles on my arm.

“Are those BOO-BOOS??”

“Nope! Just moles.”

“Oh. Oh! Yeah! I got some of those, too!”

Elton looks back up at me, mopy quarantine hair falling over his eyes. He grins, plops his head on my shoulder, and goes back to stroking my arm. A fishhook tugs inside me, and I say to the group, “This is the most affectionately someone I'm not married to has touched me in four months.” Knowing nods.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

6 PM Saturday. My sister texts, *OK James is so proud of this dinner he wants to send some with you in a to-go box. Want to come pick some up?* James texts, *Cocktail on the front porch when you get here?* Jesus, the front porch. We're idiots. We could have had dinner out there in our laps if we wanted, well over six feet apart. We're not used to thinking of our houses like this, of

spaces where air will be most likely to blow a deadly, poorly understood virus away from us. We push our chairs far apart on the porch, and hey: James was not wrong. Dinner is delicious and a thunderstorm shatters overhead, the lightning purple and jagged.

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We wrap up at Trevor's, the heat of the day receding. My husband takes a picture of the family on their back steps, in their final week in Minnesota. We re-pack the snacks we brought. Then, we stand in the backyard. A pause. I have the same thought I've had every time I've said goodbye to Trevor in the last three years, and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you what it is. It hits even harder now that they're moving. I say "Well..." and Trevor responds, "My son's already touched you today, Chad." And then he takes two long steps forward and hugs me. A hug with purpose. Meaning. I squeeze back, fiercely. We stay like that for a beat longer than most guys from Minnesota hug. One last wave to the kids, and we leave.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

We're not even home yet when Trevor's wife Hannah posts pictures from the afternoon on Facebook. I see them in the car. The picture of Trevor and me is a good one. It's a really good one, actually. Our matching shirts, me with my jokey, open-mouthed, too-big-smile and my hand under my chin, senior-picture style, and Trevor looking at the camera sideways with a wry smirk that's genuine but has seen some shit.

And we are definitely not six feet apart.

And the rat-a-tat-tat record cranks up again: Jesus shit shit shit how irresponsible Trevor is immunocompromised was it really worth it to take that chance for one afternoon wait wait when Hannah held her phone up for a picture Trevor plopped down in front of me and then got right back up again when the photo was taken and went back to his chair which was six feet from mine and we're all outside anyway but shouldn't we have masked up Trevor's cells Trevor's cells Trevor's cells but how can you eat with a mask on and besides we've been good and they have too like actually good like really really good and I was taking my cues from them but shouldn't I have held the line and isn't this what a collective slide into carelessness looks like one barbecue one photo and then months on a ventilator and brain damage the rest of your life but we're dealing with things we were never designed to deal with and aren't we just doing our best but shouldn't your best be even better Chad and you can do better but there's no use in trying to do better and

My husband pulls into the garage and we're back home.

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The New York Times's red line graph of new American cases of COVID-19 reaches back to March. No smooth, European bell curve for us. Ours twists upwards, like a bent coat hanger.

Pandemics are long and fraught, but they end. Pandemics end. They end. They end. They have to.

They have to.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.