

Pandemiversary

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One day in the first weeks of the pandemic, my 10 year old and I explore the empty city. We hop on our bikes ...and cruise through stoplights in the abandoned financial district. We walk in the Path, which is so empty that we both get the jitters and race up an escalator for the light of day. We sit at the foot of the CN Tower--which normally would be crawling with tourists--and gaze at the vacant plaza.

I hope, in this moment, that this will be just a small break that will end soon as life and health, pulse back onto our streets. On this day, I don't know how long it will all go on.

The next day we end up somehow in the Beaches. The wind whips sand against our faces as we trudge the empty shoreline. The volleyball nets are unstrung. A massive blue lifeguard stand looms *empty* like a forgotten fortress, frozen in time. I always thought it would be so beautiful to have the beach to ourselves. But on this day when I finally get my wish, it's disorienting. I want everything back: the crowds, the noise, the Soft Serv truck, the lines for the change room. A life without fear and loss. A future I can understand.

And yet, despite the desolation at the beach, we don't want to go home either. So we stand on the shores and skip rocks for hours, wondering where our city has gone.

A friend of mine tells me: *"It's important for children to process this experience."* She's a therapist. She tells me to get my kid a journal. I look online at the pandemic journals and tools for kids—all just so trite and dreadful. I get him a new scooter instead. In the evenings, we walk to the vacant parking lot where the 2 neighbour kids are scooting and they race across the empty space together. They become a socially-distanced squad. Us parents sit two meters apart and chatting...but truth be told, I'm not listening. My mind is in another zone, watching the speeding shadows of our children take flight on the gusts of an early summer. *What will the summer bring?*

A big box arrived from Amazon! This is our kit for the next few months. Books, educational books, masks and a haircutting set. These things are all part of a plan to start doing things for ourselves, to learn and school on our own. DIY! I get everything set up on the patio...a chair, smock, scissors and trimmers and I'm about to call the guys outside for their summer haircuts when the phone rings.

It's the oncologist. Our virtual appointment. "You're going to need surgery and then chemo," she says. I hear what sounds like a dog barking in the background at her house? "Are you sure?" I ask. I rush into the bathroom where it's quiet. I put the oncologist on speakerphone as she outlines the therapy schedule that will circumscribe my life for the next 9 months.

I need to take notes...but there's no paper and pen on the floor of my bathroom. Roger bursts in with a notebook. The call feels like it's over before it started. We sit in shock, in our pajamas together, for a long, long time.

I know. I need to set up a cancer care plan. Self-care is crucial for cancer patients to stay well during treatment, right? But the self-care tips I find on cancer websites now read like a weird archive of a dead language:

"Get a friend to come over to your house and wash your dishes." No, can't.

"Attend our evening support groups at the hospital." No, canceled.

"Ask grandparents or other relatives to watch your children while you rest." No, can't.

The isolation during cancer treatments is in some ways familiar now, though. No hugs, no handshakes. Everyone in PPE. Don't expect things to be the same. Expect people to be overwhelmed, scared, distracted, tired. Just get in and get out.

On my first day of chemo, I desperately want someone to hold my hand. But no family is allowed due to pandemic restrictions and no one working in the clinic can safely touch a hand to another hand. I end up with two fists, clenched together in my lap. In the waiting room, half of the chairs have been marked DO NOT SIT, for social distancing. Other chairs have been placed, 3 feet apart, in the hallway, but they're also full. I sit on the floor in the hall while waiting through the routine of bloodwork-consultation-chemo infusion.

Stretchers pass by in the hallway and I quickly move my feet, trying to focus on my book. I want to blot out everything, especially the TV on the wall. Its chyron reads: *Trump to hold rally in Portsmouth, New Hampshire despite fears over coronavirus.*

My oncologist prescribed the AC drug—patients call it the "Red Devil". It's a bright red liquid given in a ridiculously large syringe by a method they call "the push." Each push brings me closer to the hope of a longer life, but at the same time, it propels me further into a world of stillness, of slowness. I'm tired.

One day, I fall asleep on our patio, then I awake...to a buzzing sound. There's my husband in a kitchen chair and my son, carefully cutting his dad's hair with the clippers that arrived in that smiley-box back in May. It's beautiful to see. I fall back asleep. Then, after a thousand years or a few months, I finish chemo and get another surgery. Then it's Christmas and winter. All this time, our province has been cycling through semi-shutdowns and re-openings, an infuriating pattern of a government that serves the 1 percent first. I've come to accept feeling infuriated as a part of daily life and I understand now, how long this will all be.

After Christmas is radiation. In the waiting room on this day, I watch CTV coverage, fixed on a helicopter in a yard outside the White House. Waiting for Trump to leave the grounds, for good.

I hear a bell and the sign above the doorway flips from red to green. *Beam OFF*, it reads. A technician comes to take me in. I lie down and the lights go dim.

As predicted, our province goes into a second wave. And now the ice is on the lake. At the beach we walk out and I tell my son, here's how you know if the ice is too thin. You watch for certain kinds of fissures, you watch for the arctic birds, for flocks seeking open water. It's easy to slip. *Don't* hold onto each other. Walk like the animals, foot by foot by foot. Grab a chunk of ice and throw it as far as you can. Watch it bounce and shatter. Listen... for vibrations. Feel the cold. The colder it is, the closer we're getting to spring.

At night, I'm alone in the bathroom with a giant tub of prescription cream, to smooth across and stop the cracking. I assess my radiation sites. Look in the mirror. Strain to try and see my heart, fluttering beneath. Alive.

And when spring comes at the lake, all the life that pulsed beneath its onyx and snow mantle will reveal itself, from the ice that breaks and spins in shards, then vanishes bit by bit until it all just becomes lake again and the chinook and the walleye, still groggy, will clamour to the light at the surface. To the light at the surface, and all it promises.