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How do I ensure sanity in a **Global Pandemic**?

It was a warm afternoon, about 1/6th through 2020 when everything changed. I locked up my bike and walked up the stairs to class while reading a rumor on my phone about Rowan extending spring break by a **whole** week. *Why?* It was supposedly to give professors time to move classes online, *just in case* we had to convert to remote solutions and limit in person meetings. It almost felt fake. I had spent the first few months of the year reading headlines about some virus in China, then the past few weeks about that virus making it to a few states and starting to spread somewhat, but thought, *surely I'm not lucky enough for it to give me a whole extra week of break, right?* Then class started and my professor announced that we *were*, in fact, “lucky enough” to be given an extra week of break.

Things quickly escalated over the course of that week, concluding in the president declaring a **National Emergency** Friday afternoon while I drove up the turnpike to my girlfriend's. Despite what was going on, we kept our double date plans since we didn't know how much longer we could even go to restaurants. There was a sense of eeriness as we walked around the nearly empty town of Montclair afterwards; life was rapidly changing. Saturday morning Mia's parents informed her that they were no longer comfortable with me spending the night, leading to a very love filled day together and a very long and drawn out goodbye. I

anticipated maybe a 50/50 shot that our midnight date to load up Animal Crossing Thursday would stick.

I took Sunday afternoon to catch myself up with accurate information about the virus. It was too late to contain it and was spreading rapidly by asymptomatic carriers, so experts deemed it imperative for us to “self quarantine” and stay in one place if possible for at least the next few weeks. Staying home would slow the spread of the virus and lighten the load for healthcare workers. This was imperative since treatment was only for symptoms, not the virus itself. If people were hospitalized at a rapid rate, many more would die. By Monday afternoon the governor announced stay at home orders with an 8pm curfew, effective immediately.

I didn't have a problem with this, I even liked it at first, loved it maybe. *Finally, I'll get some time to just relax, and **not** have to feel bad about it, while the government does what they need to do to get everything under control.* It was an opportunity, an opportunity to relax, an opportunity to spend time with my roommates, and an opportunity to focus on anything I wanted to. I figured it would be easy-- I didn't have to worry about making plans, going to work, or any random interruptions to my day. For the next few weeks, all I needed to do was stay home and go food shopping. That was it. I was on a vacation, *a vacation from the world.* I figured the best way to utilize my new and predictable stay at home schedule was to take as much advantage of it as possible. *How could I do this?* I asked myself.

Since I lived in a house of film majors, I thought, *What better way to make use of this time than to write something we could film here? What kind of format would be easy to do?* And it hit me: A quarantined sitcom, Seinfeld/Curb Your Enthusiasm style, with all of us playing ourselves acting out basic funny plots poking fun at the situation that we and millions around the

globe were now experiencing. I told my roommate Joe the idea and we had a script for the first episode later that night, with a notebook page filled with other plot ideas. After reading the script together and laughing our asses off, I knew we had gold. The next day I did all the freelance video editing and homework I needed done during the day, which left the rest of the night to start filming our new series, now named *Quarantined*.

Going through the motions and tedium of filmmaking, doing things like spending an hour just to film a minute of screen time, made everything feel normal, like there wasn't some super fucked up thing currently going on globally--- most importantly, it brought us together and got us laughing about the situation. We finished shooting late that night and when I woke up Thursday Joe had already edited all of our footage. By Saturday we had a rough cut and shared a trailer, which quickly got over a dozen comments from people, all excited about our new project.

Tuesday night we uploaded our 12-minute final cut, by then I had watched it over and over and over *and over again* to the point where I *hated* it. I was dissatisfied and frustrated with the resolution; I felt like our effort dropped off at the end so we could get it "good enough" and be done. A few hours later Joe was pressing me to write episode two with him, which brought more frustration since I felt like I hadn't processed or reflected on my feelings about episode one. I stepped outside to get some air, leading to a talk between me and him about what I disliked about the first episode, leading to him telling me I could write the second episode on my own and take charge of the editing, to ensure it was what *I* wanted it to be. I didn't know how I felt about this, on one hand, I had an idea of what I wanted, but on the other, I didn't feel confident about doing it all on my own. After a few nights of resistantly working on it, all I had was a dissatisfying draft. My idea for a healthy outlet was starting to feel like another stressful task.

Around the same time, I was gearing back up for classes. The loss of the library made for the hardest time I've ever had keeping focus. I couldn't complete even the simplest tasks without finding myself sidetracked on a YouTube binge. Being stuck in one place went from a creative blessing to a frustrating prison. Sitting down to work just made me **angry**, and the scenery of my "boy-house" (a term coined by Mia) didn't help. I grew tired of the pile of dirty dishes waiting for me in the sink every morning, tired of the filthy one and a half foot bong always sitting on the kitchen table, and tired of the ants constantly crawling in every room. My only escape from the filthy, cooped up feeling was getting out for a bike ride, but even then, I was back to wanting to throw my notebooks, keyboard, and monitor through my window after a few hours. It was by far the most stressful college had ever been, and through it all I started to wonder, *how am I fitting Quarantined into this?*

That same week, my family was beginning to badger me about when they'd see me again. I had my brother over the week prior, and my friend Kyle a week before that, but both instances didn't sit right with me afterwards. I felt guilty because they were unnecessary and the opposite of what we needed to do. I found it hard to ignore the seriousness of social distancing guidelines since they were *vital* during the last global pandemic, the 1918 Spanish Flu. Cities such as St. Louis prepared and informed citizens about the dangers of large crowds *before the virus hit*, and when it did, they swiftly shut down schools, businesses, and public gatherings. Thousands still became infected, but over a long period of time, allowing nurses to go from home to home and treat patients. Meanwhile in Philadelphia, experts urged the public health director to cancel the city wide Liberty Loan Parade once cases showed up. He ignored their requests, downplayed the danger, and moved ahead with the parade that would raise millions in

war bonds. Within 72 hours all 31 of Philadelphia's hospitals were full, resulting in 3,000 deaths *by the end of the week*. In the end, St. Louis had a peak 1/8 of Philadelphia's.

I decided to tell my family that I wasn't comfortable going home since my dad was back and forth between NYC for work still. I didn't want to risk getting the virus from him and giving it to my friends, who were still seeing their families or girlfriends. This was frustrating to me as well, I was the only one doing what we were supposed to be doing and the more I stayed at the boy house, the more I wanted to lose my mind.

I continued on through the week, trying to complete my schoolwork, which also meant trying not to throw my keyboard through the window. While procrastinating Friday afternoon, my mom called me to again ask if I wanted to come home for dinner, this time to celebrate her and my dad's anniversary. I figured, *Fine, I'll go. Everyone else has been going home to see their families, plus being here is driving me crazy*. I told my roommates I was going home for dinner, possibly the night, and maybe the next day; that I just planned on playing it by ear.

As soon as I stepped into my house my mind just felt at ease. My mom's decorating was pleasing to look at and I quickly remembered how much I missed the banter between my family. After dinner I laid with my dogs in the family room and watched *Curb Your Enthusiasm* with my parents. Again, I appreciated the mindfully decorated room, rather than a hodgepodge of whatever furniture was available. It felt *homey* and relaxing on my brain. The next day I went to my mom's office with my sister and laptop; for the first time in almost two weeks, I was actually able to concentrate on homework. After a few nights of consistent home cooked meals, I started to feel like I was on vacation.

I had this *feeling* in my gut that moving home was my best option for the time being. Not only did I feel more comfortable at my parents house, but I felt more confident that I could stay at *only* my parent's house, than I felt I could stay at *only* my boy-house. The last thing I wanted was to be back and forth, catch the virus, and introduce it to a group of people it would not have been introduced to had I stayed in one place. My only thought bringing hesitancy to pulling the trigger was, *What about Quarantined?*

Despite writing creatively for years, until *Quarantined*, I had never actually produced and *shared* a final draft of something somewhere for the world to see. Everyone ranging from film professors to my grandmother told us how much they loved it and how happy it made them. It was an incredibly satisfying payoff; I felt like we had something that made the situation more bearable for everyone, something that could make social commentary on this crazy world. I was conflicted, *Why did I feel it best for my own sanity to let go of something that brought joy to others?* The simple answer is that there is no simple answer.

When I ran out of clean underwear Tuesday I knew I had to make a decision: drive back to my boy house and take the occasional trip home, or grab my stuff and move back indefinitely. My decision was already made: *Pick one place and stay there.* After texting my roommates to let them know what I was doing I drove back to grab my things. However, while driving over I felt a new frustration, *Why didn't I at least go back first to see how I felt on the other side? Why did my mom ask me to come home again after I already told her I wasn't comfortable doing so?*

After I arrived I told my friends what was going on in my head, even then feeling uncertain about it. I regretted not communicating *before* deciding. I went into my room to sit for a second and was immediately thrust back into my head-- feeling stuck and reaffirming that my

sanity was not here but home. The rest of the afternoon was a mix of hanging out with my friends and packing my things. After loading the car with my computer, monitors, chair, PS4, projector, some clothes, and enough books to keep me occupied for a few months, I drove home. Once I got back I immediately restored my bedroom to the way it was before I moved out, then laid in bed and thought *damn. I'm trapped.*

After turning my little getaway home into an indefinite move, I found out that it *wasn't* some miracle cure for all the negative emotions I was experiencing. *Shocker!* Funnily enough, once *Quarantined* was out of reach I was flooded with hilarious ideas to poke fun at the frustration I was experiencing with remote learning. *What if there was a scene of me pacing around the living room yelling about the library being closed? What about scenes of me raging in the backyard?* In reality I still didn't *have* the motivation to write a second episode, I just wanted it more once it was gone. After a few days of this I saw that my roommates had started work on a new short film, knowing they were moving on from what we had been doing made me happy, and confirmed I had to move on. My feelings of *Did I make the wrong choice?* were finally put to rest after talking to my parents about how I felt, they reminded me that I hadn't done anything permanent, and could go back whenever it felt right to me.

Since then everything's been... far from fine. While things aren't *terrible*, I'd be lying if I said I've established a perfect homework routine, completed all my assignments free of seemingly overwhelming stress, and done so as effectively as I would have without a pandemic, but maybe, just maybe, I'm not meant to do that. Maybe it's okay to have days where I do a little bit, or not much at all. Maybe it's **okay** to have different standards for myself right now. Maybe staying up to date with a dreary news cycle isn't the best use of my time. Maybe thinking about

everything at once is too much to comprehend. Maybe the best thing I can do is act as an individual to keep others safe. Maybe this is a time to spend with the loved ones I *can*. Maybe there are ways to use my newfound free time that I couldn't do without a Quarantine. Maybe there is no easy way around the fact that living through a global crisis can *suck*. Maybe the rest will just unfold day by day. Maybe, all things considered, a simple one week spring break with a normal rest of the semester wouldn't have been *that* bad.