

Chess and Brussels Sprouts
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With each day, a new progression of emotions washes over me: confusion, fear, hope, defeat, grief. I recognize that I am lucky because I actually like home—my parents are kind, the weather is mostly sunny, and I have a larger bed than the twin in my dorm. Yet I can't escape my anxiety of what could happen when our reality is turned on its head. I feel a constant weight on my chest. Each time I flick on the TV, a news anchor is discussing the virus. Today, their tone is somber and subdued, their facial expressions saddened. It is not easy to pretend that we are not going to be affected and we are not going to experience extreme loss and grief. I struggle because my mom and I often take on the mentality of "it's not a big deal" or "out of mind, out of sight." We rely on each other because both of us, until now, have been able to think positively and minimize the emotional disturbance of this virus.

But this is unlike other challenges we have faced; it is pestering us and forcing itself into our minds, into every conversation, into every aspect of our daily lives. I am under mandatory county quarantine and if I drive to see a friend (maybe one that I haven't seen since last summer), I could get pulled over for a misdemeanor. I feel guilty for wanting to see friends because, in doing so, I feel like I am choosing to be social over keeping others and myself safe. It is difficult to replace the energy that I get from spending time with others, but in being forced to be alone, I am realizing what good company I am. I have made it a goal to start playing the piano again and, without the presence of others, I can belt along loudly and unapologetically to my favorite piece—Justin Bieber's "Baby." I have started setting time aside at the beginning of the day to read, which acts as a form of meditation and often stabilizes my mood for the rest of the day. Reading regularly also gives me a sense of pride as I gloat to my family about my intellectual lifestyle. These goals have provided milestones to look forward to, which grounds me with a sense of purpose at a time where it feels like I have no control.

That being said, I still have moments of panic and hopelessness, especially when I think of the power I have on the fate of others. Each person has a loved one who they pray for. Mine is my grandma. She just moved from living three hours away from me to living with my aunt, who cares for her in Virginia. Just as I am the youngest grandchild and the youngest of my family, my grandma is also the youngest of her family, and she has always taken special care of me. There's never been a visit when I wasn't greeted without baked goods and a pantry pre-filled with all the snacks she believes I love. She is the liveliest woman and has lived all over the world (and is writing a book about it!), but her body is very weak. She hasn't been answering my calls because her condition is too physically and mentally exhausting. I am fearful for her health. I am fearful for my friends and their family members that are not in good health.

While I stay quarantined and practice social distancing, there is not much else that I feel I can do. For that, I am giving all the hugs and laughter I would have shared with my friends to my parents. My mom is an amazing cook, and recently she has been using her gift of patience to teach me recipes that I pick out from *The New York Times*. My favorite dish we have made so far is a gnocchi stir-fry with Brussels sprouts and bacon. In my humble opinion, it was to die for. I

feel a new sense of pride at the dinner table, partly because my family praises me just for the act of cooking, but also because while my mom teaches me a skill of hers, I introduce her to my new recipes and styles of cooking. Even if I mess up, the struggle becomes a source of entertainment as we compare *The New York Times'* beautifully photographed meal to our own makeshift imitation.

While my mom and I bond through food, I have also pushed myself to say “yes” more often to my dad’s persistently optimistic proposals for family bonding and board games. Before quarantine, I often felt too stressed or busy to entertain the thought of an hour-long chess game or ping pong tournament. Now, I have a hard time finding an excuse to say “no.” In becoming more open to games that I previously had no intention of playing, I realized that I have been missing out. When we play chess, it is so satisfying to steal my dad’s queen and watch a mixture of surprise, defeat, and even pride sneak over his face in response to my command, “checkmate.”

I hope that in social distancing, my family and I will continue to become closer. Though the virus has created immense fear and uprooted our lives, I am thankful that I have been given time to slow down and appreciate each moment that I share with others. My feelings during this time still resemble a roller-coaster of emotions, and it is not always easy to stay positive. Yet, as time plays its role and the shock of a pandemic occurring in 2020 softens, I get a clearer view of what productivity and purpose look like with each new day. Still, I wonder what the future will hold.

5/4/20

It has been about two months of quarantine, and my emotions continue to change in response to new information and predictions about the virus’s progress. My grandma passed away about a week ago and, although I expected it, I can’t wrap my head around it. Despite the news stories about families being torn apart and loved ones passing away, the effects of the virus are so shocking that, even when it becomes personal, it doesn’t seem real. Yet, the grief that I dreaded for so long finally washes over me. Ironically, though, I feel less anxious. Perhaps this is because my worst-case scenario has happened. I spoke to my grandma on the phone a week before she passed and my dad hand-delivered her a letter I wrote, knowing it would be my last goodbye. Even though I feel like she was taken from us unfairly, I have a strange yet calming feeling that she is at peace and hasn’t truly left us. When I remember her kind smile that was so constant it seemed etched on her face by wrinkles on the side of each cheek, I feel similar warm energy surrounding me. Her passing away doesn’t seem cruel or dark because of the kind and fulfilled life she lived. She treated individuals from all over the world like they were worth listening to and caring for. In carrying her name, I have big shoes to fill and I hope to touch the lives of others in the same way she did.

So, while I wish I could hug her one more time or even kindly refuse her eager offer for another round of desserts, I am so thankful that I got to know her and love her so closely. In the spirit of her optimism, I look out my window at all the things that I choose to be thankful for: the constant sunny weather, neighbors running and enjoying the outdoors unlike ever before, my mom walking up to the porch with groceries full of recipe ideas in hand. Until shelter-in-place ends, I feel comforted by these little things that make up the structure of my new life. I hope the next time that we can all embrace, we will do so with a unique shared sympathy for the struggles and grief that we have overcome. We will say “thank you” because it was our selflessness that kept

us home and eventually brought us together again.