9/10/2021

Dear Nephew,

I wanted to sit down and write to you about the last year. It seems obvious to say that we live through history. Of course we do. Every second that passes becomes history. But to live through events that you have only heard about in history class – events that seemed so far away, so foreign – it can really knock everything you know on its head.

The year began with fires and ended with staggering death tolls. I woke up slowly on January 1, 2020. Taking my time after ringing in the new year with friends from college. There was a certain feeling of optimism – like a new decade meant a new start. This feeling of hope didn’t last long though. New Years Day brought news of the Australian wildfires – millions of acres burned, countless animals perished. Sitting here I can still conjure up a picture I saw of a kangaroo hoping across the frame of a burnt down home. The mountains were so covered in fire, it looked almost like lava. The smoke from the fires literally traveled across oceans. It was heartbreaking. But there were helpers. People volunteered from all over the world to help fight the fires, save animals, and rebuild homes.

Don’t forget about the good people – it just gets worse from here.

A few days into the year, there was turmoil in the Middle East and rumors of World War III began circulating. While there were plenty of jokes and memes being passed around – typical behavior for my generation coping with bad news – I think we were all pretty scared. We still remembered the last time something happened that had our family members and friends shipping off to war (I’ll give you a hint, its 20th anniversary is tomorrow).

A few weeks into the year, we started hearing the term “Covid-19” on the news. I was sick with Mononucleosis during this time and was admitted to the hospital for a few days in early February. I had to wear a mask when I entered the Emergency Room but I was allowed visitors and they didn’t even test me for Covid – the regulations said I didn’t qualify for a test because I had not been to China in the past few weeks. It was just a far-off disease in a far-off place. We were safe. Luckily, I didn’t have Covid. Others weren’t so lucky. In the weeks after I was released from the hospital, everything changed.

I remember hearing about the first case hitting American soil - Washington state. Even then I wasn’t too concerned – word on the street was that Covid was just like the flu which, while uncomfortable, is usually quite survivable. By late February, however, Covid was spreading rapidly, and people were dying. First it spread from Washington to California and then it became unstoppable. People were scared. Hand sanitizer and toilet paper was sold out across the country. By the middle of May – Friday the 13th to be exact – schools were shut down. I was out a job, but I still had a roof over my head and food on my table, so I felt okay. The shutdown was only meant to last for two weeks but we never returned that school year. Eventually I had to apply for unemployment, but I was again lucky that I was stable enough to last a while without it. Going to the grocery store suddenly felt dangerous. I never went anywhere without a facemask. I worried about my loved ones constantly. Your grandmother, uncle, and I would sit in the living room all day and watch the death toll rise. Mom said it felt like when she was a child, and she would sit around with her family and they would watch the name of the dead soldiers from the Vietnam War drift across the evening news. People were scared. I was scared. People were dying faster than they could be buried. Mass graved were filled with simple coffins. I don’t think I’ll ever forget those images. Trump began to tell people to inject bleach into their veins to cure Covid. People tried and they died. People were angry. Protests broke out. People of all ages were dying – not just the old and frail. People were losing their jobs, they couldn’t pay their rent. New York City became an epicenter and Time Square was shut down – another image I imagine is forever burned into my memory. People were dying alone in hospitals – no visitors were allowed. Health care professionals became so fatigued with seeing so much death that they left the profession in droves. It was terrible.

In the midst of all of this, America was thrown into civil unrest. Black Lives Matter protests began breaking out in response to several black people being killed by police. Cities were set on fire. I had never seen an anger like that. I lived in Baltimore in 2015 when there were protests there – again, just wanting change – and I remember the curfew and the unrest but that felt like nothing compared to what was happening in 2020. People were demanding change. And for a time, it seemed like we were really going to see it. And there was change, but not enough. I can – and will – write to you about that later. Otherwise, this letter will go on for days.

By the end of the year, 300,000 people in the United States had died from Covid-19 and there were more than 100,000 new cases each day. 1.7 million people had died worldwide. But we had finally found a working vaccine and hope began to bloom again. The world began to open back up. Sadly, a lot of people didn’t get the vaccine and so a list of Covid variants began arising, the worst being Delta. We are still trying to figure out what to do about that one but at least it has scared a far amount of people into getting the vaccine. 2020 was a terrible year and a lot of that pain, anger and sadness has bled into 2021, but there were still shining moments.

In a year of bad news, there was good. The environment began to heal as pollution rates plummeted. Families became closer. Evening walks were back in style. We found creative ways to be together. Pets were adopted like never before. People brought out their Christmas decorations in the middle of the summer to bring some joy to the world. People got to work from home. We all became a little more thankful for what we had and stopped wanting so much. We found a light in the darkness, there will always be a light. Always look for it.

You never think you’ll see history, until you do.

Be good and be kind,

Aunt J