**COVID-19**

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March 6, 2020 was my last day of school before spring break. I was pumped. I had already been accepted into several colleges, received a scholarship, and was ready for the smooth sailing that was supposed to be the rest of my senior year. That day there had been whispering and sarcastic talks about the Raleigh man who had visited a restaurant just 2 miles from my school and had later been diagnosed with COVID-19. At the time, in our teenage brains, this was funny, another disease that could fuel some memes for a couple of months then disappear into the abyss that is out-of-date internet jokes. I happily socialized with my friends after school and chatted about my lack of plans for spring break. Maybe a beach day trip or we could all meet up at the lake for the day. We even finished the day off with Pho from our favorite little hole-in-the-wall restaurant called Grandmas Kitchen.

March 6th was my last time visiting the woman who made the most amazing soup for me and my friends, our rainy day go to, my stomach was warmed by her wonderful broth and perfect noodles for the last time. Her restaurant was small and not fancy in the slightest, but she always smiled and chatted with us despite the language barrier. Like so many small businesses Grandmas Kitchen did not survive the pandemic. Several days later, on March 11th an email came through. Spring break had been “extended” pending more information about the virus. More great news. Could senior year get much better? Soon after that email my mom called me to her office and said my doctor had called. I was confused but then my mom explained to me that my doctor had called to tell her that he was extremely concerned about my health during this time. That because of my autoimmune disorder and recent pneumonia scare I was extremely high risk for the virus we knew so little about. Just like that. My life came to a grinding halt. All my plans for the week and a half left of spring break were wiped from my calendar. My mom was already making plans for me to finish school online that year in the event we did return. Obviously, we didn’t. I haven’t stepped foot in my high school since March 6th.

My entire life almost anyone would tell you I was outgoing, confident, and bubbly. Like the flip of a switch, all of that was gone. I was now crippled with anxiety about seeing my friends and family: the people I love the most and at the same time weighed down by loneliness and depression. Slowly one event after another senior year was canceled. No prom. No senior sunrise. No graduation. The dress I was so excited to wear still hangs unworn in my closet. I was at home alone watching life go by on social media. Because of my at-risk status, my house and life were restricted a lot sooner than most people. I found myself angry at my friends for being so selfish during this time and choosing to continue to go out and live life normally. After the governor of North Carolina allowed seniors to graduate early I no longer had the distraction of education. I began to see that I was having a challenging time coping with my new, must less exciting, locked-down lifestyle. A once active, athletic, and social version of myself slowly withered away into what felt like a shell of a human. I remember looking in the mirror and not seeing myself anymore. After realizing my life had to change for me to mentally survive this pandemic, I was in search of a new pandemic hobby. I threw myself into a wide range of activities. I learned to bake, practice yoga, make quilts, and run. I spent more time than ever with my horses and got into the best shape of my life. During this unprecedented time, I became an unprecedented version of myself. I was so in tune with myself that I allowed myself to feel all the feelings I needed to and use them to grow as a person. In hindsight, I am so thankful for this time of self-growth and self-love. I think my newfound confidence allowed me to transition into college a lot easier than most people did during this pandemic. As humans, we are often uncomfortable with silence, our thoughts, and feelings that we avoid them. Given this time to settle into all those intense aspects of life during a pandemic that used to scare me, I believe I learned to flourish.