





Healing Reflection

Story by: Nora Schmidt, Student
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Over the last 19 months, COVID-friendly “driveway parties” have become the all-too-familiar, go-to get-together. After becoming a world of shut-ins in the spring of 2020, we slowly emerged from our homes, venturing to grocery stores and even restaurants as we tested the limits of our 6-foot safety radii. We devised new strategies to see our loved ones, from Zoom meetings and Netflix parties to drive-by birthdays and driveway sit-downs. My family opted for the latter whenever possible, circling camping chairs around portable firepits to get a few face-to-face hours with friends and family. We passed the summer making calculated grocery store runs, sewing homemade masks, and drinking wiped-down bottles of Spotted Cow and Mike’s Lemonade. (It was always BYOB to avoid any cross-contamination.)

Fall finally came, and I returned to school at UWEC. The timing seemed perfect, as the cooling weather made it increasingly difficult to sit outside for long evenings; even with firepits and hot chocolate, the Wisconsin wind soon began to cut our driveway parties short. Even so, I happily welcomed fall, glad to get back to my friends and away from the claustrophobia of living at home as an adult. Unfortunately, COVID redoubled its efforts and pushed us back online by Thanksgiving. Not only was I back in my childhood bedroom, but I was again away from my friends, including my former roommate, Kacey, who remained in the dorms.

Although we haven’t actually lived together since sophomore year, “friend” seemed insufficient to describe how close Kacey and I are, not to mention that my family considers her our sixth member. We wanted her to come to Thanksgiving dinner as she had before, but, as many families found in 2020, such a gathering seemed out of the question; even a driveway party sounded impossible in a Wisconsin winter. If we wanted to celebrate the holiday together, we’d have to be crafty.

Just as in the summer, we adapted to the world before us. My dad worked out the setup: deck chairs covered with towels (to keep our backsides from freezing); two metal frames with tarps stretched across them, forming a cozy, open-air box to keep out the wind; three makeshift heating vents made from foam board insulation, with a hole at each end and a space heater in the middle to warm two chairs at once. Meanwhile, my mom baked cookies and prepared Thanksgiving dinner, setting aside leftovers to send home with Kacey.

When she arrived from Eau Claire, about an hour away, I was so happy to see her that, forgetting all expert advice from the last 8 months, I gave her a hug, holding my breath behind my mask until we pulled apart. My family joined us in our little outdoor den, and the six of us sipped on hot apple cider and chatted about the oddities of the last year. I looked over at my mom and saw her chuckling as Kacey and I talked.

“Whatcha laughing at, Mom?”

“Nothing. It’s just good to see you guys together.”

Artist:
Elizabeth Huddleston, Student
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