





Six Feet Out of Reality

**Story by: Charlie Roettger, Student
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My key to coping with the pandemic was taking my emotional distance as seriously as my physical distance. I filled every waking second with some form of media. When I wasn't zoning out to reruns of Malcolm in the Middle I was churning through podcasts, finding whatever noise I could to simulate spending time with friends. I spent a first date getting to know a girl over Facetime as we visited each other's islands on Animal Crossing. Heck, I finished Stephen King's The Stand, a 1050 page horror novel detailing an American apocalypse caused by a worldwide pandemic. Something about exploring the familiar suffering of a world adjacent to ours felt perversely comforting; I still can't articulate why.

While building this nest of fiction and escapism, I watched my Minneapolis neighbors get tear-gassed, shot at, and nearly flattened by a semi-truck, all behind a phone screen in my air-conditioned room. I sat there for days, paralyzed by the guilt of being so far removed from the violent uprising happening blocks away from the house I grew up in. Even when I tried to help, I protested selfishly and contributed little. Sure, I went to demonstrations, hoping to aid the voiceless and pressure the city into police reform. But honestly, I went because I missed people. I wanted to share the human connection that righteous indignation creates. The privilege of being an optional advocate allowed me to involve myself without straying too far from my detachment. It afforded me the cognitive dissonance of wandering through Powderhorn Park, seeing villages of tents sprawled alongside the lake, seeing hoodies and sweatpants scattered underneath clotheslines tied between cedar trees, seeing people passing around a gallon jug of fresh water with the label torn off, and thinking to myself, "What a strange place to go out camping."

There's so much more I could tell you if I hadn't immediately opted into delusion. There are memories I've let float for so long there's no hope that I could reel them back. Part of me is ashamed of how I've coped with everything. But twenty-one months have passed since the day of the outbreak, and I can't help but surrender to who I've become. None of us will ever deal with stress the same way we used to; Covid-19 has invariably changed that. Perhaps we'll indulge in our own silent vices and enable our vicarious habits, continuing on as if things were always like this. I will say this: I firmly believe that this behavior isn't a crutch, but a reactionary survival skill. Despite my temptations to remain half-present, 2021 has blessed me with friendships and opportunities that have grounded me back into the present. Sure, I'll walk across campus with one earbud in and wear out old TV shows like a tattered security blanket. But I can do so understanding that these things do not nourish my soul, they just keep me floating on in an ever-changing world that demands my acquiescence.

Artists:

**Sabre Sletten, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

**Mayly Vang, Student
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