

There's Still a Reason to Lace Em' Up.

I've done away with alarm clocks since the world ended. That is something I'm glad to be without. These days I wake up with the sun, who shines through the blinds in strips of proof that there is still life on the other side of my window. Today I'll leave my bedroom four or five times—the first trip, for my morning coffee.

I take tiny slurps from my mug while looking out the window above the kitchen sink. The sun glistens off the dew that coats everything. Especially the patches of overgrown grass in the backyard that have swallowed up the remnants of my past life. Neon water guns, soccer balls and garden tools surely have been buried out there. There was a bird bath at one point, but it's gone now. Along with my grandpa who maintained it. Time continues moving along.

Growing.

Consuming.

I look out and over the back fence to the train tracks that now only serve as a reminder. The train doesn't run anymore, if it did, it would serve as the new symbol of death. Forget the dark figure draped in a black hooded cloak. Forget the scythe. Since the pandemic began, death now moved at 70 mph. Death now just past the sliding entrance doors. Death would cling to the handrails whose purpose was said to have kept you standing, balanced. Death would roam out of the mouths of nearby strangers saying hello, or talking on the phone, or even just sighing out of exhaustion. Or annoyance.

I take another slurp of my coffee, shifting my eyes away from a world that didn't exist anymore. The world exists within my home now; cable TV and the internet are the only connections to the rest of humanity anymore. Not saying they weren't the strongest connections I had before the world went into hibernation. At least back then I could get feedback on my

thoughts about the world with the people closest to me. A nod of affirmation, or the wide-eyed look of “what are you talking about” goes a long way. Now I can *only hope* my conjured up view of the world has any footing. It’s completely secondhand. The word ‘humanity’ is only an idea now.

My phone vibrates.

I pull it out and see a text from my friend, Kellen, “We still on for today?” it read. I forgot it was Thursday. Kellen and I took up the secret habit of meeting every Thursday in the new wasteland to play basketball. Basketball is how we met, at the local rec center. The same rec center that had been boarded up for months now. We shot free throws at opposite hoops for an hour before approaching each other to play an actual game. We were both selective with who we played with, even back then. So many guys at the rec center would ball hog, only shoot threes, call ridiculous fouls, or become more and more emotional with each loss. It wasn’t just a game we wanted to play, we wanted to play it the right way.

Having another person to play the game we loved, *the way* we loved to play it was a part of our lives we just couldn't let die. Yet to continue playing ultimately meant keeping a relationship with death. Boarding that train. Even if we were young and strong enough for that risk, what about our families? I know I lived at home with my grandma, who was ‘at-risk’ with a compromised immune system.

Our choice to meet once a week and play was a choice built on trust. Between two people. Only two. We each risked the possibility of showing up armed, spewing bullets out of our mouths in the form of greetings, or trash talk. Or panting. Basketball is an intimate sport. We needed to be much closer than six feet to have any hope of playing effective defense. Especially with my jump shot. I used to think of it as ‘deadly’, but now that adjective would be in bad taste.

It was this trust that preserved my sense of humanity. Don't we have to trust each other, each and every day? Whether we are driving on the road, boarding a plane, or eating food prepared by a stranger? It is the loss of this trust that takes our humanity with it.

Kellen and I met each other at Lawrence E. Jones middle school, the halfway point between our shelters. The same school I had learned the fundamentals of the game many years ago—during recess with all the other kids. Who knows how many of them are still out there. It was a school where I also learned the fundamentals of trust. *It always starts with a risk.* This school was where I first trusted a crush with my fragile, pubescent heart. Where I trusted a friend with my troubles at home. When you are willing to take that risk is when you can receive something only attainable from outside of yourself.

There were five asphalt courts behind the school. They could house fifty players at full capacity, but each and every Thursday there were only two of us. The sun rose behind us as we played. Inching slowly over the distant tree line, rising over the empty dirt track, until it was high above us in the sky. The ultimate jump ball. It shined down on everything open to its rays of warmth. Only those hidden away, inside, behind blinds, remained in the cold.

We played for hours, enjoying competitive games, trash talk, and just the company of another person. Someone to share the day-to-day thoughts of what it felt like to live through a pandemic. The worst one in a hundred years. The actual, no exaggeration, temporary closure of *the world*. We played until our bodies reached their limits and not before. There was no job to get back to, or other plans to eat and shower in time for. The only thing waiting for us was more shelter-in-place. So if our legs could hold up for ten games, that's what we played. I think we all forgot that our bodies *have* limits. We did, until the world ended.

Back in my kitchen I texted Kellen back immediately. “Yes sir!” I replied, and slammed the rest of my coffee like a shot of tequila. I ran back to my room and grabbed my basketball shoes out from my closet. As I laced them up I thought to myself, *I won't be consumed. There is still life out there. There's still a reason to lace em' up.*