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The Lights in the Dark: A COVID-19 Journey

Kristen Justice Palado

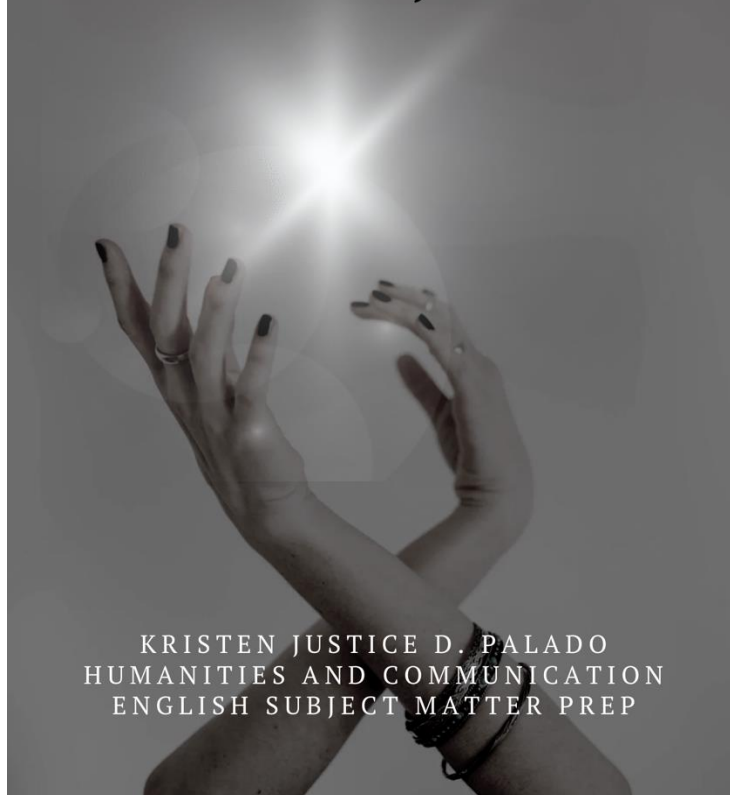
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THE LIGHTS IN THE DARK: A COVID-19 JOURNEY



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HUMANITIES AND COMMUNICATION
ENGLISH SUBJECT MATTER PREP

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Senior Capstone

English Subject Matter Preparation

Creative Project

Professor Phuong Nguyen

School of Humanities and Communication

Fall 2022

The Lights in the Dark:

A COVID-19 Journey

K. J. Palado

DEDICATION

I WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS CAPSTONE CREATION TO MY PARENTS, MY WHOLE FAMILY, AND MY BOYFRIEND WHO HAVE SHOWN ME UNCONDITIONAL AMOUNTS OF LOVE AND SUPPORT AND HAVE GIVEN ME THE COURAGE TO PERSIST IN THE FACE OF DARKNESS AT EVERY TURN ALONG THIS COLLEGE JOURNEY, THE PANDEMIC, AND MY LIFE IN GENERAL. I LOVE YOU ALL FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART. THANK YOU FOR ALL THAT YOU'VE DONE FOR ME AND ALL THAT IS TO COME. MAHAL NA MAHAL KITA.

Capstone Proposal

1. Name and Area of Concentration:
 - a. Kristen Justice de los Reyes Palado
 - b. English Subject Matter Preparation
2. What is your topic?
 - a. COVID-19 and the struggles that came with the pandemic.
3. What is the crisis or community you're interested in researching?
 - a. COVID-19 and how it affected myself, my family, and those that surrounded me during the start of the pandemic.
4. What questions are you trying to answer?
 - a. How did the pandemic and quarantine affect my family and myself? How did the move to online learning and the aspect of quarantine affect my learning abilities and my mental health?
5. What is the primary genre of the project?
 - a. A personal narrative/short story/creative piece.
6. What kind of research are you doing for your topic?
 - a. No research. Just personal recounting of growth about a global crisis.

Abstract

My project is entirely focused on the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, particularly when CSUMB moved to a virtual setting, and how a global pandemic brought a family closer together. COVID-19 was a terrifying disease that began in the Spring of 2020 and instilled in all of us fear, stress, and anxiety. Families were scared to go out and have family parties, schools shut down and abruptly moved to a virtual modality for teaching, and the mental health of the world began to decrease. For this project, I will be using my own voice and experiences to create a personal narrative essay/creative piece that showcases the fear and anxiety as well as the hope and joy that arose from the pandemic and how my family grew closer to one another as well as capture my own personal growth. By doing this, I hope to create a piece that those who experienced what I experienced and those that survived the pandemic can sympathize with and relate to, forming a small community in the end.

Chapter One: A Look into the Future – A Word

With this capstone project, I explore the hardest period of time in both society and my own life: the period of COVID-19. Never in my twenty-two years of living did I ever imagine the world being overcome by fear and death, nor did I ever imagine that I would be thrust into such a world, living through a global pandemic. The trauma that it put me through, the fear that it instilled within me. All of the bad memories flooding into me at this very moment as I type this all out. And yet, I begin to see lights forming in my head; lights that are warm and comforting and happy; lights that symbolize a turning point within this growing darkness. And there, with those exact lights, I find hope and love.

Chapter Two: The Beginning – Before the Darkness Caved In

It was January 2020. My second semester at CSUMB. It was the spring semester. The pandemic was a nonexistent thought in my head. All I could think about was homework, my classes, and a boy who was the owner of my heart back then. I was only focused on finishing my education for my parents. I don't think I even had a set plan for my future at that time. I was only set on becoming an author. It was classes, head home, homework, sleep, repeat. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think or even believe what the world would suddenly thrust me into. I was happy, naïve, and blissfully ignorant that the world could be filled with so much fear and darkness. And it all began with a fated encounter and an end to something that I put so much effort into.

Chapter Three: A Fated Encounter, A Tragic End

It began on a cold January morning in the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences building, more specifically room 2410. The third day of my language course, Japanese 101, for the spring semester. I walked into that classroom, not a single soul in sight. I took my seat and brought out my book. I began to read and read as people started trickling in and didn't put my book down not until the class officially started. There was this tall and intriguing boy in my class that sat approximately two rows behind me. I had never seen or even talked to this boy since the beginning of the semester. The date was January 28, 2020. Our professor, Ogaki-sensei, had started her lecture. We were learning new words and numbers. Nani was the word that started it all. I heard someone say "Omae wa mou shindeiru" and then, from behind where I sat, the boy answered back and said, "Nani!" I immediately turned around and that was the moment where time stood still for the first time. A pair of chocolate brown eyes met with dark, black, round and innocent eyes for the first time and each one smiled. Something was bound to come from this meeting. And the universe was not yet done playing matchmaker for Ogaki-sensei gave the entire class an ice-breaker activity that could also help us all learn our Japanese numbers: "I want everyone to find at least one person in the class and to get their phone number. Introduce yourselves with your name and your phone number. You will have about 5 minutes to do this activity and mingle. Afterwards, you will introduce each other to the class with the phone number you received in Japanese."

Who should I go to? Should I go up to that boy? He does share a love for anime like I do. Plus, it would be nice to have him as a friend. He seems nice.

Thoughts began to swirl in my head and soon enough one step became two then several more until I was standing in front of this intriguing stranger.

“Hey. My name’s Kristen. Kristen Palado. What’s your name?” I said with a shy smile.

“My name’s Rick. Rick Torres. Nice to meet you!” he said, a cheeky smile appearing on his face.

“Nice to meet you too, Rick! Nice joke you pulled in class today. Good to know that I wasn’t the only one in this class that has a love for anime!”

“Thanks!”

“So, shall we exchange number then? I was going to actually ask for your number once class was over anyways since I think that you’re really funny and you’re into anime too,” I say, awkwardly smiling in the process.

We proceed to give each other our contact information and that was when the spark was lit. We began talking that very same night and began to become close with one another, creating a friendship.

The month of February began to creep up on me and Valentine’s Day soon came around. I was in a long-distance relationship at the time and we had recently hit our one-year anniversary. I naively believed that I could make this long-distance relationship work, but that was not the case. Approximately a week after Valentine’s Day, on February 25, I ended the relationship. It was a cold and overcast morning. My partner and I were in a serious conversation as I drove to campus that morning. I could feel the dam behind my eyes beginning to break as I held the tears back whilst I drove, my vision going between blurry and not blurry the whole thirty-minute drive to campus. The conversation just kept getting bleak and that was when I realized how much effort I had put into a relationship that was practically one-sided and that was when I pulled the plug. Throughout Statistics and Japanese class I was an emotionless husk of who I used to be.

Rick and I were pretty close with each other by this point, considering that I came to his dorm room almost every day to help him with Japanese class or just to hang out with him. During my breakup, I had no one to turn to. My mind turned dark and I felt so small and pathetic. I was in such a vulnerable state, I was so close to making such a horrible decision that day. Until I realized, I had someone. *It was a long shot. But, it was worth it to try, right?* I sent a message to Rick, telling him that I had something urgent to tell him and that I was heading to his dorm room. And with that, I went on my “merry” way. I barely remember the long walk from parking lot 13 to North Quad. All I can remember is arriving there, sobbing, and in a warm embrace on a bed. Something in me in that moment clicked. And I did not realize exactly what it was until a month later, the month where the world had other plans for us all.

Chapter Four: Budding Feelings and a Quarantine

March 16, 2020. The day everything in my life was shifted. COVID-19 was rearing its head and it became clear to me that the life that I was so blissfully living was coming to an end. I had only spent two months of my first spring semester at CSUMB and now everything was suddenly moving to a virtual setting. And just when I finally realized my own feelings for Rick. I was thrust into virtual learning, masking, and staying at home, all while dealing with stress and anxiety.

My family and I lived in the small city of Salinas, about thirty minutes from campus. It was just both of my parents, my grandparents, and I in a small three-bedroom house when quarantine began. Frontliners and anyone in the medical field were of utmost importance now and the elderly were at high risk as death tolls continued to climb. I was in constant worry and stress and for good reason too. My mom worked as a nurse in the local hospital, Natividad Medical Center, as a Maternal Infant Unit (MIU) nurse and she was exposed every graveyard shift to the disease. My grandparents live with us and they would always be at such a high risk whenever my mom would come home from work the next morning. My own mental health was not the greatest as well since I was dealing with some new feelings. I was falling for Rick hard and as soon as I began to realize this, he was in a relationship already. Now, I was the type of person who was very selfless and prioritized other's happiness over my own, which I can see now was ultimately hurting me. And that is precisely what I did with Rick. I confessed to him because I thought that he had the right to know. I even told him that I'd wait for him no matter how long it'd take. As the saying goes, "If you love something, set it free." *If he was happier with someone else that wasn't me, shouldn't that be enough? His happiness means the world to me. That's all that should matter to me right now. Not some dumb feelings of false hope. Besides,*

he would never fall for someone like me. It was painful for me, seeing him be so happy with another person. And as the months and the quarantine drew on, the pain was too much. Everyday I internally screamed to him, to the world. And every night ended the same way: I'd cry until I couldn't anymore and fell asleep. The world was so mean and dark to me. I began to doubt that I would ever be happy.

As the months of the quarantine and the pandemic continued on, I was growing more and more stressed and tired, both mentally and emotionally. Soon enough, I finished my freshman year and summertime had arrived. Rick and I still continued to talk, though deep down it hurt me. However, I began to find out that his relationship was going downhill and soon enough he ended it altogether. I, of course, gave him the space that he needed and reminded him of my feelings and said, "I do still love you, Rick. And I'll wait for you, even if that means waiting forever. I'll still do it. I'm not giving up on you, Rick. So, take all of the time you need and when you're ready, I'll be here. Whether it be as a friend or something more, I'll always be here."

Chapter Five: Light #1 – Budding Love and Renewed Hope

After that moment, I kept my promise and waited for him. During that time, I had two suitors pining after my love. At that point in time, waiting became painful for me. I began to doubt myself and my promise. *This hurts. Will it really be worth it in the end? If he doesn't reciprocate my feelings and finds someone else, I'll just go back to suffering in silence again. Maybe I should choose one of those dudes to forget about him. If I don't, I have a bad feeling that I'll go back to an unsafe place in my head and do something really stupid and make a decision that I can't take back.* And that is exactly what I did. I began to start talking to one of the guys. This method of forgetting worked for a bit but it didn't last long. My mind just kept coming back to Rick and his dorky little quirks, his smile, his eyes, the sound of his laughter, how warm his cuddles and hugs were, how kind and friendly he was, everything. I was in a conflict with myself and my emotions. *Do I keep talking to this dude? If I stop, I'll just go back to suffering with the waiting. But, if I continue on like this, it still will lead me down the same path. They say that if you love someone or something, set it free. But, they never talk about the pain of letting go when you love someone/something so much. I think I've made up my mind. I promise Rick that I'd wait for him, no matter how long it takes. I have to stick to that promise. I know how it feels to have so many promises broken and never kept and I don't want to put him through that pain as well. So, I'll keep that promise, even if it does hurt me, because, for some odd reason, I have a feeling that all of this pain and suffering will all be worth it in the end.*

As the summer flew by, the waiting never stopped. And he and I began to get closer and closer with each other over an online platform called Discord. We watched anime almost every night and sometimes talked and watched funny videos on YouTube for hours and hours into the night. And then the month of July came around. Towards the end of July, he and a few of his

friends left for a week-long camping trip at a place called Clearlake. Wi-fi connection out by the woods is pretty spotty and so conversations with him were very minimal at times. My house was also being painted that time and the weather was sunny and warm. The week after his camping trip, on July 30 at approximately 2:55 in the afternoon, we were just talking, sending each other message after message, and I decided to pull up my courage and take a leap of faith. While sitting on my bed, with my dad to the left of me and my dog laying at the foot of the bed, and watching T.V., I sent him a text of a GIF of a piece of paper being opened to reveal the words “I love you” written on it. And this is where all of the pieces fell into place. Our conversation went like this:

Rick: I don't know what to say. I love you too. But it's still complicated for me.

Me: I understand. But I mean it though. I really do.

Rick: I guess it's time I explained to you my situation. It's really simple. A long time ago, my ex and I were talking and it was about a week after my first breakup, which was a real bad one. I told her I felt like my heart was broken, and I wasn't sure if I could love again for a long time. She said something that really resonated with me, “I have a broken heart too, but that doesn't mean I can't love you with the pieces.” She's the girl who I took the longest time to get over. An entire year. And sometimes still, I wonder what would have happened if we didn't break up. And last week at Clearlake, I was thinking about you and how I'm repeating what happened with her again. I've been making you wait. And I feel terrible about it. And I had a flashback to what she said. The pieces thing. What I'm saying is I'm still trying to love you with a heart that still needs fixing. There's been times where I felt compelled to say, “I love you.” But, I keep getting reeled back in by my thoughts

of, "Are you sure you wanna do this? Are you really ready to take another chance?" And then, I keep it down.

Me: Rick. Let me tell you something. I'm doing the same thing here. You know how broken I've been since my ex and I broke up. I've been broken since I was 16. I've been loving with a heart that is practically smashed at this point. I want to mend the broken pieces of my own heart and yours, Rick. And like I said before, I'd wait for you even if it took forever.

Rick: My ex said the same thing. Right after the other thing. She said, "I will do everything I can to mend your broken heart." The only difference here is I saw her every day. We are separated by distance and time. I guarantee if we were to hang out privately things would be very different. The thing is ever since then, I've been looking for someone like my ex. But that's not fair to anyone to compare. And here you are, very similar. The only difference is she was more, "battle hardened," by bad experiences. And I want to be with you, but I'm scared. She left me because one day, she just didn't love me anymore. I couldn't understand. I'm so used to there being a reason, I had to have fucked up somehow. But it wasn't my fault. I'm scared of that happening again. Having no reason.

Me: I've been holding back on saying, "I love you," for the longest time because...I didn't want a repeat of my ex. I'm still broken and scarred from my own past. Rick, I'm scared too. I'm scared because I don't want to be broken even more in the end. I don't want it to be like my ex who didn't even love me anymore as the relationship progressed, making me think everything was my fault—from being too clingy or too affectionate.

Rick: I cried a little just now. But I fought it back. Hehe, you are pretty emotional sometimes. But you're honest and true. And that's what I love about you.

Me: Rick, you're not alone on this. I've been scared this whole time. When I realized that I was falling for you, I tried so hard to deny it. But every time I did, it hurt. I was in conflict. I've been holding it back for a long time now. I'm honest and true because you bring out my honest and truthful side which is who I really am. You bring out the best in me, Rick. Sometimes it seems like I'm not scared but in reality I am. I'm scared of losing again, losing someone...someone I love to my own mistakes. To something that was my fault again.

Rick: You finally broke down my last wall, hehe. I love you too.

Me: Rick, I love you so much.

And on July 30, 2020 at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, my waiting finally came to an end. All of that suffering and dwindling hope ended and turned into a light in the dark.

Chapter Six: Light #2 - Familial Pressures and Bonds

The quarantine added some pressure from family as well. The entirety of my sophomore year was completely a virtual setting and my parents were urging me to find my life's calling.

“I know that you want to become an author, Krissy. But, think lifelong. Being an author is not a truly financially stable job. You still have to declare your major and concentration so think of what you are passionate about and connect it with your concentration,” my mom said.

My mom was right. I had to think ahead of myself. Though many would believe that I was rushing into things since I had two years left to figure things out, I thought otherwise. I still wanted to take up my masters immediately after I graduated, which meant some added years of school. Plus, with the eighteen units that I've taken each semester so far, I was better off finishing up and attaining my bachelor's degree in three years so I could focus on my masters degree immediately after. I began to think and think and think. And my parents' words of encouragement and support helped things settle into place. As Asian stereotypes go, most go into medicine or law as their future careers, just like my parents did – my mom a nurse and my dad a probation officer. Yet, neither one of my parents pressured me into taking up careers in the medical field nor law.

“If nursing is not a career that you well and truly love, do not go into it, because you will learn to just hate waking up in the mornings,” my mom said, seriously.

“Choose a job that you will love waking up to every morning, something that you won't think of a job that is only for money. Choose a job that garners towards what you love so it will not be about just the money earned but instead about something you love,” my dad said, agreeing with my mom.

Unlike the stereotypical Asian parents that are usually depicted in stories and films, my parents wanted and urged me towards a career that would still be able to support me financially but one that I would love forever and never experience burnout from. For years, I was always under the impression that I would be pressured and forced into a job that I just did not like. For years, I thought that all of this pressuring from my parents was them not giving me the support that I needed to grow. They have proven me wrong. They have been so supportive in everything that I have done and will do in the future and only want me to succeed in life, to be independent and strong.

Chapter Seven: COVID to the Present

COVID-19 disrupted our lives, resulting in a single year of staying indoors, masking up, and living in constant fear that the next day could be our last one. It was a whole year lost to fear, death, and anxiety. And yet through it all, my lights in the dark shone bright and led me to a brighter tomorrow.

After Rick and I got together, we spent most of our time on Discord watching funny videos on YouTube and spent a whole semester, once again, online. However, I guess you could say that was how we started to realize we loved each other deeply. And soon enough, the quarantine ended and we went on our first date together after being together for seven months. Prior to the date, I had told my parents about our relationship. I wanted to wait until the sixth month because I wanted to be sure that everything wasn't a fluke. Thus, my parents and grandparents finally met the love of my life. Now, Rick and I have been together for two years and five months and will be celebrating three years towards the end of July on the thirtieth and, in approximately a year or so, will, maybe, be living together in our own apartment.

Chapter Eight: The End – Lights that Shone Bright

COVID-19 was a dark period in our lives that only brought death, despair, and fear. It was hard to find even the tiniest glimmer of hope in our lives. And yet, I was surrounded by people that brought back that spark of hope within me that I thought that I had lost many years ago. My family and Rick, my boyfriend, brought me back to life during a time that discouraged hope and encouraged, instead, the spread of despair. Without them, I think that I would not be the strong and resilient person I am today.

I shall end with saying that I hope, dear reader (s), I have given a tale that is, somehow, relatable because I know that every one of you had a different experience during the pandemic and by offering a personal story of growth and triumph that you can also look back to your own life and what transpired during the pandemic and tell your own story as well so that the world is full of pandemic stories, building comradery, community, and unity in the world.

Reflective Essay

This capstone project is the crowning jewel to my entire college journey. From delving into topics such as gentrification, the topic of this capstone course, aptly named “Crisis and Opportunity, Culture and Community,” and diving into the capstone project itself discussing personal growth and the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that I have come full circle from when I began here at CSUMB.

When I was choosing what my capstone focus would be on, it was not hard to see exactly what topic I should focus on. COVID-19 and the pandemic was a great general starting point and it fit the theme of crisis for the capstone course. However, I needed to be more specific and more focused on the other aspects of the course: opportunity, culture, and community. Bingo! I could focus on the pandemic but also focus on how the pandemic affected my life and those around me. Now, to choose a format/genre for the project itself. After approximately three and a half years of writing scholarly papers, I wanted to do something that was much more passionate and much more like “me,” something that had a human voice to it. A creative piece, more specifically a personal narrative/short story piece would do the trick. And so, *The Lights in the Dark: A COVID-19 Journey* was born, a creative piece written from the perspective of a young mind faced with the hardest of times and coming out stronger than ever while also creating and strengthening bonds along the way.

It was through the pandemic that I finally found my life’s calling as well. But, the journey to the calling was long and winding. As a child, my family always asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. My main focus kept changing as I grew and matured. At first, I wanted to follow the typical Asian stereotype of becoming a nurse, just like my mother. That thought dissipated as I began to become an animal lover, particularly towards both cats and dogs, and

thought of becoming a Veterinarian. That thought grew into a love for marine life, specifically bottlenose dolphins and dolphins in general, and the thought grew into the career of Marine Biology. The thought of Marine Biology lasted until I was in the fifth grade and died when I reached the sixth grade. At that point in time, I was an avid reader and slowly began to dip my feet into creative writing in the form of short stories. Creative writing took up most of my free time and stuck around as a possible future career. I participated in a short story contest in high school and received an honorable mention. I began to think that becoming a writer, an author, was the path for me in life. However, my mother began to shed some light on the path of what becoming an author would be like and how difficult it would be. She began to give me other options, steering me clear of nursing altogether. A journalist, a news reporter, anything that gave me a head start in finance once I graduated. I began to think and think and think. I was already in my second year here at CSUMB and did not have a concentration yet. I was going through every option in my major for a concentration to give me inspiration and, in the end, it worked. English Subject Matter Preparations. The concentration sparked a memory in my brain, the memory of my service learning experience working at the local Boys & Girls Club in Salinas. The children there seemed to gravitate towards me and I had a deep love for children, helping them with homework and teaching them new topics that their own homework brought up. Teaching! That was it! I could be an elementary school teacher while also pursuing the path of the author. I would write and publish on the side while my primary focus was the kids that I would be teaching. Yet, that also began to change as I progressed with my studies. It soon switched to college level teaching, more specifically a professor of creative writing, and I still kept the idea of becoming an author as something that I could do on the side.

The purpose of my capstone was to garner towards the other aspect of this capstone course, which was “community.” By creating a project that contained a personal experience, I had the hope that others out there would be able to read this piece and relate to it, therefore, creating a community in the process because I know that the pandemic affected all of us, and though experiences vary, I believe that hearing one voice, one story, can encourage others to tell their stories as well.

I would like to express my gratitude towards all of my HCOM professors that I have taken courses with and have spent most of my college journey with, connecting and creating bonds with you all. I shall extend my gratitude, now, to my loving family and my parents. Thank you for always believing in me and supporting me and my dreams. And last but not least, to my boyfriend who is my source of inspiration everyday and who has given me the motivation to pursue my dreams, help me see a very bright future ahead of myself, and providing me with all the love that I could ever ask for. Thank you!