

Quarantine

Only two weeks, they said – nothing but a small break from the rushing river of life. The first few weeks were scary, but this hysterical period didn't last long. The experts had it in control– *don't they always?* I occupied my time with birdwatching and biking, believing that my current would be as strong as ever by the end. Competitions, awards, graduation, university – then real life could finally begin. I would leave my impoverished life, and nothing was going to sabotage that, certainly not two weeks. My future glistened like sunbeams on a shallow creek; bringing me hope when the weeks turned to months.

Until the noise came.

My mind churned out endless noise: looping conversations from before isolation; a baby crying in the distant corners of my mind; drafted, fanatical plans for the future, but no platform in which to enact them.

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One more month. Surely, lockdown only needs one more month. It's in the papers, things are getting better. Once it's done, I'll get right back to business. I'm bustling with excitement.

Two more months. Surely, only two more. Once this whole thing is done, I'll be ready to act – my plans are perfect, I just need to wait for the opportunity to take off.

Half a year more, that's it, really, they've got it handled. I'll come back ready and even better, actually, with all my plans and all, it'll be so easy, I've done all the thinking, I just need to act, and in a few more months I can go back to being exactly who I was, how I miss who I was, but I can go back, I'm still them, but indoors, and this time, with plans, so I'll be ready to

confront life, if anything life will be easier because I've been thinking so much, and I can problem solve any obstacle, I'm always thinking of problems now, more than I had before, how I miss thinking less but really, it's for the better.

I wasn't better. My life was hit with drought and sandstorms that eroded who I was until there was nothing but a nub. I recited that I still am who I am; who I was; who I wanted to become.

2020. I think about her – *me* – every day. She plays the cello – no, *I* play the cello; I'm in the math club; I have friends; she – *I'm* – going to be a chem major; she's – *I'M* bold; she's promis – no, *me*, *I'M* promising.

2021. It'll be over soon. Soon it will be over. Remember the plan. The plan. The plan. The plan —

It's time. Wake up, it's the fall of 2022. *It is time to enact the plan.*

I sprint to grasp the moment and twist my ankle. Within the first month back, I can't keep up. How did I ever do all this work? There's too much light, I hear buzzing all day, Jesus Christ, I can't think.

Thoughts of my 'future' press into my heart like a blunt knife, never puncturing but always applying pressure. *Just think!* Why did I wake up to such a dreadful reality? Where is the reality I was born in? Where is the well oiled machine of society, the conveyor belt that takes you from a driven student to a successful adult working a six figure job? Why can't I do it, when I did everything right? Where is the life I was promised, the life *I deserved*? I was supposed to be

at Stanford by now, or Brown, or Yale – instead, I’m serving cafeteria food at the hospital and I’m forced to hear “*when is the peach cobbler coming?*” every single Wednesday.

I’ve been introduced to a place where everything I hoped for never existed. And what of my *past* future self? I held a funeral for her. I apologized for taking her place and trapping her in my noisy head. I’ve got to get over this whole COVID thing, someday.

If I could go back in time, and say my goodbyes, I hope that maybe her optimism would rub off on me. If I could go back to the place she last was, I’d hope I could hear her playing cello from down the hall, and I’d meander into the orchestra room. I’d play beside her. I’d show her that I’m still *something*. I’d gently explain to her why the future slipped from my hands, into some parallel and kinder universe far away.

If only she didn’t dissolve, if only I could keep the essence of her somewhere in me. But that’s only *if only*.

Rare nights I play in my bedroom so that she might hear me. If she does, she will think I’m enough, maybe she will think *I am her*. I sing in a whisper and try to replicate a song that was once so easy, but now my bow scratches the string, and my fingers slip along the fading maple neck. I’m rusty and out of tune, but I go on. *Ohhh, I believe... in Yesterday*. I sing off tempo. I will be late to my shift, where I’ll clean, count, and cook – *nothing of substance* – but for now, my hands are occupied, so I go on. A river turned to a slow, shallow stream of salty tears flowing down, down, down.

if only, if only, if only, if, if, if, if, if, if...