I'm Not Scared to Reenter Society. I'm Just Not Sure I Want To.

(I have gotten acclimated to a different existence.)

MAY 30, 2021 Tim Kreider The Atlantic

This post-pandemic summer is evidently expected to be one long reunion, after which, once that's out of our system, it's back to work, back to school, to what we used to call "normal." And if the pandemic had ended, say, last June, after a couple months of lockdown, we probably would've returned to our lives with relief and jubilation. But after a year in isolation, I, at least, have gotten acclimated to a different existence—quieter, calmer, and almost entirely devoid of bullshit. If you'd told me in March 2020 that quarantine would last more than a year, I would have been appalled; I can't imagine how I would've reacted if you'd told me, once it ended, I would miss it.

"For the last year," a friend recently wrote to me, "a lot of us have been enjoying unaccustomed courtesy and understanding from the world." When people asked how you were doing, no one expected you to say "Fine." Instead, they asked, "How are you holding up?" and you'd answer, "Well, you know." (That "you know" encompassed a lot that was left unspoken: deteriorating mental health, physical atrophy, creeping alcoholism, unraveling marriages, touch starvation, suicidal ideation, collapse-of-democracy anxiety, Hadean boredom and loneliness, solitary rages and despair.) You could admit that you'd accomplished nothing today, this week, all year. Having gotten through another day was a perfectly respectable achievement. I considered it a pass-fail year, and anything you had to do to get through it—indulging inappropriate crushes, strictly temporary addictions, really bad TV—was an acceptable cost of psychological survival. Being "unable to deal" was a legitimate excuse for failing to answer emails, missing deadlines, or declining invitations. Everyone recognized that the situation was simply too much to be borne without occasionally going to pieces. This has, in fact, always been the case; we were just finally allowed to admit it.

That grace period is almost at an end; the dread specter of normality looms. Unlike a lot of people, I was never terrified of going broke or getting evicted—the flimsy twin pillars of my existence were government loans and a (way more successful) friend's apartment. I was also inessential, and so I have been sitting in the same room for the past year. After so long spent doing nothing, the prospect of having to Do Things again is daunting. My new tolerance for human interaction maxes out at about two hours, after which I start getting secretly antsy to be alone on the couch watching TV again. I'm reminded of a film I once saw of a captive gorilla being released back into the wild, huddled away from the open door, afraid to leave the safety of its cage.

Before the pandemic shattered my attention span, I was about halfway through Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain, which would've made uncannily apt quarantine reading. It's a novel about a young man, just graduated from college and about to commence his career, who goes to visit a cousin who has tuberculosis in a sanatorium in the Alps for a couple of weeks. He ends up staying for seven years. (We learn this in the opening pages, so this is not a spoiler.) One reason he stays, clearly, is that he prefers life at the sanatorium to life "down below"; it is, as the title suggests, an otherworldly realm, outside of normal time.

I've always loved weekends and summers, those officially sanctioned respites from productivity. This year was like one long Sunday afternoon: society suspended, life on hiatus. It felt like being offstage, or hanging out in the kitchen at a party. My circadian cycle ran amok; I stayed up long after midnight, when the world wasn't watching, and tried to sleep through the mornings, when I used to write. I liked listening to the warm, amniotic thrum of the dishwasher, like the sound of the car engine when you were a kid, nodding off in the back seat, knowing the grownups would get you safely home. I was grateful for debilitating blizzards and cold snaps, when no sane person would venture outdoors. Recently it was oppressively nice out, 75 and sunny, and I never left my apartment. I've come to love the darkness, snug in my cocoon. Some of this, I know, is symptomatic of depression, currently a secondary pandemic, a societal sequel to COVID-19. I've had episodes of depression before, and although I now have a cushion of experience to handle them—I know they're ephemeral; I know how to endure them and crawl out again—they're harder to come back from every time. Not because of their perniciousness or tenacity, but because of their allure. The sirens of solitude, idleness, and nihilism are becoming harder to resist.

Once, years before the pandemic, when I had the flu and was laid up in bed, watching movies and drinking Theraflu, it took me a couple of weeks to realize that I was no longer sick; I had just grown accustomed to the flu lifestyle. I had an excuse to indulge the pleasures of slovenly indolence with a clear conscience. “I understand there’s a guy inside me who wants to lay in bed, smoke weed all day, and watch cartoons and old movies,” Anthony Bourdain once wrote. “My whole life has been a series of stratagems to outwit that guy.” When I was younger, I had more incentive to thwart my own sloth and return to the productive world; I had ambitions yet to achieve. But I’ve since achieved a lot of those ambitions, and in the past year, they have all evaporated, as if they’d never happened. I know from experience that I can, with great effort and discipline, claw my way back to a baseline. Let’s say I do—I get off the couch, turn off the TV, start writing again, apply for teaching jobs, get another book contract. What Couch Guy wants to know is: What’s my reward for all of that? What’s the big payoff? Will it be as good as lying on the couch watching TV?

Sometime in this past year, I just stopped caring, and now I can’t quite remember how you trick yourself into starting again. You lure yourself into any major undertaking—a vocation, a marriage, life—with certain hubristic delusions: I will be rich and famous. We will be happy forever. This all means something. And once you’re disabused of those, you need to find truer, more enduring motives to go on. If you can. Quarantine has given us all time and solitude to think—a risk for any individual, and a threat to any status quo. People have gotten to have the experience—some of them for the first time in their life—of being left alone, a luxury usually unavailable even to the wealthy. Relieved of the deforming crush of financial fear, and of the world’s battering demands and expectations, people’s personalities have started to assume their true shape. And a lot of them don’t want to return to wasting their days in purgatorial commutes, to the fluorescent lights and dress codes and middle-school politics of the office. Service personnel are apparently ungrateful for the opportunity to get paid not enough to live on by employers who have demonstrated they don’t care whether their workers live or die. More and more people have noticed that some of the basic American axioms—that hard work is a virtue, productivity is an end in itself—are horseshit. I’m remembering those science-fiction stories in which someone accidentally sees behind the façade of their blissful false reality to the grim dystopia they actually inhabit.

The forces of money and power would certainly like us to forget all about this year and go back to exactly the way things were, like a teacher intoning, “All right, class, back to your desks,” while the first flurries are falling outside. Maybe we will; insights are evanescent, and habit has a leaden inertia. But a lot of people went very far away over the course of this past year, deep into themselves, and not all of us are going to come all the way back. Maybe this period of seeming dormancy, of hibernation, has actually been a phase of metamorphosis. Though, before caterpillars become butterflies, they first digest themselves, dissolving into an undifferentiated mush called “the pupal soup.” People are at different stages of this transformation—some still unformed, some already opulently emergent. Some of us may wither on exposure to the air. Escape from the chrysalis is always a struggle. Me, I am still deep in the mush phase, still watching TV on the couch, trying to finish just this one essay, awaiting, with vague faith in the forces that shape us, whatever image is assembling within.