

October 2, 2021

Dear Rhode Island,

I'm writing this missive to you onboard the Amtrak train from Providence to New York City, on my way to visit a dear friend for the first time since the COVID19 pandemic began. I spent the first weekend of March 2020 with my friend as she recovered from an abortion, having dropped all my plans at home when she called for support. I made chicken soup in her tiny Brooklyn apartment as we binge-watched *High Fidelity* and processed her decision. At that time, not having the ability to hop on a train or plane to go physically care for a loved one when they needed us was completely unimaginable.

And yet, that's what we all started experiencing the very next week — people suffering from the novel coronavirus alone, then dying alone, with only healthcare workers enveloped in Hazmat suits easing the passage from this life to the great unknown. Everything about it was and is unnatural to the human condition, to our biological need for connection and interdependence.

As a person about as extroverted as they come, I was immediately bereft by the isolation and lockdowns, and by the fear of dying alone. Like so many of us, I felt my energy plummet and stay subterranean for long weeks. But two things provided brief, yet powerful reprieves in those early days: my spice rack and my neighborhood streets.

After downloading the Zoom app for the first time, I realized that if I placed my phone standing up vertically in between the cumin and paprika, I could video chat with friends and family while cooking. That was a game changer. For some reason, my loved ones' faces appearing at the exact same width and height as my spices brought some color and flavor back into my life.

Early adopting the national trend, I rescued a dog as extroverted as his owner in late March 2020, his licks are like chicken soup when I feel down and he demands at least three walks per day around the neighborhood. During these walks I spontaneously encounter the familiar eyes and foreheads of my friends and neighbors, which is delightful and life affirming even when their noses and mouths remain covered. While the panic in New York was rising and uninformed pundits started claiming that "cities were dead," I found deep comfort and connection in the close proximity and density of my urban network. Even as our own neighborhood's rates of infection rose and rose, I watched as groceries got dropped off on doorsteps, waves and air hugs were exchanged from across the street, and money passed through mutual aid groups to those who needed it. While it felt good to get out of the city and into nature on occasion, there is nowhere on Earth I would have rather weathered this storm than the West End of Providence, my home. Don't those fools know? Cities will never die.

While this pandemic is still maddeningly far from over and the need for connection remains paramount, two other deep truths are on my mind as well: the human talent of adaptation, and

the relentless march of time. Like a car on the rails, we have no choice but to keep moving forward.

Some don't adapt so well – I just witnessed a man get thrown off the train and stranded in Connecticut for refusing to wear his mask. But most of us do. Most of us find a way to normalize the conditions of now and keep living.

Tonight I'll be attending my friend's housewarming party at her new apartment in Brooklyn that she's sharing with her new boyfriend. They met online in June 2020, and had their first date at a Black Lives Matter protest. During a time of isolation, grief, and tumult, they found each other and began a new life.

To me, their story feels like that most Rhode Island of feelings: Hope. I hope you feel some too.

With love from the tracks,

Liza