

My pandemic year has been a series of ups and downs, profound change and growth. I was in my studio dorm at Columbia when everything changed in March of 2020. Columbia was shutting down and I had to go home. My brother, who was attending Loyola, and I took the train to southern Illinois and departed in Carbondale. My mom met us at the train station, and I thought we were all looking dazed and asking each other is this really happening. I remember questioning, will I be back to Columbia in a few weeks or a few months? The drive to our home in Dover Tennessee was conversation about COVID, what we were hearing in the news and at school and how we were both going to do online courses.

I was honestly relieved to go home at the start of the pandemic in March of 2020 since Columbia's campus became a ghost town. I felt very isolated and scared that Chicago was going to close state travel so I would not be able to go back home. Since the start of COVID I was never truly scared of the virus itself even though I knew at any point I could get sick. I was very careful at the beginning and did not know anyone who had been infected by the virus. So rather reluctantly I returned to campus in the Fall of 2020. I was so disappointed that all of my classes were online even though Columbia said some would be in person. It was a very isolating experience and I was so happy when I returned home for Thanksgiving and was able to come home before my birthday on December 17th. We were all together during the holidays. My stepfather came home from a NCIS training the night of my birthday and we were all together for Christmas. My mom bought us a gas firepit for Christmas and my stepdad immediately put it together. It was the strangest Christmas morning when we turned on the TV and saw that someone had put a bomb in a RV which resulted in a huge explosion in downtown Nashville. John, my stepdad, said he knew the chemical that was used in the bombing just by the way it exploded. He was an expert in counterterrorism in bomb making in Special Forces so that comment stuck with me. Luckily, no one was severely injured, but it certainly was not a typical Christmas morning. I remember him making fun of the newscasters that morning who were saying all the wrong terms about the bomb and that they had no idea what they were talking about. We joked and said, well its kind of just fits with how 2020 has been. We finally shut off the TV, made breakfast and opened our presents That evening we all sat out in the cold and made smores around the new firepit on our big front porch. We all had a really nice Christmas.

I was going to return to 30 E. Balbo but made the decision with my mom mid-January that I should stay home for the semester since we would save money on housing and all of my classes were on Zoom anyway. It was kind of a last-minute decision but both me and my mom had a strange urgency about it. It just did not feel right that I be at school. Then my brother called and said his landlord called and he had to move as soon as possible to another apartment in his building because of a major pipe/plumbing issue. Now, we needed to go help him move his things and to retrieve my belongings from my dorm. At this point, we were not even sure we would get our money back from housing, but it almost seemed like we did not care. I was going to move back home no matter what. It just seemed like the right thing to do. We made our plans quickly, and my mom rearranged her work schedule and we were off to Chicago for the seven-hour drive. We arrived at a very quiet campus and city the third week of January to get my things and put some of my belongings in storage. Then we spent the next day helping my brother move his thing to his new apartment. We returned home around 7 pm on Monday

January 25th, 2021 and my stepdad told my mom that he thought he had chest congestion and possibly COVID. John and my mom spoke about 30 times when we were away, and he never mentioned not feeling well. I heard his voice on the phone and he never sounded sick at all. The next day, he went to get just a COVID test, even though my mom was yelling at him to go to the doctor and get examined since this could be very serious. He made a doctor appointment for Thursday at 1 pm. He said, "Twenty-four hours won't make a difference." On Wednesday morning, my mom had to go to her office in Nashville and I was home on my Zoom call all morning. Later, my mom said that John told her he was feeling better and strangely she said he even looked better. He had more color and seemed to have more energy. My stepdad was working in the basement and all of a sudden that afternoon, an ambulance was in our driveway. He called 911 and he said he was having a heart attack and dropped the phone. I saw him going out on the stretcher and the police talked with my mom on the phone, but they weren't giving her a lot of information. She drove home and picked me up and then we went to the hospital. They brought us into a room with two doctors and they said he had a massive heart attack and passed away. The next day, that Thursday at 1 pm, my mom went with a friend to make his funeral arrangements, instead of John going to the doctor for his appointment.

I was numb, I could not believe he was gone. He was in Special Forces for years and still trained law enforcement and other government agencies. The funeral was a week later and really that time was a blur, but we all got through it. I often wonder if COVID was not here, would he had gone to the doctor sooner. It was a very sad time, but things are getting better with time.

I will never take for granted again being able to sit in a movie theater or never have to worry about wearing a piece of cloth on my face. Or that a new virus would never show up because it definitely could and most definitely will. I will also never take for granted being able to see anyone in person. I already feel in my generation that people were for the most part pretty antisocial especially being at Columbia it was already hard to make friends. Now with the pandemic many people's anxieties have worsened. It has become yet another reason for people to not have in person contact, which is a huge detriment to people's well-being in general. I am optimistic about going back to finish my senior year next month and have in person classes for my BFA. I am confident with the vaccine that we can finally control this virus. Our lives, although forever changed, will begin to feel normal again.