

Usta Speaks

10th edition



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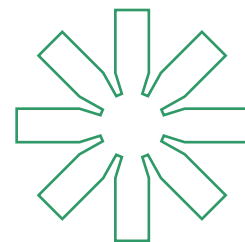
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Content

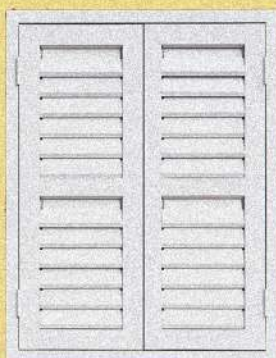
Índice

Pag. 5	Post-pandemic
Pag. 8	Stress
Pag. 9	Glow up
Pag. 12	Anxiety
Pag. 14	.....	I found my vocation in quarantine
Pag. 15	.....	Working through the pandemic



Pag. 17	.....	Fear
Pag. 19	.....	Finding peace in sport
Pag. 22	.....	Hope
Pag. 24	.....	Perfect
Pag. 25	.....	I had five dollars in my back account

POST-PANDEMIC



Reflections around
“going back to normal”

The pandemic

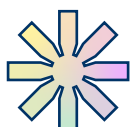
That awkward moment in everyone's life when we were forced to stop on our tracks to keep a lethal virus from spreading. Who would have thought this was even possible? This experience surely took most of us by surprise and forced us to take a hard look at the situation of the entire world. This was a time of incredible despair but it was also a time of deep reflection. We also saw our fellow men and women in their vulnerability and saw our own reflection: hunger, death and sorrow were breathing down everyone's necks.

Many of us saw that time as an opportunity to improve ourselves and our society; we realized the importance of something so simple as washing our hands regularly. We saw how diets and fitness plans started everywhere. For one brief moment we thought that we could fix some of the damage we have been doing to the planet. Many of us actually believed for a second that we would get out of this situation as better humans. After all, how could we remain the same after such a traumatic event?

Regardless if we were optimistic or fearful of life going back to normal, that day eventually came. Slowly, life began to look like something vaguely similar to what we knew. In our case, 2022 was the moment where we met again (or for the first time ever) in the classrooms; the strongest signal that those plague days are starting to be left behind. We probably witnessed some of the strangest years of this century: a long list of events that nobody ever thought were in the spectrum of reality.

This edition of USTA Speaks asks the question "What's it like going back to normal?" and collects reflections of some members of our Tomasina Family to highlight the variety of experiences of getting through and out of a pandemic. We will read texts about how difficult it was for some and the challenges they had to overcome. We will also enjoy heart-felt reflections about the positive side of it all. The compositions of this edition of Speaks compose a beautiful collage of experiences and, in that sense, reflect some of our society's hopes, fears and lessons learned.

So, we hope you enjoy this collection of short reflections that provide an image of how some of us faced such a historical event, now that we can say we are almost over it.



Jessica Galvez Granada.

Foreign Language Teacher
Universidad Santo Tomás, Villavicencio.



STRESS

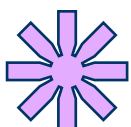
Abstract

This article provides a general overview of the first moments of the pandemic. It discusses the difficult situations it put humans during and after lockdown. It focuses on the stress caused by the virus and the idea of getting it, as well as the stress of going out again and living life in normality.

Almost two years ago, we were in a world where everyone lived without thinking about simple things like our daily routine or how we use and share objects with everyone around us. One day, a pandemic began and everything started to change. The evidence seemed to indicate that every person around was contaminated with a virus that made people die of respiratory disease. We were forced to abandon everything that implied sharing with other people.

This disease was spread by people coughing or with any flu symptoms; the ones around them could inhale the particles exhaled and get COVID-19, as this virus was named. Because of that, everything started to turn into a disaster and people started dying. During the pandemic, we learnt to interact with everyone through online tools. Being far from home was a real risk for everyone. We experienced high levels of stress because everything we did could cause the death of a relative or our own demise. The stress was caused by the experience of wearing a mask everywhere and feeling scared of dying. The ranks of anxiety started to increase as well. Our closest relatives were the ones we could visit at first, but we had to forget about hugs and kisses between us.

After almost two years, we went out again and now the stress is caused by interacting with many people and not feeling secure about it. Nowadays, sharing with people face to face is not that easy. Also, getting back to a routine where you have to spend a good part of your day in a vehicle makes you feel that you are losing your life in a stupid way. It is hard to believe that the virus is gone and try to act like everything is fine because the world is now a very different place and people have suffered a lot of its consequences.



Juan Camilo Triana Farfán

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GLOW UP

Abstract

This article touches on the topic of “Glow up culture” and reflects on the author’s personal experience with it. During quarantine, lots of people started diets and fitness plans to try and improve their appearance. The article reflects about the dangers of going too far with these practices.



Since we were in lockdown, many of us became aware of the “glow up” culture. If you don’t understand what I’ve just said, then I can describe it to you as a series of physical and psychological changes you do to be a totally different person. This trend became viral with Alivia D’Andrea (n.d). Basically, you do things to change your lifestyle to become a better version of yourself. Once we understand what a “glow up” is, we can proceed with my story.

Everything started before the pandemic. I used to be chubby and a food enthusiast. I had never cared about how I looked so I’ve always been an easy target for bullies and negative comments about my appearance. Suddenly, when I started middle school, my whole life had a drastic turn and two years later, I was motivating myself to lose weight. I started noticing the glow up culture and the first thing I thought was “oh, I want to feel good with myself and look gorgeous too! Why do I have to be so ugly?” It’s true everyone wants to look pretty and feel confident when they look at the mirror, but all this utopia led me astray.

I remember when I approached the lockdown by getting into workouts and strict diets. I’ve been living like that for a year and three months. I have never liked my face and my thighs, so I kept working out and whenever I felt emotionally empty, I filled myself with tons of sweet food to keep myself distracted. All this got worse and I kept binge eating, working out too much and restricting myself to the point where I had to get rushed to the hospital. I told myself that I didn’t need to recover because I didn’t feel sick. In fact, it was quite the opposite because I felt alive while I was slowly killing myself.

One day, I decided to try to heal my relationship with food even if it was difficult. I did it. Yes, I did. I don’t regret choosing to recover over death and an inhuman thinness. I’m grateful for the psychological help I received and I can say that it’s the end of that part of my story. I want to remind you that whatever you see in your social media is fake, even fitness influencers don’t have that “perfect body”. We’re all too good to compare ourselves with someone else and if you don’t feel good, then you can always talk to someone you trust. Your appearance doesn’t determine who you are.

**Lin**

School in Spain

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After the pandemic,
anxiety has affected me
in different ways.

ANXIETY

Abstract

The article reflects on the author's personal struggle with the anxiety caused by the pandemic and the months of lockdown. It also reflects on the process of overcoming anxiety once restrictions started to be removed and life went back to normal.

Before the pandemic, I was a more sociable person than now. When the pandemic started and we had to stay home, I couldn't see my friends and I didn't go out to distract myself. In 2020, I wasn't studying because I had just graduated in 2019 and quarantine made life more boring. This gave me a feeling of anguish because the pandemic changed my routine. For example, before, my routine was to wake up at 5:30 and go to school; on weekends I went out with my friends or with my family. My plan was to study in 2020 but I couldn't because I didn't want virtual classes.

In 2021, I started studying at the University and I thought that if I went back to school, my routine would be reestablished and my mental health too, but the stress of a big responsibility made everything worse. At that moment, I was sharing with new classmates and I wasn't the same sociable girl I used to be, so having many people around generated social anxiety. That year I had some virtual classes and my anxiety made me think I couldn't get good grades. When I had exams, the anxiety came and the nerves too. This was all new to me because I never was nervous and I never doubted my abilities.

I felt scared, but then I thought I couldn't let anxiety get the best of me: I started to work on myself, my feelings, and started letting the bad times stay in the past. This experience wasn't really good for me. Feeling fear and anguish isn't nice, but I learned to control it and see that I am better than what my thoughts make me feel. Now I see anxiety as something difficult but that can be dealt with calmly.



Yuli Camila Guerrero Garcia

Public Accounting Student
Universidad Santo Tomás, Villavicencio.



I FOUND MY VOCATION IN QUARANTINE

Abstract

The article talks about the difficulties faced by the author during lockdown and also touches on how spending time in nature helped them discover the importance of agriculture and decide on a future career.

Personally, the pandemic was a stage that caused me a lot of stress and anxiety because I am not used to being at home. Being locked up in a house for months without being able to leave, or leaving with the fear that I would arrive with the virus, was just too frustrating. I only wait for the day they say that the virus is really over to try to lead my life as before.

Returning to normality has been super satisfying and necessary, though. Being able to see my friends off screen and going back to class felt really good. I valued every second I spent outside my house; not only because of the confinement, but also because the pandemic took a lot of people, so I learned to value life, give importance to every second as if it were the last and enjoy life to the fullest. That was and is what matters most to me right now: life and health. Although it is not the same as before, because now you can go out but with masks and biosafety regulations, for me it is not a big deal because that way you take care of yourself and you take care of your family and friends.

Last but not least, thanks to the pandemic I chose the career that I study today, which is Agricultural Business Administration. During quarantine, I spent time on my family's farm, and I realized what I had to study thanks to the connection and satisfaction I felt when I got involved in agricultural ventures with my cousins. I had some broilers and a well of cachamas and mojarras where we made good profits. I realized that despite the fact that people tried to save as much as possible, they continued to consume these products since they are essential. I took love for what I did and I realized that agriculture is extremely important for society since the food of all people depends on it.



Juan Pablo Montoya Pineda

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WORKING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Abstract

The article narrates the personal experience of the author trying to survive the months of pandemic. It talks about the economic, health and mental difficulties that were common during the pandemic.



At first, the pandemic was very difficult for everyone. We all know that.

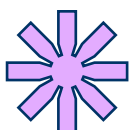


A few weeks into the pandemic I was never home; I was out all the time helping my parents out with their restaurant. If I wasn't there, I was at school. At that time, we had one restaurant located in the city center and it was incredible seeing how everyone around us was slowly getting desperate. I was no exception.

We got Covid in October 2020 and had to stop working at the restaurants. My mom and I were asymptomatic but it took some time for me to regain taste and smell. In fact, even now there are still some things I can't smell. Even if we were sick, we could not close the restaurant because we were in a very difficult financial situation. That year, my sister turned 15 and my parents had planned to throw her a party. They even had some savings for it, but under those circumstances, we had to use the money to support our family business. At some point, my dad was so sick we thought he was going to die. Thank God that didn't happen, and thanks to many people, he managed to recover. These were some of the most difficult times I have experienced.

When everything was going back to normal, we were all scared. Not only us, but everyone. For us, it was difficult to adapt to this new reality and all the protocols for the operation of the restaurants. I also had too much on my mind between school, the restaurant and my dad. Although he was improving, he still felt very weak, so I had to fill in for him. I try to help my parents as much as possible because they are the center of my life and I try to do the best I can for my family, but this was a time of extreme stress.

My personal experience was really difficult because I was terrified about covid, thinking about my own health and the people who were important to me, like my grandmother or my parents; all of that on top of my studies. I think that the most important thing that I've learned from this situation is to take good care of my health, to care for my body and improve my eating habits. I have learned to be patient with important decisions and have learned to be calmer and more careful.



Nicolás Ernesto Quijano González

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FEAR

Abstract

The article centers around the topic of fear. It discusses the author's personal experience dealing with fear during and after the pandemic. It also talks about the benefits of feeling afraid when searching for a purpose in life.





Fear has made me a strong and risky person. Fear is not all bad, it allows me to be cautious for what the future brings me (ANSeR, 2021). The months of lockdown were a moment of great fear. Fortunately, during the pandemic I had the company of my family; they were my shelter and my guide to endure that moment. However, the fear of facing the distance that would separate me from them the moment everything returned to normal passed through my mind all the time.

It was a huge fear to leave everything behind and open my wings to seek success. I knew that facing reality was not going to be easy, much less moving away from Mesetas, the town that saw me grow up and where I feel the peace and tranquility of my home. 2021 witnessed my greatest sacrifice: that year I left home to start building the future that I yearn for as an accounting student. I strive every day to live this dream. It has not been easy; the fear I felt was right because nothing far from home is easy, making decisions is scary, making mistakes is something I avoid, but sometimes all of this has to happen.

I am aware that living without fear is going through life without meaning, without understanding what it really means to enjoy the good and the bad.



Yicet Camila Pérez Rojas

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Universidad Santo Tomás, Villavicencio.

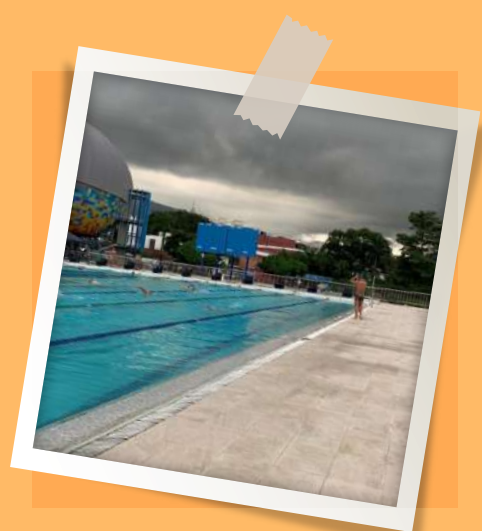
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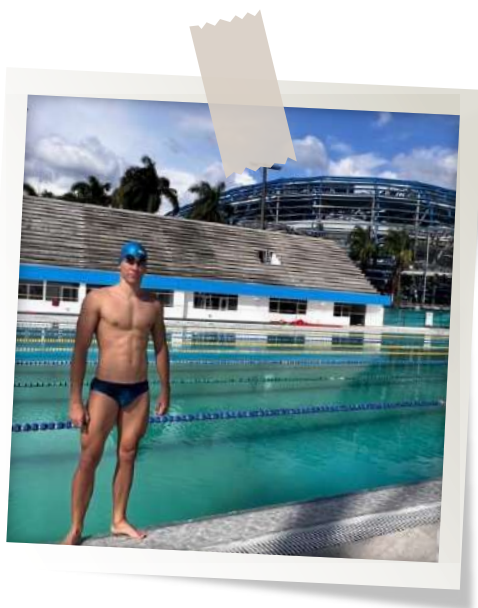
FINDING PEACE IN SPORT

Abstract

The following article talks about the role of sports in the management of anxiety during the pandemic. It is a personal narrative where the author explains how engaging in physical activity is fundamental for their own process of dealing with the restrictions imposed by local governments to stop the spread of COVID.



I found peace and happiness
in sports: during and
after the pandemic.



The pandemic was a difficult time for me. At first, I couldn't control my anxiety; I felt locked up. Everything was the same but not everything was bad. During the pandemic, I talked more with my family; my dad cooked and cleaned more than now. I learned to love my family and to be more organized. I saw many movies and met many people. What I loved the most about this was when I worked as a delivery man and could go out. I felt very good at that time because I had more freedom. I remember the happiness that breathing fresh air generated in me; that feeling was better than spending my time on social media. Visiting my friends was a great way to deal with my anxiety as well as it was very frustrating not being able to talk to people in person and really feeling what the other person is conveying.

Now, I feel happier post pandemic. I can do the things that I missed the most: I can train and swim like before. I still remember how I had to train; it was horrible not being able to swim. I had to do all kinds of training and exercises that had nothing to do with swimming. Luckily, my physical condition remained and I gained a lot of strength at the gym. Before the pandemic, I had a free gym but during covid I had to pay every training day, so I had to work as a delivery man to get that money for my training. It was an effort that I knew would later be reflected in the water. I still pay for the gym, but that is not an impediment since I am sponsored by the government thanks to my personal improvement and my achievements in the last championships. Currently there is no longer a pandemic and I can swim happily in my 50-meter pool. My training is the same again. I improve every day and get better results in every competition I go to. When I'm in the water, I feel like I'm someone else. I feel liberated. Swimming takes away all the stress I accumulate daily.

Getting out of the pandemic and back to my normal life makes me feel happier; everything is better, the economy is moving and my anxiety is gone. The days of quarantine are over and only those memories remain of what was and what I hope will never be again.



Juan Camilo Marin Rodriguez

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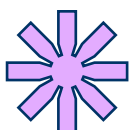
HOPE

Abstract

This article reflects on the importance of maintaining hope after the pandemic. It states hope as the main value to help society endure and cope with the difficult times of quarantine.

I believe that returning to normality represents a great hope for the world's population, taking into account the economic, social and health problems that continue to be seen to this day. The pandemic serves as a reflection to value what we have and see life as an opportunity to be happy. It fills me with sadness to think how the homeless, the elderly, street vendors and stray animals were in need in times of pandemic; how we struggled internally not allowing ourselves to be psychologically affected by being "locked up", although grateful to have a home and food.

For me, normality is hope, because I hope it will help change the mentality of society. We must help those in need, put ourselves in the place of that person, the one who had to lose a family member, the one who had to say goodbye with dignity, the one who spent months in a hospital, that during these two years never believed that there would be happiness again. Normality means starting to rebuild society from the beginning, so that it is prepared for any calamity. It is not a secret that from now on, society will live in fear. That is why we must begin to change our day-to-day habits, start doing what we love, improve our mental health, share with friends, look for opportunities, save, but above all, keep hope. In life, we learn that every problem helps us grow, evolve and get ahead, as long as we keep our hopes up.



Maury Alejandra Rico Sarmiento

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PERFECT

Abstract

This personal narrative looks back at the author's experience during the pandemic and comes to the conclusion that those times, even when they were very difficult, are still perfect.

Analyzing every moment I lived, I can say that my experience at the end of the pandemic was happy and sad at the same time. I realized that I had to get closer and share more with my family; play with them, cook, watch movies and laugh at every story my parents told me when they were young. Perfect means "no errors". I chose the word "perfect" because I feel that all of God's plans are perfect.

While I was at home, my grandparents, aunts and uncles had to be isolated from each other. I couldn't go visit them and communication was not the best as the networks were starting to be saturated. This situation was a little stressful at the beginning. The house, even though it is big, started to feel small as the days went by. The monotony began to have an effect on my brother and me, but we managed to overcome this and we understood that God wanted us and each family to become more united. Although technology is one of the problems that is slowly destroying each of our homes, at that moment it was the most used tool to feel the closeness with our families and to have the certainty that they were well.

As time went by, I got COVID three times, of which the first two were calmer than the third. When I got COVID for the third time I almost died. My lungs would not give more and my breathing was shortening. Thank God I am still alive and this is why I chose the word "perfect": because despite all my mistakes and some situations that today I regret, God gave me a second chance, which is to stay alive and overcome a virus that took thousands of innocent souls, grandparents, parents, newborn babies and children.

Just being alive, being able to enjoy my family, being able to mend my mistakes and make up for the time I wasted on things that did not add to my life, is perfect. I know that for many this is not the most desirable word to choose for a pandemic, but for me it is, because God taught me that all his plans are perfect and that you will not always have second chances to love every day of your life and tell someone how much you love them by remembering this phrase: "Enjoy life today. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never come" -(Anonymous).



Leidy Daniela Parrado Cervera

Industrial Engineering Student
Universidad Santo Tomás, Villavicencio.



I HAD FIVE DOLLARS IN MY BANK ACCOUNT:

FINDING NEW PATHS IN THE NEW NORMAL

Abstract

McKenna Wellhousen found herself living abroad in Spain as the pandemic started. Over the next two years, she experienced financial hardship, isolation, and found new opportunities at the unlikeliest of times. She describes how she rebuilt her life, achieved her professional goals, and made necessary adjustments.



McKenna Wellhousen

Graduate of Oakland University, with a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and English with a linguistics concentration. Specialization in Methodology and Evaluation Student - Comillas Pontifical University. Spain.



IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE UNTIL IT WAS DONE

"They can't shut down an entire city," I said in the kitchen, shaking my head. It was March 2020, and I was living in Madrid. The Spanish government had announced that schools would have online classes for the next two weeks. Few people had taken the novel coronavirus seriously. But when the schools shut down, it felt as if Armageddon was upon us. People bought enough food to last until the next decade. Masks and hand sanitizer were nowhere to be seen. My roommates were packing their bags and heading back to their hometowns. One of them had told me that she'd heard rumors that no one would be allowed in or out of Madrid in the next 48 hours. Impossible, we had all thought. It was impossible until it was done. But not just Madrid. The entire country, my entire world for the past seven months: stopped. Within the next few weeks, I turned 30 in lockdown, my birthday trip to Paris was cancelled, and all the friends I'd made left the country. I watched my savings dwindle into triple digits, then double digits, until I had five dollars sitting in my bank account.

Five dollars.
I had no idea how
I was going to survive.



"I'M GOING TO BE JUST FINE."

Thankfully, the money came through at a time when I needed it, and I could continue paying my bills. I lived off rice and ketchup, but I lived. During the days of nothingness I thought of my heroes. They had humble beginnings, and fought toward their success despite all odds. I thought of how the best parts of their stories were when they were struggling the most. Those were the parts that gave me hope, that encouraged me to pursue my dreams at all cost. I told myself in the dark that I was living the best part of my story. I told myself that someday, someone would find hope and encouragement through mine. In a time where there was nothing to do, all I needed to do was to keep going.

I repeated this phrase like a mantra whenever I felt like the world was going cave in, tattooing it into my brain. When people control what they put into their thoughts, it can change their life. I repeated this mantra, listened to hours of motivational talks and my life started to change. In a matter of weeks, I got back three times the amount of work that I had lost. This work sustained me throughout the summer and I found a new career path and a passion for online education. I worked hard, starting as early as 6:30 in the morning and finishing as late as 11:00 at night, but after losing everything, I was more than grateful for the work and for my students, who had trusted me to be their teacher during a period of chaos. During the few moments of free time I had, I saw a different Spain, a Spain without tourists. Us Madrileños walked tentatively around the beautiful buildings, staring at them as if we had discovered a new planet.

"Everything
is going to be alright.
I'm going to be just fine."

THIS WA



AS A SIGN IF THERE EVER WAS ONE

I love Madrid, but after not being allowed to leave for a year, I wanted a change. I started to visualize a place that would make me happy. In my daydreams, I started to see a beach, the same beach every time. I wasn't sure if this beach even existed but it was a sign if there ever was one to go near water. At the end of June 2021, I packed three suitcases, and tearfully watched the city of my dreams disappear below the clouds from an airplane window. I was heartbroken to leave. I knew I had to, even for a short time, follow my blind faith and head toward the water. When I arrived in Gran Canaria and sat at Las Canteras beach, I realized that the image of the beach that I'd visualized for months was the beach right in front of me.

Nothing and no one can stop me

Adjusting to post-pandemic life is interesting. It feels like you've woken up after years of hibernation. Masks have become so normal that it feels weird not to wear one. I'm never without hand sanitizer. Watching the crowds increase and the restrictions go down feels both a relief and a little bit suspicious. Without a doubt, these past two years have been horrific. As much as we all would have liked for covid to have never happened, I can't help but express gratitude for what I gained during this time.

I lived through a pandemic alone. When you spend enough time on your own, you learn to become your own best friend. Some people would do anything to have one day all for themselves, and I was gifted a whole year. At last, I've found self-love and self-respect. I've walked into this post-pandemic world as a strong, brave young woman. If I could live through a pandemic by myself and with five dollars in my bank account, who and what can stop me? Nothing and no one. Now I understand the saying, "When you have nothing to lose, you have everything to gain."

STEP PROUDLY INTO WHO YOU HAVE BECOME

“They can’t shut down an entire city,” I said in the kitchen, shaking my head. It was March 2020, and I was living in Madrid. The Spanish government had announced that schools would have online classes for the next two weeks. Few people had taken the novel coronavirus seriously. But when the schools shut down, it felt as if Armageddon was upon us. People bought enough food to last until the next decade. Masks and hand sanitizer were nowhere to be seen. My roommates were packing their bags and heading back to their hometowns. One of them had told me that she’d heard rumors that no one would be allowed in or out of Madrid in the next 48 hours. Impossible, we had all thought. It was impossible until it was done. But not just Madrid. The entire country, my entire world for the past seven months: stopped. Within the next few weeks, I turned 30 in lockdown, my birthday trip to Paris was cancelled, and all the friends I’d made left the country. I watched my savings dwindle into triple digits, then double digits, until I had five dollars sitting in my bank account.

“Everything
is going to be alright.
I’m going to be just fine.”





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