

Age is a thing that defies explanation. We slowly transform, reflect, (hopefully) mature. We change. Change comes to us. But, this past year has been an experience for all of us, fraught with pain, emotion, loneliness and lack of hope.

We've gone through the coronavirus pandemic all together, but we each carry our own experiences with us of this tumultuous time.

For me, as a normal 16-year-old struggling through high school and worrying about college in the future, this year has been compounded into one of the most horrible, but impactful, years of my life.

As a freshman in high school in March 2020, I was mainly concerned with three things: school, friends and more school. I had made it through biology and math, and I was excited for semester two of the school year, where I would take some of my favorite classes, like English, journalism and essay writing.

If you didn't catch it, I love writing. I love expressing the way we, as humans, experience life. Everyone is different, and words are a powerful way to convey the fears, hopes and dreams that we all have.

Anyway, back to freshman year. I had been so excited because of the prospect of a semi-formal. In 8th grade, we were *supposed* to have a semi-formal, but the dance council had decided to have a quarter-formal, which was fine, but this year I was so excited.

I bought my beautiful dress: a deep blue sleeveless fit-and-flare with black flowers embroidered at the bottom, and got ready to have the time of my life.

My friends and I were so excited, because we were going to go get Chipotle after the dance and have an after-party. The coronavirus had gotten on to the Diamond Princess about a month previously, but we all assumed that it would get under control, because what could stop our semi-formal? Nothing.

Reflecting on it now, it's funny how indestructible we thought we were.

But, then reality came crashing down. The day before our semi-formal, school was cancelled. There was a sense of excitement, but also of sadness.

But, we all said, we would just get a couple weeks off of school, and the dance would be postponed. It was better, because we finally got our vacation in March, just like everyone always complained about a lack of! We'd all be back in a few weeks and have been refreshed and ready to push until the end of the year.

A few weeks went by with nothing to do, and a few more, and a few more.

By this point, it was late April and I was depressed, with no hope for the future, no human contact to keep me going, nothing.

I had my family, and they were probably the only ones that kept me anchored to this world. Spending days trapped inside my room, searching the internet to find why this was happening today. Languishing. Life was stuck at a standstill. This was one of the darkest times in my entire life.

I eventually pulled myself out of that deep, all-consuming hole with the help of my family, but it changed me. Lots of people go through depression, it's not an uncommon thing, but the darkness was so huge I lost myself.

It took time, and help, and perseverance, to try and find myself again. But, I will forever be changed from that.

Fast forward a month. I was doing a lot better. The hope of a semi-formal was long gone. School had been cancelled for the year, except for the occasional online class. But, something new and painful came into my life.

My grandfather's health was declining, declining too fast, at a rate they hadn't expected. He was put into home hospice and given a month to live.

I wrote a response for my English class about the end of innocence, about a time, a moment, when you knew life wasn't all rainbows and fairytales. The moment when you faced the cold reality of life:

*"Then my dad got the call. The call that can flip your life upside down and shake you until you break down and cry. The call that meant the end of innocence, of pleasantly bobbing on a calm ocean of life, but turned into a hurricane, thrashing the ocean until you felt like you might drown. [...] I wish that, by some miracle, everything would right itself and the world would be okay. But in real life, there is nothing to stop the endless torrent of pain from crashing down on your ship. [Y]ou can't rely on miracles to come true."*

The mindless blur that passed the time was full of pain, but also of sorrow, of the fact that he won't be there anymore. He won't be around to see me graduate, to help me pick out my first car, to come to holidays and family vacations. There will always be a gap where he once was.

But life wasn't meant to last forever. That's what makes it so special, of experiencing all the emotions of life. It's what makes life so important. Otherwise, would we even be human?

We moved shortly after this happened. My grandfather never got to see the new house, but it is full of memories of him.

We still lived in the same town, the same neighborhood, the same life. Everything stayed the same, everything changed.

We started seeing people again, outside and masked, of course. Life seemed to start to resemble some kind of normal. School started, but we were hybrid, going in two or three days a week, and doing virtual school the other half.

I started physics (ugh). I turned 16, and got my driver's permit. I am going to retake my driver's test soon. New friends came, old friends left. Life still moved forward.

But something changed. I changed. Loneliness is still something I carry around with me, but I learned to cope with it. I have trouble defining this change, as so many things compounded together to change me.

Did I change because of the pain, or did I change because of age, or because of the introspection I experienced? Was the pain I felt exacerbated because of the pandemic and the loneliness, or was it just the same, raw emotion that courses through you when you experience loss?

I don't know the answers, but still, I write. I write to channel all the pain I carry with me, to reflect on the past, to help others step in my shoes.

I'm not saying that I would go through it all again in order to become the person I am today, because that would be ridiculous. But, it happened. You can't prevent the storm, but you can weather it the best you can.