

POST PANDEMIC

Opinion After covid, there's one place I know I can go and not feel lonely



By Danté Stewart

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It once was a house, then a pizza parlor, then an antique shop, then a tie-dye shop, then a coffee shop — and then it was *nothing*. A whole heap of nothing. A virus drained its rooms of laughter, of stories, of crying as people shared a cup, and it was nothing but stuffy emptiness, the occasional bark of a dog, a house where children once played and food was cooked and last breaths were taken.

Now, as I sit in it some three years later, the Buona Caffè is a coffee shop again. And it is *alive*.

About the series

We spent two to three years building private, interior covid worlds. Now, with the exterior world reopening, Post Opinions asked fiction and nonfiction writers, essayists and poets to reflect on what it's like to be getting outside — if they are — and how the pandemic changed them.

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The shop sits at the corner of Central Avenue and Wilson Street in Augusta, Ga., in a building erected in the 1930s. It has that classic American bungalow feel — flat, low-pitched roof; living room in the center; connecting rooms in the hallways — a style that rose in popularity here in the thick of the Depression and war. That central, shared gathering space is the focus. And so, from the beginning, this coffee shop was always what it was meant to be: a thing constructed of the human desire to never be alone.

I sip dark Ethiopian coffee from a bamboo mug. “I want you to have something that reminds you that even when you bend, you don't break,” the potter who made the mug said to me about a month ago, when I entered the shop looking for an artifact of joy. So I sit, and I think about breaking.

I think how I occupied this same spot before the pandemic cleared us out, how from this couch I'd read the words: “Coronavirus will also cause a loneliness epidemic.” How during the pandemic, world events and devastating loneliness indeed broke so many of us, but how, to our surprise, some of us bent back in the other direction to stand upright again.

I remember just three years ago taking a shot of WhistlePig, praying and meditating for 10 minutes, running in the backyard with my son, and watching the buildings burn. I remember “No justice, no peace!” I remember “Breonna Taylor was 'sleep!” I remember “He was just running” and “Why? Why? Why?”

Now, I hardly know how to process all that has been given and all that has been taken away.

“We survived the apocalypse,” a young man said to me as I sat in the shop the other day, and the word feels right — what happened was catastrophic, and our sitting in the Buona Caffè is a testament to our survival. A house is more than a house. It is a constellation of all the ways the human heart breaks and puts itself back together. It wears in and on its walls every change the people who once dwelled there made of it. A house is a history book.

What was I here to do? Oh, yes, I'm here to write. To build a house sentence by sentence, in such a way that people can enter and dwell in it.

When I first came back, several weeks ago, there was a woman here. She wore a necklace with a silver cross, a half-wing and what looked like a turquoise stone. On her right hand were a blue cloth and a bandage, as for an IV. She

was on the phone.

Judging from the way she said “insurance” and “hospital” and “not right,” and the snuffles between each word, I could tell she was talking to someone about a medical problem and, like so many Americans, was sick and tired — tired of being left behind, vulnerable, yelling, crying.

When she saw me, I turned around quickly, trying to avoid looking like I was looking at her. Yes, we writers in coffee shops look, but most times we’re not looking at other people; we’re trying to track down this or that thought we’ve made in the invisible web of our imagination. I told myself, *You’re not here to talk*. But then something else — instinct? — made me look up, and I realized that maybe I was in that coffee shop not to be left alone, but to catch the idea waiting in the eyes and heart of another.

The woman got up and came toward me. Her hand moved toward my shoulder.

Tap, tap, tap.

“Hey,” she said, pointing at my stack. “I really, really like your books. Do you mind if I take a picture?”

I motioned to her to sit. The books, sources of research and inspiration, rose in the shape of a Christmas tree: Joan Didion’s “The Year of Magical Thinking” on top, Chanda Prescod-Weinstein’s “The Disordered Cosmos: A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, and Dreams Deferred” on the bottom. Other ornaments: Sarah Broom’s “The Yellow House,” H.G. Bissinger’s “Friday Night Lights,” Carl Sagan’s “Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space,” Frederick Buechner’s “Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons,” Ted Chiang’s “Exhalation: Stories.”

The woman studied the books for a few seconds. “I like to sometimes escape into other worlds,” she said. “Do you ever find yourself doing that?”

“Yes,” I said. *All the time.*

“You know,” she told me, “when I was younger, I couldn’t read.” And for the next 10 minutes, she told me the story of her life: how she had dyslexia before people in her community knew what that was, how her mama had helped her untangle the words and would say to her daughter, “Try, try again.” How she later volunteered with a school to help children read, how through mentoring a little girl, she “learned that magic was real.” She told me how excited she was to meet me, a writer with two children, children who will grow up knowing that Black people from where I’m from can be writers.

In the weeks since that encounter, I’ve gone to the coffee shop almost every day. I haven’t seen the woman again. I don’t know if her medical issue was solved or if she’s still crying. I don’t know if anything, for her or for me, has actually changed.

And yet, as I write these words, I have to think that something did change. We both entered the shop alone while

desiring to feel what we used to — to not feel lonely. And we found each other.

I think often of loneliness because I know my own so deeply. When the world shut down and the distance between our bodies widened, many people clung to the notion that technology could be a bridge out of loneliness. But whatever brand of “connection” we were sold wasn't really connection at all.

Sitting here, sipping my coffee, I've come to believe that being together — in a coffee shop, at a concert, in a church, at a bar, outside, inside, day, night — is one of the greatest tools of our resistance and defense.

So much is different after three years. Many whom we cherished are gone. The future feels more uncertain, more unknowable than ever. But we still have the places that remind us: We all want a little love and hope. We all want someone to say, I am better because I met you today. We could all use a simple *tap, tap, tap*. A *hello in there*.

This is why I return to the coffee shop — the house that's more than a home. It is not the coffee I want. It is the people. It has always been the people.