

above/below

a journal from the bunker

April 18, 2032 @ 5:46am

I always find that memory takes a second to reboot in the morning. Eyes closed, brain foggy, the stench of the subconscious still thick in my nose. For that second I could be a million different places, except for where I actually am. One morning, I wake up on Christmas morning to find a teddy bear propped up under the tree. The next day, I wake to the first day of 11th grade. The next I wake to the scream of the city wide sirens, false alarm. The next, I wake as Maya shakes me awake, telling me to grab my go bag. And so on, and so on.

Once the door has been fully closed on sleep, any possibility of retreat from reality is squashed. I wake for real, for the last time that morning. And now I can't go back to sleep. Not with the not-quite-silent hum of the generator. Or the sweat-soaked blanket from night sweats twisted around my waist. I am stuck as myself, now. Not the memory of who I was at 7 or 17 or 24 or 32.

Soon the overhead heat lights will start to fade on, acting as our artificial dawn in this windowless compound. I don't know if anyone really knows what time it is topside, but over the past year our biological clocks have accepted the illusion. Right now, the morning brings a chill that radiates from the concrete walls. A chill we have tried to fight by covering the walls in tapestries and papers. The insulation also breaks the echoes that haunt us, reverberating off the walls. I guess I should use the remaining darkness as an excuse to burrow back into the sleeping bag and try to let my memory continue to play tricks... well, bye. Do you say bye to journals?

April 18, 2032 @ 8:28am

## 361 DAYS

The screen above the counter in the mess hall unrelentingly displays the number of days that we have been underground. Only 5 more to go. Even with everything that happened, the powers that be mustn't forget that it is a leap year.

When we first went under, I told myself that I would journal every day. I felt like important things were happening and I should record them for someone, someday. That lasted all of 4 days, and honestly the shit I wrote contained nothing but a deep, overwhelming despair that didn't even have enough literary flair to make it somewhat entertaining.

But we go topside in 5 days and that felt like something I should take note of. Maybe I have changed in the year we have been underground. Maybe it is easier to write when I am not thinking of all the things I have lost, but all the things that are left to gain. You would think that the last 5 days stuck in a bunker would be filled with preparation for our grand emergence, or celebration, or something. But things just continue on as normal.

I think maybe it was a hurry up and wait situation. It is like when we used to be able to go on big fancy trips and you would pack your suitcase a week in advance. Then, for the remaining days you have nothing to do. You are just taunted by the packed suitcase. I don't know. Maybe it's like that.



April 19th, 2032 @ 9:36am

Before all this, I used to wish for more free time. There was a chest-deep ache when I had too much going on with no end in sight. When, all of a sudden, the pressure behind your eyes starts to build and you worry you are going to start crying in the office cafeteria. When you have been exhausted all day and you are a few too many miles away from your bed.

Before the reset, we were always doing something. Working, going out, meeting up, scrolling, organizing, devolving, dying. I don't really know why. Maybe we were conditioned to be afraid of just existing. Of not being productive. Maybe we were so distracted by what there was to do, or see, or try, that we didn't notice we were being fucked over. Maybe, if we didn't stop to listen to the trees or smell the roses, we wouldn't miss them when they were gone.

I don't really know. I don't know if I care to come up with a reason now. When we first went under, I felt like I was having withdrawals from the constant stimulation that once co-opted my attention. Like there was an unreachable itch under my skin that was tearing me apart. There were no new podcasts, no new movies, or music. The cellular grid was down. Everyone we needed to talk to was in our bunker or in another bunker, only to be reached on limited HAM radio messages. Our cellphones became useless.

It's fucking depressing how impossible the task of existing without digital stimulation seemed at first. We were like a bunch of addicts suddenly forced to sober up. Who am I kidding? We were a bunch of addicts forced to sober up.

April 19th, 2032 @ 2:14pm

I really became the community "knitter" or "mender" or "seamstress" or whatever by accident.

It started, like most things do, with a baby.

About three weeks after we went under, Ms. Wilson had her baby. We had been prepared. Some of the residents were doctors topside. Most everyone had been a parent, or sibling, or kid topside.

Anyway, baby Lewis was born and he had all the things he needed, but nothing felt distinctly "his." They were all hand-me-down blankets and clothes and reusable diapers. Nothing that was made just for him. I remembered how my mom used to knit every new baby in our family a baby blanket: "every stitch is a stitch of love."

I didn't have any yarn, but you start to get creative when there's nothing to do but count the days and complete community chores. An hour with a pocket knife and an old sweater and you'll end up with a few balls of crinkley yarn. A few more hours with knitting needles that some old soul brought down, and baby Lewis has a blanket. He has something that's his. I don't know why that felt so important to me at the time. We share everything down here. It wasn't that I wanted Lewis to have some sort of private ownership or whatever over the blanket, I just wanted him to know that someone had made something while thinking of him.

Since then I've been re-working various materials into blankets and socks and sweaters and even the occasional stuffed animal. Whatever comforts help to soften the concert walls. There's something peaceful about making and mending. The yarn transforms from one lonely string into something that holds weight. A squishy textile created

through hours of repetition. Plus it helps to kill time.

April 20th, 2032 @ 3:14pm

It feels odd to make a 'to-do' list for re-emerging into the world. Everyone seems to have different priorities at different times. Jacob is making sure that we have enough salt, pepper, and oil packaged to take up with us when we begin cooking. Mia has been packing and re-packing her go bag, as if we won't be able to return to the bunker whenever we want. I have an nearly uncontrollable urge to clean the bunker. Erase my existence, as if leaving a friend's guest room after a short visit.

You learn a lot about people when you are stuck underground with them for a year. I guess that is expected. Once privacy is limited, you learn how they spend their time, what they prioritize, when they go to sleep and when they wake up. You learn who skips breakfast in the morning and who can't function without coffee. You learn from what they decided to bring down with them. What they feel like they will need for the next year when faced with limited space. Some bring childhood stuffed animals and books. Others bring laptops with movies downloaded, knowing the wifi will be cut off.

I have also learned a lot about the people who are not in the same bunker as me. Bunkers were designated based on geographical communities. Unfortunately, our love is rarely contained by imaginary borders. Pieces of my heart are hidden under the ground across the world. You learn about them through what they choose to prioritize for short HAM radio messages and telegrams. How Abby rarely sends updates about herself, but sends weekly updates about her infant daughter. She took her first steps a couple weeks ago. When we re-emerge, she'll be ready to toddle through the grass.

From Jackson, I watch as his constant complaining about boredom morphs into a new passion for cooking. From Alice, I learn of her

commitment to giving everyone in her bunker a flu vaccine, fearing a micro epidemic.

I think I am even learning about people I have lost contact with decades ago, maybe even people I have never met. I imagine how a kindergarten best friend, almost lost to memory, spends her time below ground. I wonder what a high school ex-boyfriend is doing without access to rock climbing. I imagine all the people I do not know, may never know, who are facing the same reality I face. Who in a decade, or two, will also be making comments about the year we spent underground. Strangers who will tell their children of 2032.



April 21st, 2032 @ 5:32 am

I think what I miss most about being above ground is the smell of the trees. You get so used to the sappy scent when you live around them all the time, but after a year of recycled air I crave something real. Something tangy or sticky or earthy. I hope there are still trees above us. I guess the whole point of this experiment is that the trees should be in even better condition when we emerge. But I am still scared.

April 22nd, 2032 @ 9:57pm

I didn't have time to write today. Lots of community meetings about the plan for tomorrow.

April 25th, 2032 @ 7:54pm

We are topside.

It's been 48 hours and it feels surreal. It's weird. Not much has changed physically other than more overgrowth and less light pollution at night. The structures are still standing. The roads are still weaving along, although slightly worse for wear. I don't know if we plan to repave them or let the creeping Lichen take it back.

I spent so much time imagining what the world would look like when we emerged, that I never considered it would look relatively the same. The real change is in the way it feels. The birds are louder in the morning and the stars are brighter. Out here, away from the cities, the stars were never completely hidden, but now they seem supernatural in their brightness. Amazing to think that even our little street lights were once diminishing their glow. The grass is tall and untamed, dandelions are starting to spring up.

During the winter a tree must have fallen over because one lays just south of the bunker, beginning the long process of being reclaimed by the Earth.

It feels like when you see a beloved friend after a long absence. You can still recognize their voice, their gait, their laugh. But small features here and there have changed. Maybe a hair cut, a new tattoo. Or maybe your memories have started to blur in the time since you last saw them.

I know the land around us. I know it's voice, it's gait, it's laugh. But something is different.

We are topside. We are topside. We are topside.

April 26th, 2032 @ 1:04am

I was thinking about how I have such a deep urge to clean the bunker. It's so weird to think that we were down there to let the Earth grow wild and messy, and I still felt a desire to put things in order down there.

Before we went under, I would make my bed everyday. Normally in the mornings, but I would even make it 2 hours before bedtime solely so that I could say that it was made. The logic in my head was that if I made my bed everyday, I at least accomplished one thing. It's a weird thing to put value on. And yet, even below ground, I was still making my bed.

Down in the bunker, I didn't mind the communal chore cycles. I would much rather clean a bathroom than attempt to cook a meal for others. I can clean better than I can cook, and I want to offer others my best.

The cleaning of my world has always been about putting things in order, but the cleaning of the natural world is allowing things to break out of that order.



April 27th, 2032 @ 4:13pm

The world is so much louder out here. I know that they warned us that the sound adjustment would be difficult, but I thought they were kidding. I remember that when we first went under, the silence was deafening. But we adjusted so quickly. Now the world is so loud that I am having trouble falling asleep at night.

Not that the sounds are bad. Just different. Bees and the wind and birds in the morning. Owls and crickets at dusk. The faint sound of bat wings fluttering at night.

The world does feel so much healthier. The air smells different than I remember and the sky is bluer. Organizations are starting to get what was determined as 'necessary' back and running. Water, refrigeration, lights. Then schools, hospitals, and homes will get power. The newspapers will start running again. The postal service. But no one seems desperate to restart social media or cellular service.

We left so much when we went underground, but now it seems like we are leaving even more below. As if the year helped us sift through what we needed and what was a waste. We played more games of chess and picked up our phones less. We didn't need downloaded music when people were playing nightly shows on their guitars and keyboards.

We have changed. We might have even changed more than the surface did. We sat with ourselves for a year and we started to poke at the aspects that we didn't like. We saw more of each other, saw deeper into each other. And I think we liked what we saw.

April 29th, 2032 @ 1:32pm

I get so mad sometimes. Now that we are back above ground and I can see all that we missed. Why did the past generations fuck the Earth up so much that we had to all hide underground? Why didn't they have to suffer through a year underground?

I am still getting used to the mid-day sunlight. Why do I have to reintroduce myself to the sun that I have known all my life and they didn't? Didn't they care about us? Didn't they want us to have the same opportunities as them?

Why? Why did we have to deal with the consequences?



May 2nd, 2032 @ 5:46pm

I worry about the children. We tried so hard to give them a chance. Those of us who were alive for COVID-19 know the way it hurt young kids. They weren't in school during a critical social development window.

We tried so hard to keep them connected even when we were separated into communities underground. And I think we helped. I think it is better than it could have been. But it could never have been perfect.

What hurts the most to watch is the way that they have become disconnected to nature. We did this whole thing so that the Earth would have a chance, but so many of these kids missed adventures in the natural world. They didn't run through the sprinklers or jump into leaf piles. They didn't splash around in puddles or try to catch a snowflake. They didn't get caught in the rain and dash to find a tree to shelter under. They never saw a worm on the sidewalk and rescued it.



May 10th, 2032 @ 6:56pm

It's been awhile since I have had a moment to sit down and write. Everything has been so busy. Not in a bad way, just busy.

I think people are being more social above ground. I wondered if people would flock towards privacy and isolation after a year with very little access to those. But we are having more community dinners. The kids have more sleepovers. Movie nights have continued now that the above ground solar power is working. I think we all remembered that there is something nice about community.

I think we remembered a lot while we were underground. There is a lot of time for thinking obviously. So many of our daily distractions were stripped away. We put so much effort into remembering aspects of life above. We taught our children the names of regional trees, reminded each other of the moon phase, and daydreamed of the feeling of moss beneath our toes.

And we also did a lot of forgetting. We forgot how bright the sun was and how heavy rain feels. We forgot where exactly to look for various constellations. But we have also forgotten how it feels to be addicted to our phones. We have forgotten our fear of social interactions. We have forgotten why we valued isolationism. We have forgotten why we thought we needed so much in excess.

I do wonder if some of this 'forgetting' is really just a deeper form of remembering. A bone deep recalibration of what it means to be human. Of what the world would be like without late stage capitalism and divisions. Remembering that we are capable of making change. That we can help each other. That we should help each other. When all the noise is stripped down, we are reminded that being human is not a competition.

I think that while we were under, we were not only haunted by the environmental pollution, but by the way we have polluted ourselves. We were stuck with ourselves and we didn't love what we saw. And I don't know if we love what we see now, but I do think we are starting to like what we see.

The Earth healed while we were under in a way that left a planet that was familiar, but slightly different. With slow creeping changes that are small, but impossible to miss. I think many of us have experienced a similar form of healing. We are still the people that went under, but every day we were below, we changed in small, unignorable ways.



