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502

All the lights are out, and Boston has turned into a ghost town.

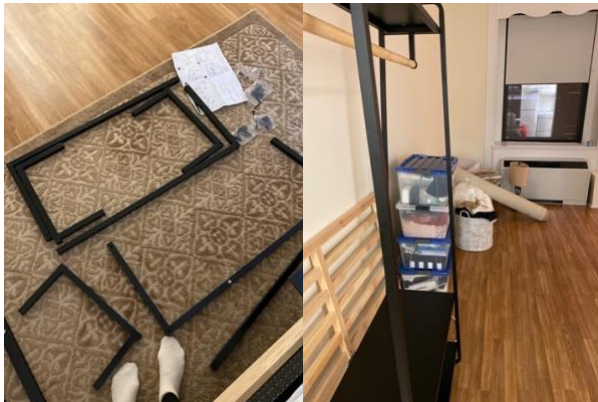
The building into which I moved in January is an old apartment in the heart of downtown Boston, off the edge of Chinatown. Conveniently, several of Emerson College's buildings are in vicinity of this building; the view outside my window is one of the college's dormitories. The unit in which I live, 502, is a studio apartment with hardwood floors that expands 428 sq. feet. Several factors led me to move into this apartment and live alone—the most important being commute time. My old commute lasted an hour and half, and I had to cram my classes into 3-day school weeks. The new apartment allowed me the flexibility to spread my classes out over the week and eliminate unnecessary stress.



Figure 1: collecting my keys. Figure 2: my new space. Figures 3 & 4: moving in.

The Little Building (one of Emerson College's dormitories) is situated directly across the street from my apartment. Before my early morning classes, I watch the windows light up as students rise and prepare for their day while enjoying my morning cup of coffee. One of my closest friends, Emily, lives on the 4th floor across from me and sometimes we text each other through our windows. I wonder if the residents of LB notice my lights switch in the morning or off at night.

With spring classes in full swing, it took two weeks to finally finish building my furniture and organizing my possessions. Moving from a house to a small studio apartment caused me to realize that I have more belongings than I need. In hindsight, I should have opted for the already-built furniture instead of furniture assembly kits; the money I saved wasn't worth the effort I put in assembling the furniture. I also became used to the loud and incessant plunging sounds from the upstairs neighbors—their toilet must get clogged frequently.



Figures 5 & 6: building and packing.



Figures 7 & 8: the finish product after 2 weeks.

My apartment was now fully furnished and tidy, ready for guests. I frequently invited my friends over to share dinner, study, and hang out. I've never been good at cooking but having to feed my guests forced me to dig my moms' recipes from the back of my mind to be hospitable to my guests.

Everything changed on March 13, 2020.

The governor of Massachusetts declared a state of emergency in response to the worsening COVID-19 pandemic. Classes have been moved online, and students are strongly encouraged to return and stay at home for the rest of the semester. I was dismayed because that was the main reason, I decided to move closer to campus. But, not much else felt like it had changed since most of my friends stayed on campus in Boston.

However, after the President of the United States declared the COVID-19 pandemic as a national emergency, Emerson College decided that all students with the means to move off campus and return home should do so within a stated time frame. Throughout the week, all the windows within view were filled with boxes and packed bags as students prepared to leave campus. As most people in my apartment complex are upperclassmen college students, many of them are packing and preparing to move out. I no longer hear the plunging sounds from upstairs anymore. Maybe they moved out, too.

My parents are older, and my elderly relatives have dinner at least 4 times a week in our home. The fear of being an asymptomatic carrier of COVID-19 made me decide that it would be best for me to quarantine myself in Boston and not compromise the health of my family and loved ones. Growing up in a huge family, the meals we cook are often meant for at least 5 people—all the recipes my relatives taught me were meant to feed a family. Having friends over made up for the fact that I was cooking for way more than just myself, but now all the meals I make end up with leftovers lasting for several days. While I don't mind cooking for myself, I feel like I've taken for granted all the times my friends came over and forced their way in to help me chop my vegetables while I prepare the sauce or marinate the chicken. 502 isn't a very big space, and I usually feel very frustrated when I'm in a confined or packed area. The built-in kitchen is small with barely enough counter space for prep work; I used to kick everyone out of my kitchen so that I can make dinner quickly and efficiently alone. It's funny, because now I can't wait for fall when I can have friends over again to share my tiny space.

A meal is a meal, but somehow it seems that sharing the cooking process always makes food taste better.



Figures 9 & 10: sharing meals



Figures 11 & 12: meals for one



As more workplaces and colleges send people home, I notice people began to take the pandemic seriously and practiced social distancing. A grocery run is the only form of *going outside*. The nearest grocery store near me is the Roche Bros in Downtown Crossing and right outside there is a flower stand where an Asian man sells flowers at reasonable prices, and he often gives discounts if you pay in cash. I once read an article on Psychology Today that said flowers can trigger your happy brain cells and decided that I was going to make a habit and purchase flowers twice a month for myself, to bring some life back to 502.



Figures 13 & 14: new flower bouquets

The flowers I bought from the stand are starting to wilt. Unfortunately, with the enforcement of the stay-at-home policy, the stand has also shut down and I placed an online order for 3 potted plants a couple of days ago.

In my view, everyone in Little Building has moved out. From the side of the building that I can see, there is only one Asian girl left: she has sat in front of her computer on her desk in the same position for two days now. I wish I knew her so that I could provide comfort in some way. *You're not alone, I'm here too.* I wonder if I'm the only person she sees in her view, too. I wonder if she feels as anxious as I am.

Since classes have moved online and nothing is open, I find myself frequently staring at my walls. 502 is a small studio, and there is only so much I can do in this limited space. Why am I re-organizing the closet that I just packed yesterday? Why am I vacuuming my floors 5 times a week? My box of wires and chargers have been reorganized at least twice a day every day. I start to realize that maybe I'm not as introverted as I've always thought I was. 502 had become a space in which I grew comfortable, but now it causes an anxiety that keeps growing and growing as each day of quarantine passes.

But my friends who flew home to be with family two weeks ago called me to let me know they tested positive for COVID-19, because three other passengers on their plane were actually carriers of the contagion. When I received the news, I knew that I had made the wiser, safer choice to stay in Boston.

I did not realize we take comfort in the mundane until it is taken away from us. I find myself trapped and bored in my studio apartment. When I looked out of my window again, I found that the Asian girl has now moved out, too. Maybe she decided to go home.



Figure 15: view from my apartment (day)

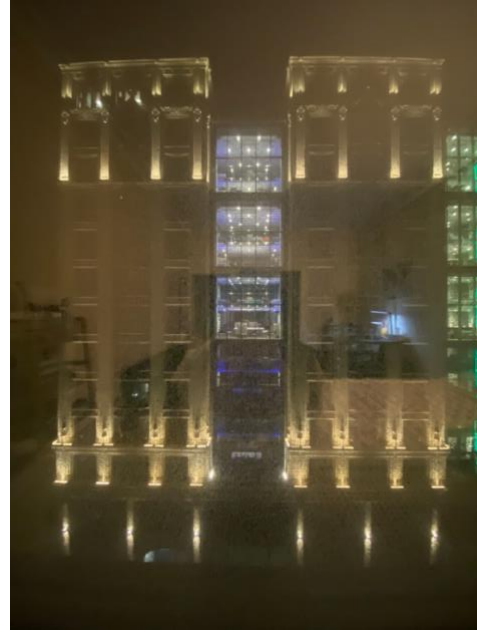


Figure 16: view from my apartment (night)

While I wait for the lights to turn on again, I find myself struck with a thought: we're not alone in being alone. We're all alone together.

As time slows down, may the empty world heal.