

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Ann Lipsett

God Bless This Mess

I hate the expression: “cleanliness is close to Godliness”, not only as an obsessive-compulsive but as a living being with a heartbeat. I first became acquainted with this expression while I was acting in *The Miracle Worker* in high school, where ironically, I played the maid to the Keller family. Anyway, this expression is what Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher would tell her day in and day out. Anne taught Helen that cleaning up after herself is an essential step toward success, which I understand, especially in Helen Keller’s case. A girl who was both blind and deaf needed to understand the basic value of keeping herself clean if she ever wanted to move on to more advanced pursuits like reading and writing. But honestly, I don’t believe that “cleanliness is close to Godliness” at all. I think that God will bless us regardless of our respective messes, he just wants us to come out cleaner on the other side.

I’d give anything to be writing this in a coffee shop right now. Smiling at my boyfriend from across the thick wooden table, sipping on a dark roast coffee while pressing my pen to bleached white paper. The gentle hum of kettles and grinding of beans sounds like paradise compared to overhearing my neighbor’s power-washing while I write in my room. But the whiff of rich Colombian beans seems like an ever-disappearing memory now.

The COVID-19 riddled state of the world reflects the resiliency of the human race. People are grocery shopping for the elderly, having drive-by birthday parties, and donating to our essential workers, which are all testaments to the human spirit that should be celebrated. But simultaneously, Americans, in their gas-chugging pick-up trucks, with automatic guns tucked under their arms, are raiding Wal-Mart for every last roll of toilet paper in stock.

And that’s scary. It’s so unsettling not to know when things will go back to normal when I can sit with my pink sparkly laptop and sip dark roast. I’m not even sure that I’ll be able to do that again, at least not like before. I don’t know when I’ll be able to add creamer to my cup and watch it swirl into the blackness of the coffee, lightening it, if only for a second before it slides past my lips.

My boyfriend, the same one that I wish I was sipping coffee with, says that my child-like spirit is infectious, and I believe him. I am a child at heart. This fact is confirmed by the Rapunzel doll that lays on my bed and the *Peter Pan* poster plastered to my wall as I’m writing this. I have been watching cartoons daily and listening to the Finding Nemo soundtrack as I write for years. I eat more than my fair share of chicken nuggets and adore ice cream. My personality is pink and sparkly- there’s no other way to put it. But this year at college, I started to become a full-fledged adult... sort of.

I’m not graduating this year, thankfully, but I did leave my friends, my apartment, and a relevant internship at a reputable non-profit to travel back to New Jersey to shelter in place. Now I’m left with no choice but to sit in my childhood home and worry, not only about COVID-19 but also

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

the sense of independence that I was forced to throw out of my penthouse balcony, in favor of feeling guilty about not spending every conscious moment at home with my family.

But this past year I started to get settled into college life. I had two roommates with whom I was close, threw legendary parties where people set movie tickets on fire at my apartment, and had a car that could transport me and my emptying wallet to IKEA on a whim. For the first time, I felt like a true adult, not bound by the rules of parents or on-campus living. And I'm terrified that my sense of independence has been permanently castrated by the COVID-19 quarantine.

But I know this isn't true. This is just how my Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder works. Despite being obsessive-compulsive, I don't wash typically my hands profusely or spray down my room with Lysol, even though this pandemic is forcing me to do so. No, my OCD simply tries to convince me that falsities are true. It's like my OCD is a news network devoted entirely to pushing fake news in my face, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It tries to convince me that every story is rooted in truth, even though I know that the news is just that-fake. Still, my OCD gnaws at my brain, forcing me to spend hours analyzing the merit of thoughts that I know are meritless.

As one can imagine, this quarantine has been an effective vehicle for my OCD to torture me. However, my OCD has gradually been silenced through this stay-at-home order because I have been able to spend copious amounts of time writing. This is all I want to do with my life- I want to write. Hopefully, I'll be lucky enough to be accepted into an MFA program next year, where I can devote two years not only to my craft but also to teaching others about the complexities of writing that boil just beneath the surface. Mainly, that writing can be the ultimate form of escapism, as it has been for me in these trying times. I have a nearly twenty-one-page fiction piece that proves that I feel more at home on that page than I do, well, at home.

This quarantine has allowed me to cement exactly who I want to be in the future, a writer, and I'm thankful for that. I'm remised, however, that I had to have this realization in my childhood home, not at the apartment that served as a testament to my independence. But, honestly, sometimes the best self-exploration is untidy and doesn't play out according to plan.

But I still don't think that "cleanliness is close to Godliness" because, in the end, God will not judge our mess. He will not judge our college experience or OCD. He will not judge us for our handling of COVID-19, for our refusal to wear masks or social distance. In the end, He will judge us on how we power through as a society, how we cope with the cards dealt with us, how we love thy neighbor. And in these truly difficult times, all we can do is work on who we are internally, messy and dirty- or not if we ever want to come out clean on the other side.