

2020—Can I hit restart? - Katie Grossman
(Adult Fiction, First Place Winner)

I am putting some thoughts to paper to remember the last six months.

This story begins on New Year's Eve 2019; I am surrounded by friends in their finest. We are dancing and enjoying cocktails on the deck overlooking the swanky golf course that Anna had reserved for her wedding reception. We are in the mood for reminiscing; what better time than New Year's Eve. Overall it was a good year but we are excited for 2020 and the new decade. As we toasted with champagne at midnight, looking around at my friends, I felt fortunate to have them in my life.

Becky, Anna, Mike, Jessie and I have been friends since college. We don't get together often since we scattered across the country after graduation but this was a special night with everyone in town for Anna's wedding weekend. We are filled with hope that 2020 will be our best year yet. As the party wound down and the year drew to a close, we bid our goodbyes but were full of the promise that a new year always holds. I don't think any of us could imagine what this next year would bring...

Chapter One - Becky

Becky is my adventurous amiga who loves to travel the globe making friends everywhere she goes. She did a stint in the Peace Corp after college and has continued her traveling passion ever since. This time she had her bags packed for Australia with plans to volunteer at a preschool there. She had never flown that far and was understandably a little anxious. I texted her words of encouragement and had sent a travel kit full of her favorite treats to keep her occupied on the flight.

As she boarded, we made plans to keep in touch despite the different time zones. She seemed excited and nervous. She had said it was the hottest and driest year in Australia but felt fully prepared with the appropriate clothing in her suitcase.

When she finally landed, her plans were quickly derailed. Turns out the winds had shifted and fires were raging near the airport in Canberra. She had to take shelter in a nearby convention center and found out that the preschool where she was slated to volunteer at was not going to be open due to the spreading wildfires. The fires had been raging on for months but had not come this close to Canberra until now. Her hopes of volunteering with children were quickly dashed; she instead enlisted to help battle the wildfires that were devastating the countryside.

As she quickly learned, the fires have ravaged most of the country, destroying 27 million acres and thousands of homes. People have perished and billions of indigenous animals have died. She stayed on for the fire effort for two months before returning home. Becky made friends with some fellow firefighters; her closest friend Timothy was overcome by smoke inhalation after the winds quickly shifted spreading smoke and fire too close to him.

Becky decided to return home after that loss. She is still dealing with the emotional scars of that trip but she is glad to be alive. The fires are still wreaking their havoc across Australia. She is now trying to figure out her next steps. Because life goes on... for some.

Chapter Two - Jessie

Jessie is originally from Mexico and has many family members still in Mexico. He had not seen some of his family in years. His aunt, uncle and cousins had finally made plans to visit him; he had been looking forward to seeing them for months. He missed his aunt's homemade corn tortillas and he hadn't seen his little cousins in years. Jose was 10 now and Juan was 6. Jessie was excited to take them to a soccer match and had scouted out all of the local ice cream shops in preparation for their visit. They loved sports; watching and playing anything with a ball was their passion. And they loved American food so Jessie was stocked with junk food galore. He got a call on the morning they were to arrive; the entire family had been detained at the border. His aunt and uncle had been robbed at gunpoint in Mexico and stripped of their passports and other identification. They had been beaten and lost their shoes and clothing.

They were arrested by border patrol and were assumed to be illegal immigrants seeking refuge. His little cousins had been separated from their parents and were placed into a tent-city shelter in Texas. Without proper identification, his aunt and uncle had been turned away at the border. Jessie hopped on a plane and was frantically trying to get to his cousins. He had heard stories about the conditions in these tent cities. It is hard to believe that in the US such conditions could exist, especially for children.

He met with the border agents and pleaded his case. Fortunately, he had pictures of his family that he was able to use to prove their identity. Jose and Juan were eventually released to his custody but not before they had witnessed a few fellow children at the shelter die from untreated infections. This tragedy will surely have long-lasting effects for his family. Jessie is still trying to reunite his family and feels lucky that he got his cousins out alive. So many families have not had this same outcome. He is still picking up the pieces for his family. Because life goes on... for some.

Chapter Three - Me

I have been working at my local hospital for the last five years. I love seeing my patients on rounds and feel satisfied when I can discharge them home feeling much better than when they arrived. However, in early March everything changed. Covid-19 had entered the US and was spreading at a rapid pace. Our hospital was preparing for the worst; we had read and heard horror stories about hospitals overflowing in New York and body bags piled up in trucks outside the hospital since the morgue was full. This virus was unlike any virus we had encountered before; highly contagious and more fatal.

Fear and panic were spreading through our ranks. Our team was preparing to care for these patients. We had to don masks, gowns, gloves and eyeglasses to protect ourselves. Hospital supplies were critically low.

I ordered some goggles on Amazon and prepared for my first shift. When I took the call from the ER physician, I knew I was dealing with my first Covid-19 patient. The test wouldn't be back for days but she had every symptom that would be expected; high fever, loss of taste and smell, extreme fatigue, cough, shortness of breath and body aches. As I am taking her history I can't help but wonder if I have been exposed. Throughout the evening her condition worsened and she had to be moved to the ICU and placed on the ventilator.

She was the first of many patients that were afflicted by the virus. My new routine involved wearing a mask everywhere, submitting to daily checkpoints to ensure that I was not having symptoms of concern, stripping down in my garage when I get home from work and showering immediately thereafter. As the weeks passed, our area was put into lockdown and we had to shelter in place. Colleagues were furloughed from work since patient censuses were down. Patients were too afraid to come to the ER and all elective surgeries were canceled due to the virus.

Work became a source of stress and worry; everywhere I looked colleagues and team members were working harder than ever but also dealing with job insecurity. As the death count rose, we had to adapt to this “new normal” with Covid, in addition to helping patients coming in with other illnesses. Friends were losing loved ones. And to top it off, people were protesting the restrictions in Lansing as an impingement on their constitutional rights. Some even felt that Covid was a conspiracy and not a real threat.

I have learned so much about people in these last few months. It makes me worried for our future. It feels like there are two different countries with two different realities. I have to come to terms with how to deal with my feelings on that moving forward. I am grateful to have my health but many have not been so lucky. I continue to take it one day at a time. Because life goes on... for some.

Chapter Four - Mike

Mike has been a practicing dentist in Washington and over the years has built up a successful dental practice. He had assembled a great team and had a beautiful office in downtown Seattle. As the Covid-19 virus spread across Washington, his practice was forced to close for safety reasons. He had not expected to be shut down for so long. His loyal team was really struggling and many had to go on unemployment. His office manager, Susan, was having an exceptionally hard time. Her husband had also been deemed a non-essential worker and had been laid off. Her son Matthew was doing school from home, which was a challenge for a first-grader. They were having trouble making ends meet.

Mike was close with the family and was helping out the best he could with meals and assistance with their unemployment claims. He could tell that Susan’s husband, Steve was not coping well. One night Steve went out to the grocery store and never returned.

He was later found in the park in his car; a single shot to his left temple had claimed his life. The stress of it all had been too much. Lives were permanently changed. Susan and Mike will forever hold the scar of this needless tragedy. Mike was just given the go-ahead to reopen his practice but it will never be the same. He will never be the same. But he is trudging forward. Because life goes on... for some.

Chapter Five - Anna

Anna just married the love of her life, Tony on New Year’s Eve. She and Tony were set up by a mutual friend and were an instant match. They were living in Atlanta in separate apartments; after the wedding they moved to a house in the suburbs and were adjusting to life in their new home. They were both very active and loved to run, play soccer and just be outdoors. Their wedding was such a special time. Friends traveled from all over the country to share in their joy.

Anna was excited to be welcomed into Tony’s large extended family. She didn’t have any siblings so she was thrilled to get to know Tony’s brothers and sister. They all lived in Atlanta and would often get together on Sundays for dinner. Anna loved to visit with them, especially Tony’s younger brother, Ahmaud.

Ahmaud shared in their joy of running and was known to run in his neighborhood nearly every day. He would usually run rain or shine; he often shared that he felt it was the best way to start his day. Anna and Tony got some horrific news about Ahmaud one week after their one-month anniversary; Ahmaud had

been chased, shot and killed while out on his daily run. Someone had gone so far as to videotape the encounter and it had been released to the public.

Anna had seen examples of prejudice and racism over the years with Tony; she had noted the occasional comments that Tony would have to endure from people who didn't know the two of them. She had often wondered how Tony just let it roll off his back; his reality was so much different than her own coming from a white family. Now the worst had come to fruition; rampant racism had hit close to home. She and Tony grieved and laid their brother to rest.

The course of their lives had forever changed; battling racism was going to be at the forefront of their life moving forward. They will never forget their fallen brother. They are preparing to endure the next chapter of legal battles and trials of the killers. Tony and Anna have never been more acutely aware of the differences in their life experiences because of the color of their skin. Tony's family is protesting and fighting for justice for Ahmaud. Because life goes on... for some.

Chapter Six - Five Lives Changed Forever

So, as I reflect back on the first six months of 2020, I can't believe all of the trauma that my friends and I have endured. We had never expected these turns of events when we were ringing in the New Year at Anna and Tony's wedding. It is hard to believe such a joyous occasion could be followed by a combination of tragedies that the world has not seen before.

I know one thing is for sure; we are all changed from the crises of the last six months and nothing will ever be the same. Sure, over time our grief may lessen, our lives may take on some semblance of normalcy again but in our minds and souls we are forever changed. I only hope going forward that we can take these traumas and turn them into positive action. I will no longer sit back and let life pass me by; I for one am going to be getting involved, speaking out and making a difference for the people I love and the people that have been lost.

I do have hope for the future.

We have all weathered the storms and come out different people, but we still have each other which counts for a lot. In the end we are all humans sharing the same planet; experiencing the highs and lows that life brings and working towards common goals.

Without walking in another's shoes we cannot truly understand the challenges that we all face. But I am just grateful for family, friendships and open minds. I hope the next chapter gives us the glimmer of hope that we all need. For me that would be a start. Because life goes on... for some.

And those that were lost will always be remembered.