Covid-19 and the Teens

“We tried to launch but the ground crumbled,” Anna says.

The initial busyness of the fall has caused the pain of the past few months to fade so that they can now be faced with humour. Anna and I both laugh at her remark as we find a seat at our local cafe. The limited seating is filled only by university students, most of them we recognize as our high school peers. Their textbooks open on the table, laptops humming and searching for the weak pulse of the cafe wifi and their tired eyes focusing intently on the task at hand is a reflection of the hardships of university but even more so, university during a pandemic. Anna and I stand out, our laptops still concealed in our bags call us to join the others but we resist and sit outside with only our coffees on the table.

“It’s just a bit sad isn’t it. We’re missing so much, ” she says.

I feel Anna’s comment speaks for everyone during these times, but perhaps rings more true for all the young people who had plans to move away this year or go to school. Covid-19 has restricted young people's lives so that they can no longer enter the world with the same security and foundation that people experienced in the past. Students in high school and university are not able to meet face to face with their peers and in turn have lost the ability to connect with people who have more in common than high school friends of geographical circumstance. Students cannot create the same relationships with teachers and profs that used to inspire them or hold them accountable. With no class rooms or class social dynamics the element of student competition is gone. Why go to a good school when you could go to community college for cheaper and still from your house? There are no parties, no meet n’ greets, no concerts, no clubs, no events, no where to meet people - you get almost the same experience from your house. Where can young people find love? Friendship? Inspiration? It’s a dark world in the pandemic, the loss of university culture is felt by all young people.

Our conversation is briefly interrupted as a large group of teens walk by our tables towards the bus stop, their conversation only mildly muffled as they put on their masks on. Port Moody is a very lively city and is filled with young people, the high school aged kids dominate the small businesses and are always seen out with friends along the shoreline trail. In the Ioco area where I’m from, Port Moody feels very much like a small town and that's why Anna I aren't surprised that we recognize the group as students from our high school. Like us they had nowhere else to go for lunch and came here, one of the few remaining community spaces. We sit in the centre of Newport Village, a popular community area filled with little shops and grocers, and watch as they wait for the bus to take them back up to class.

“It was crazy that they get to go back, we went on spring break and never returned.”

Anna and I take the time to think back on how the spring was for Port Moody. Though our small town felt like it was a bubble, a safe haven from the virus numbers in Vancouver, we were not exempt from the extreme behaviour that was displayed by people all over the world. Immediately small shops started closing, toilet paper could not be found unless you went three cities over and every open area, every field, every playground and forest trail was closed off to the public. With Port Moody essentially shut down, the only place for people to be was out walking the trails, a previously very quiet spacious activity that was now being flooded with people - it was impossible to go out for a run or even pass people. “It was at this time that I thought - community, there should be less of it”. I laugh but the case is still true today.

“ There was nowhere to go, nowhere to be. I was retreating”

Anna expresses that she did not mourn the loss of graduation as much as the last few weeks of school. The loss of academic motivation was strong as we completed high school alone in our rooms anticlimactically on a random Wednesday night. The solitude increased as gathering restrictions caused us to choose from among our friends, it was tough to finish high school with less friends than when we started. There was no place to meet new people safely or make an income to activities with people in our circle. It was hard to enjoy the extra time as we all felt the weight of school year in the distance.

“I was hoping to save for school during the summer, but I was laid off two times in one week so that was a bit sad.”

So many of us were depending on a summer job to take us over into the school year, whether that was to afford the education or to have some funds to build off of in the future. Anna had plans to live in residence at the University of Victoria to study marine biology, and though she had many scholarships she still needed some money to cover her cost of living.

“But once I decided that I wasn’t going to school the summer was really good, no one went away or had any plans. It was a classic teen summer.”

After the chaos of the spring, the summer was an amazing opportunity to grow closer as a group of friends as everyone’s plans were lost to Covid-19. We barely spent any time in city spaces as the weather allowed us to be together outside staying safe in nature. As we arrive in the fall, it seems that this quickly will not be the case. The weather has already gotten increasingly cooler as daylight recedes.

“Most of our friends have moved away or are in school and I’m still in Port Moody, I’m not doing school, I’m working two jobs and taking high school calculus.”

The fall is shocking as we are forced to come to terms with our new realities. We wait anxiously for the winter and the lack of mobility we will have.

“I’m concerned for the winter, I feel that it will be a very lonely time”

Anna and I discuss the idea of building a shed to live in my yard so that we’ll have a place to stay and see each other in the winter. We accept that it may be a lonely Christmas as well, none of our friends anticipate being able to come home during the holidays nor will we be able to visit family.

Overall it seems that our group has seen many changes in the past months. “We didn’t get to enter adulthood the way we wanted to. Our friends were first refined then scattered everywhere, it’s really just you and me now. It’s going to be hard to meet new people and find motivation from our basements and cafes, it’ll get old. And I’ve taken a gap year like tons of other students, but who knows how many of them will actually go back to school, I know I’m struggling to want to. I wonder how this will impact the number of highly educated people I future? The number of people entering university? Perhaps this will only add to the fast paced world as people will take online university as well as managing home life and a job. I’m curious to see where our year will end up.”