

[CURRENT ISSUE](#)[PAST ISSUES](#)[SUBMISSION GUIDELINES](#)[MASTHEAD](#)

EVERYONE HERE IS FINE

by Cynthia Allen

I'm suddenly a housewife like my mother, procuring groceries at different markets, cleaning dog hair off the kitchen floor, and promptly serving dinner weeknights at 6:00 pm. At first, I welcome the busyness, but as three weeks roll into four and six and eight, my patience wears thin. I'm doing what my mother trained me to do: anticipate and prepare. Before the shutdown in New Jersey and New York, I stocked up on toilet paper and frozen vegetables, filled prescriptions and reordered make-up and eye cream. I have enough root rescue powder and spray to camouflage an army of grey. Everyone says I look 20 years younger than my age. I want to keep it that way.

My 30-year-old son has left his apartment in Hoboken and is working from his bedroom. My husband shuttered his business and now spends his time refining his workout routine. On alternate days he lifts weights in the basement and runs long distance outdoors. When they both pop their heads into the kitchen at noon and ask, what's for lunch, I want to scream.

The young mother across the street says she doesn't know how she'll survive without her housekeeper. Who will do the laundry and make the beds? Of course, she's paying her, for now. This tall, athletic blonde is not much older than my own two sons who've grown up with someone other than their mother cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors, not because I was better than that, but because I worked hard and could afford to pay. She walks past her empty garbage cans, two days at the curb, something I've noticed my older son do coming back from a run. How is it that neither of them see?

Entenmann's cake, and thought nothing of hitting the sales at both Shoprite and the A&P on the same day. She grew up without a mother, shuttled from one relative to the next, and slept wherever there was a bed. My mother knew how it felt when the supply chain broke.

I remember once, a trip to Pennsylvania, to visit my great aunt Helen, the matriarch who'd sheltered my mother and her cousins. I walked through room after room separated by heavy curtains hanging from the ceiling to protect the sleepers' privacy. It's a dream that still haunts me. The mother I knew slept on a satin pillow.

I've never been to Costco, Walmart, or Trader Joe's. My mother's pride informs my shopping. She always said it was better to have one or two good outfits a season than to wear cheap clothes. That was in the 1960's, when every purchase was precious.

Then in 1979, I moved to New York City. Each morning, I waded through a river of homeless people as I walked through Union Square to my office on Park Avenue South. Looking smart in a camelhair coat borrowed from my roommate, I played the part of the young executive. No one knew I was a subway token away from being on the street.

In my eighth week of isolation, I see how little I need to get by. I wear and wash and wear the same jeans and T-shirts. I don't always change my socks. Somedays I shower, but don't wash my hair. Make-up and eye cream stand unopened on a shelf. I drink my morning coffee with a view to the street, hungry for companionship. My mother used to say there were days when the only person she talked to was the mailman. Now, we can't even say hello. A car pulls up across the street and a woman gets out. She drags the garbage can from the curb, wearing a mask and gloves.

Estelle, my cleaning lady from El Salvador, called before the lockdown to tell me she was scared. She and her husband Manny came to the US as teenagers in 1982, when young people in their country were disappearing. After all these years, they finally had enough money to buy their first house. I text Estelle to ask how it's going, wondering when I will see her again. Estelle texts back that she and Manny tested positive last week, but "we're recovering well." I ask about her pregnant daughter and her son who works at Whole Foods. "Everyone's fine," she says.

hearts and flowers and a photo of the check I'm putting in the mail. *Everyone here is fine.*

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