

CORONA DRIVE-THROUGH

JOHN HOVEY[∞]

In this personal essay, John Hovey documents his experience traveling through a Washington suburb to receive a COVID-19 test, a trip that marked one of the few times he has left prison since his incarceration as a teenager. In the essay, John observes how much of America has changed, but also what has remained the same. He notes the contradictions of the scene, and of his place within it, and ponders what will come of this time in our country.

A Washington prisoner gets a glimpse of small-town holiday Americana during the pandemic...

Just as the Washington prison system endured another COVID-19 outbreak in several facilities, including the quarantined prison where I am incarcerated, I was unexpectedly taken out into the community for a December COVID-19 test.

Ordinarily, prisoners are tested when they are symptomatic, or if there has been contact with an infected individual, such as the guards who bring the virus into the institution, or if there is a suspected outbreak in an area of the prison. And of course, prison is always a fishbowl of disease and hazard anyway. But in my case, I had been scheduled for some unrelated medical procedures, and, understandably, the doctors first wanted to make sure I wouldn't bring the virus into the small local hospital.

For me, incarcerated since I was a teenager, it would be a rare journey through small-town Washington suburbia, one of the very few times I've been allowed to view the free world after being caged for decades under a life sentence.

First, I was given the mandatory pandemic-era temperature check by a prison medical worker waving a noncontact Star Trek-style thermometer. Once my customary 97.1 degrees was confirmed, my other vitals were taken and I was ready to be prepped for transport.

For most American prisoners, transport consists of armed guards, a security-modified vehicle, and a fluorescent target-practice jumpsuit, wrapped in manacles, shackles and chains. I exited the prison, pale, sunken-eyed and rattling like a ghost in a Dickens' story.

Sometimes we are in windowless vans, but this time I was luckily blessed with a window. In the facility where I am caged, unusually, the cells have no windows, not even jail-style portholes. Even the housing unit lacks windows. It is a dreary existence, without even a glimpse of clouds or sun or birds to interrupt the bleak view of concrete and metal and hatred.

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I stared out of the van, wide-eyed, soaking in the landscape, unwilling to blink for fear of missing a new image. The weather was mild and pleasant despite the mid-December Pacific Northwest setting, with calm skies and scattered grey clouds. Oddly, ducks were the most common birds waddling around this holiday season, flapping around the wet evergreen trees and splashing in the ponds. The only other animals were dogs, leashed and taken for walks by occasional pedestrians, or bounding along unencumbered as their owners jogged down uncharacteristically empty streets.

Upon arrival at the hospital, it became apparent that the test would be a drive-through, as we idled in the parking lot in our masks. A friendly nurse in a sci-fi cybernetic spacesuit wandered out, carrying her paraphernalia. The 3M ventilator belt and plastic-visored helmet gave her voice a metallic echo. The COVID-19 test consisted of questions, signatures on a clipboard, and a long wooden swab jabbing the sinuses. The test can feel unpleasant and invasive if someone is unaccustomed to medical procedures, but if done correctly and compassionately, it is quick and painless, albeit uncomfortable. The trepidation is probably worse than the momentary nasal contact. Your eyes may water for a bit, and your nose may feel irritated, but it passes.

The test ended and we were off again. I was free to concentrate on the view and enjoy the sights. It was the holiday season, fortuitously – a winter holiday occurring in a strange new world ravaged by politics, protests, and pandemics. Christmas songs played on the car radio, adding to the surreal nature of the experience. As the car glided through the narrow streets, I saw holiday decorations and other relentless reminders of the season everywhere.

It was a Monday morning in the small city, so it was difficult to tell just how abnormal the deserted streets were. Parking lots were filled with cars, presumably with employees filling the buildings. All the sidewalks were empty, as were the shuttered strip malls and food courts. Fast food franchises were mostly operating as drive-throughs. Theaters and entertainment centers had chained entrances. The infrequent pedestrians, usually alone and unmasked, furtively shuffled away to their destinations. Down the maze of winding streets and nestled cul-de-sacs, there were no children to be seen, not even in backyards. All the kids were almost certainly indoors staring at various computer screens, suffering virtual school, or sampling YouTube, playing videogames, and texting or Zooming their friends. Phones and televisions and other screens had already been keeping Americans social distancing from each other long before the pandemic required it.

It was impossible to miss that the town was already celebrating the holiday season, especially Christmas, the most blatantly commercial of all holidays. Some homes had more religious-themed displays, like Christian nativity scenes, and a couple of yards with gigantic light-up menorahs. But the decorations were overwhelmingly secular, and often quite garish.

Another strange thing I noticed was that while many of the houses displayed holiday decorations, a lot featured not lights and reindeer, but American flags and political signs. Some of the flags were enormous. But a home almost never had both; it would seem jingoism was at odds with the holiday spirit. Still, it was a bizarre and

demonstrative juxtaposition of the two Americas we live in, the flipsides of a coin. One friendly and lighthearted and hopeful, the other divisive and troubled and stark.

Even so, visually, the commercial exuberance overpowered everything else. Beyond the glowing, flashing, twinkling lights and ornamented trees were character classics like Santa Claus and reindeer, along with many iconic pop-culture figures from Rudolph and Frosty to Baby Yoda and the Simpsons, and even some Pokémon. I was surprised by the number of human-sized inflatable Snoopy dogs, some in Santa suits, some on his doghouse. Everywhere, life-size plastic figures and wire-frame reindeer outlined the yards and rooftops. One house even showcased a particularly impressive Christmas dragon, red and green with enormous wings, festooned with tinsel and lights. A couple of stray, forgotten jack-o'-lanterns and tombstones made me wish my trip had occurred on Halloween!

The last time I actually walked the sidewalks of America, I was sixteen years old. In many ways, I was now visiting an alien planet. So much of it looked the same, but under the surface, everything had changed. A parallel universe, an alternate reality. But decades after being exiled from the free world, the teenager trapped within still felt a thrill seeing these ornate decorations and Snoopys, and the beautiful cozy little homes, crammed tightly together in cramped neighborhoods where real estate is apparently at a premium. Quite a marked contrast to the filthy, dingy repetition of colorless concrete boxes filled with cages and despair that is prison. I envied those deserted streets of fresh air and open environment, when the majority of my life has been wasted away in the ugly overcrowded diseased hellhole prisons of America's hidden underbelly, surrounded by sociopathy and suffering.

A couple of days later, my COVID-19 test negative, I made the return trip to the hospital for the actual procedures. I was off before dawn, which meant I was able to see the same city sights, but in darkness. It was fascinating to see the explosion of color from all the holiday lights. Some yard displays were so bright they lit up the entire street. Others were so massive and elaborate they must have used enough electricity to drain a power plant. I never realized residential house outlets could handle so much extravagance.

Aside from some obvious weird technological advances, such as bland electric cars charging at ports, or expensive digital billboards and public screens displaying news and ads, the small, northern American town looked largely unchanged since at least the eighties, if not much earlier.

All in all, I experienced a perfect tableau of current American chaos, a snapshot of the conflicted American experience – the promise of capitalistic idealism, the contentious ideological political divide, the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the lives and hearts and souls of the people, and upon the economy. But transcending that, there is the survival of the lost dream – the small-town goodwill of average, decent people just trying to get by and hoping to bring a smile to their neighbors' faces for a winter season, to help the children laugh and play again, to feel safe in the face of a deadly global pandemic, an unprecedented nightmare in modern times.

And all of this as viewed through a car window by one of America's state-sanctioned perpetual victims, a lifer who can neither live nor die. A lone representative of the millions of impoverished, disenfranchised human beings

incarcerated in tiny cages stacked in giant fortress warehouses, the unseen silent suffering commodity that fuels the vast, greedy, unholy Prison Industrial Complex, the profitable repository of the deeply flawed discriminatory Criminal Justice System. America's dirty little secret, exempt from any oversight or reform. Prisoners, the only minority that everyone is allowed and encouraged to hate and despise and oppress. The living dead, forgotten and abandoned by modern society, ostracized from our allegedly advanced, enlightened twenty-first century utopia.

What then shall be the new America that ultimately emerges from this pandemic of viruses and brutality and prejudice and ignorance?