

One Last Trip With My Old Face by Sylvia Whelan

2022 was a year of big changes for me. All in one year I went to my first concert, saw my first movie in theaters, went to my first convention, took my first trip out state, my first trip by plane, and attended my first wedding after the world shut down in March of 2020. My trip out of state and my trip by plane were one and the same, and were for the aforementioned wedding, that of my friend and college roommate to his high school sweetheart. It was a memorable and very enjoyable trip that reminded me of life's potential for fun and excitement which I had forgotten during the lockdown.

In college, I was not yet out as trans, so I was, to all appearances, a guy, and thus all my roommates were also guys. Sophomore year I had an amazing roommate, a charismatic young man from Chicago named John. We met in the dorms freshman year and decided to rent an apartment together. He was an amazing person—smart, athletic, funny, a martial artist and foreign language prodigy—and I really enjoyed his friendship. He left for another school after that year and ended up using his language skills to find employment overseas. As the years passed, we lost touch, occupied by our own busy lives.

It was only later, during lockdown, that we reconnected and caught up on each other's lives. Like everyone else, I was living my life online, fluctuating between bored and anxious and morbidly fascinated by all that was going on. I made many online friends during that time and also reached out to various old friends whose phone numbers or social media accounts I still had. John and I got back in touch, and I learned he was back in the states, still with his girlfriend. John learned I was now a woman and a lawyer.

Flash forward to 2022. While the virus was still wreaking havoc, I was gradually, cautiously, stepping out of my pandemic cocoon, going to movies, going to concerts, eating in restaurants, but always with great trepidation and always with my N95, or maybe just a KF-94 if I felt brave. I had also begun to work on my transition again. I had just begun to live as a woman full-time shortly before the pandemic, but my transition, like everything else, was put on hold while COVID-19 raged across the globe. As the virus receded, I began to work on my transition again and scheduled a surgery for facial feminization for early November.

Out of the blue, John sends me an invite to his wedding. He and his longtime girlfriend, the woman I'd heard him on the phone with and skyping for hours almost every night in college, were finally getting married, and he had been kind enough to include me. There was just one problem, the wedding was in Chicago. I live in California. I had never been to Chicago and had not flown since I went to my grandfather's funeral in Philadelphia all the way back in 2015. Indeed, I'd not traveled out of the state since 2015. My only real travel during the pandemic proper were a few fleeting trips to my girlfriend, who lived several hours from me.

Closest I'd had to a vacation since the pandemic had begun was an overnight trip to see the singer Mitski in San Francisco earlier that March. Travelling out of state for a two-day event would require time off and with a surgery on the horizon, I had precious little to spare. What's more was the fear of Covid. The wedding was little more than two weeks before the surgery and with incubation and recovery times, I might miss it if I contracted the virus en route or at the event. While the fact that John did ask all guests to test before both the rehearsal and the wedding, and to not attend if they had symptoms, gave me some reassurance, neither FTA nor airlines were requiring masking or testing for flights anymore at that time, so there was no avoiding exposure en route and on my way home.

Despite my worries, I decided to go ahead. I got the bivalent booster, bought an elastomeric n95 respirator, and booked a flight and a hotel. In the wee small hours of the morning, Saturday, I hopped a plane from Fresno, stopping briefly in Los Angeles for a connecting flight. Traveling again, and by myself, was exhilarating. There were so many people going so many places and I was one of them. I felt the warmth of random human connection talking to my seatmates on the two flights—an older gentleman on the way to visit family, a young woman going to a new job—something the pandemic had taken from me.

Chicago was beautiful. I was enthralled by the size of Lake Michigan, more a sea than a lake, and crisp autumn air greeted me as I stepped outside the airport, which was a welcome break from the Central California heat. I met with John at the rehearsal dinner, and it wonderful see him again. He hadn't changed one bit, and I finally got to meet the partner he had talked about for so long. After dinner, I had the chance to meet up with some I met up with some newer friends, several trans women I'd met online during the pandemic. We met in Boystown, which I learned is the first officially recognized gay village in the U.S.A., I went to a gay bar for the first time since the pandemic started and we ended the night getting cupcakes from Jennivee's, a bakery owned by a trans Filipina. It was a wonderful night, reconnecting with an old friend, making online friends into "irl" ones, and being in the LGBT community in person, not just online.

The following day was just as enjoyable. I woke up, got my hair done for the wedding, and explored the city for a while. Chicago is a beautiful place, with some of the most amazing architecture I've seen in the America. But the wedding was the highlight of the trip. It was without a doubt one of the most extravagant affairs I've attended, with immense floral arrangements and a dessert table that I will probably dream about for years to come. John and his bride were the cutest couple, and all of their family and friends were such lovely people and so happy to see a romance that had lasted decades and endured thousands of miles of distance finally reach its next stage. We danced and celebrated until the early

morning hours, all the misery of the past two years of plague forgotten in this celebration of love. My feet were a bloody mess from it all when I finally got back to my hotel and took off my high heels, but I didn't care. I was living life, for the first time it seemed since March of 2020. The next day, with much sighing, I bid adieu to the Windy City, and caught my flight back home. Thankfully, I did not catch Covid, and was able to have my surgery the following month.

The pandemic was, and is, difficult for me. The loneliness, the fear of death and illness, the uncertainty, the lost opportunities and community, all hitting right as I entered my thirties and just as I began to live as my real self, they all took a toll on me, to say nothing about the virus itself when I ultimately caught it. I'll never get those years back, and probably never get over my anxiousness around the disease. I still mask and still feel my anxiety go through the roof whenever I hear someone cough or sneeze in public. But I also try to live and enjoy my life, and I will always remember my wonderful trip to Chicago for my friend John's wedding.