

Last week, on our drive home from a snowy hike at Lime Hollow, my son and I were stopped for the train on Port Watson St. As we were waiting in the car, a group of kids appeared on the sidewalk. They were preschool aged, and they walked very neatly in a row, like obedient little ducks on a trip to town. A dozen of them stood on the chilly sidewalk in between their teachers, and every one was wearing a face mask.

My son, who is 5, could not stop staring at them. "Look at those kids!" he said, his voice a mixture of longing and curiosity.

He hasn't been to school in almost a year. In 2020, the day after his 5th birthday, his preschool had its last day. The teachers kept in touch, sending videos and project ideas. Jamie, not interested in spending long amounts of time at the computer, usually ignored the lessons. But since spring was more or less on its way, we played outside a lot. Every morning, he would pull my hand and lead me to the stone wall. It borders our yard on the street side, and the dark, shady crevices would be filled with slugs and snails.

My son, although fascinated by backyard wildlife and happy to have chickens and sticks for company, talks about his friends often, and spins wild plans for when he can see them again. "When Coronavirus is over...." he often intones. He mentions sleep-overs a lot (he's read about them in books) and daydreams about the toys in other kids' houses. But until that happens, he seems pretty content to play at home. We've evolved a loose schedule of sorts that involves playing, chores, walks, outdoor play, and books, books, and more books. We put books on hold, and walk to the library (it opened up again last summer, after a few empty months). We read about Arthur and DW, the Berenstains, Frances and Gloria. Fancy Nancy. Curious George. Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder. We play games and bake. He helps me with the laundry -- he prides himself on how forcefully he can fling the clothes and towels into the back of the washer. He mixes the batches of bread and cookies. Decides which music we're going to listen to. Feeds the cat and helps me check the mail. He is always there; we are whiling away the pandemic hours in our own little world.

Still, part of my mind is always a bit distracted-- worrying about cases rising, people dying. Worried that Americans will never be able to cope with serious climate change effects, for instance, if they can't even be bothered to wear a simple face mask. Wondering about the next pandemic -- there will be more in our lifetimes. My kindly grandfather, a nursing home resident for a scant 6 months, ended up contracting the virus in December. He died 6 days later. Sadness and anxiety are ever-present.

But the simplicity and joy of my days sustains me. My 12 year old daughter does her learning at home for half the week. She, my son, and myself eat breakfast and lunch together on those days. We take the dog for daily walks, marching up the hill behind our house in all types of weather, laughing and joking together.

I'll be glad to say goodbye to the dying, to the worry, and to the joblessness and despair that so much of humanity has suffered. But I know I won't regret the mornings searching for snails, the hours of reading library books, and the evenings with all of us around the table.