

Dec 23 Expat Guilt

Natalie Harris-Spencer

I blame the quarantine, but I also blame myself.

I blame myself because I emigrated two years ago, not because of war, or famine, or climate, but because of opportunity.

A Facebook copy-and-paste quiz goes viral: *Ask your kids these 16 questions and post their answers below.* My sister relays my nephew's responses, wins some likes from family and friends, some virtual chuckles.

How long does it take to get to America?

"500 seconds," he divines, while scissoring paper shapes from the kitchen floor, 3,756 miles away.

Wish this were true! I comment on my sister's wall. She loves my comment, clicks the heart. I consider that number, 500, its chunky sound to a four-year-old. Is 500 seconds too near or too far for him? He's so big now, and just like you might miss a cloud moving, I missed his growth.

"This is worse than the Blitz," my granny reports. "At least we could leave the air raid shelters, get some fresh air".

I'm always the one to call her. She doesn't know how to dial America, how to tap the correct numeric pattern on the landline phone with the curlicue cord.

I sit in the garret of my New Jersey townhouse. Beyond the window is the tease of cherry blossom, a cartoon pink against the grainy gables.

The old train line used to cut through our block. Ghost rail. It reminds me of disused London Underground stations. Aldwych. Brompton Road. Swiss Cottage. Wood Lane. Some repurposed. Some not.

I haven't seen my family since last December's holiday stress. Too many family members under one semi-detached roof at a time, too many M25 loops and Islington pubs. Miles too much mulled wine.

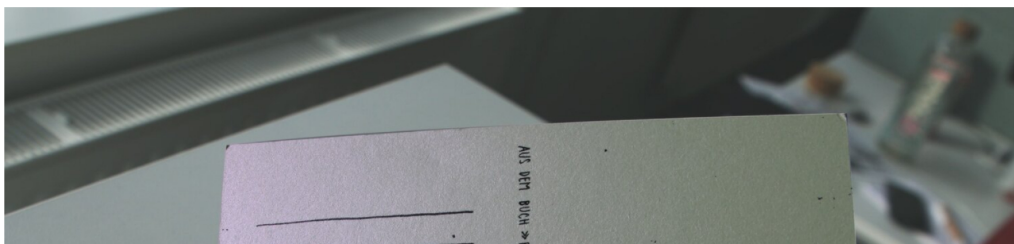
I ache to send a better message to England than from behind a Zoom window or through a telephone current. A special expat message: admitting to my not being there-ness, the selfish choice to live away. I would plead no contest.

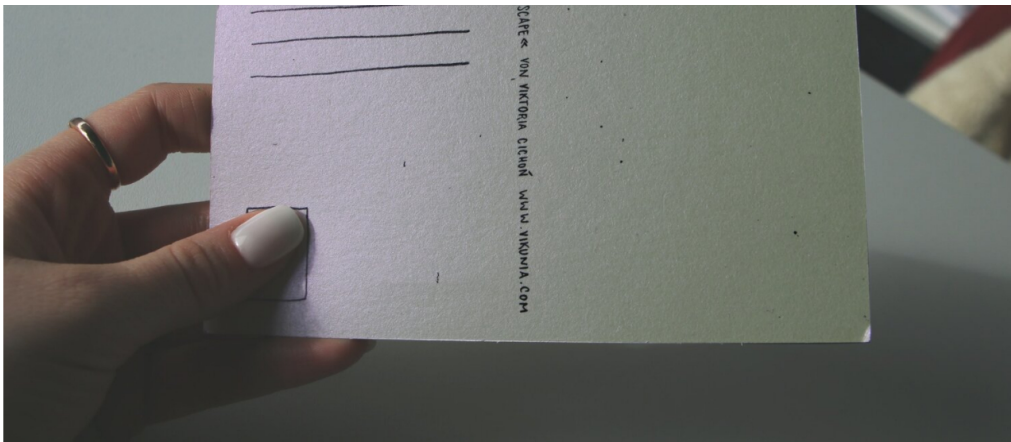
To Zack, four, Chigwell, Essex.

To Sylvia, ninety-six, Northampton.

The message should detail how I plan on gripping your shoulders, reassuring you that I'm here, I'm here, but instead it stutters out like a cipher, like the *bip-bip* of Morse code or the BBC Shipping Forecast. Rockall. Malin. Hebrides. Bailey.

I end all transatlantic calls to my family with a cheery lie: "See you soon". Anything to tranquilize my guilt.





Natalie Harris-Spencer is an English writer, digital editor, and blogger living in America. Her work has appeared in the Archipelago Fiction Anthology, the CultureCult Anthology, The Dark City, The Satirist, The Drabble, and more. She was selected by Oyster River Pages as one of their Emerging Fiction Voices, and has work upcoming in the Stonecoast Review. She is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Stonecoast, University of Southern Maine, and is currently working on her second novel. Natalie enjoys surprise in fiction. And tea. Three random facts about Natalie: she is a Climate Reality Leader, she performed in the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony, and she won a cat on Twitter.

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Non-Fiction

COVID-19, Lockdown, Family

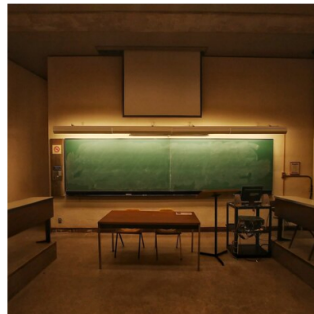
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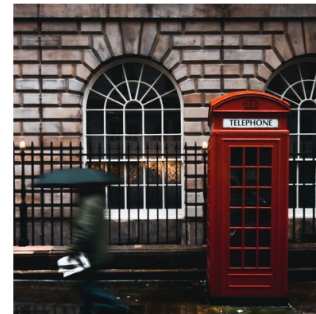
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