

After 12 months of coronavirus the Bay Area reflects on a year of loss, and a lost year

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The past year has been one of incomprehensible loss.

There is that number, of course: 530,000 dead and counting. The human mind is notoriously bad with big numbers — wasn't built, never evolved to really understand a figure of this magnitude. So, we talk about it in ways that feel more familiar. In euphemisms.

This loss is greater than the population of Sacramento or Fresno.

Or it's the equivalent of more than 2,690 planes, each with 197 passengers, crashing in one year. It's the number of lives lost on Sept. 11, 2001, 177 times over — a 9/11 every other day.

And then there is the other loss, less comprehensible, less tangible still — the loss of a year in our lives.

We're always losing time. Every day lived is, in some ways, a day lost. But the past year feels different. Like we've lost a year we never got to live.

On March 5, 2020, Rebecca Schmidt gave birth to her first child. She and her husband named him Santiago. By that point, COVID was in the news and on our minds.

At her prenatal screenings, they'd ask, "Do you have a fever? Do you have a cough?" Everybody had told her the first baby always comes late, but Santiago — "Santi" — came a little bit early. Sebastián Sánchez de Lozada, her husband, was still allowed in the delivery room. Just a few days later, that wouldn't have been the case.

They'd had so many plans for Santiago's first year of life. There were introductions to be made, to family in Bolivia and northern Virginia and Australia. "Something kind of silly in retrospect — but at the time it felt like a big deal — we did a lot of research on baby gear. We live in a small apartment. We really looked for compact baby stuff so that we could travel a lot."

At home with her newborn, Schmidt listened as the city grew quieter and quieter. Then one day, the Muni line outside went silent too. "It felt like as this thriving little baby was growing and getting bigger each day, the world was shutting down. It was this very eerie feeling."

Now, the year they'd imagined for so long has been lost. Schmidt and her husband still have Santiago, of course. Every day, she says, she learns something new about her son. But she doesn't spend time with other moms. And she can count on two hands the number of people her child has touched.

"There's this constant fear he hasn't met any other kids, really. He's seen them ... but he doesn't interact with other people, really. Except for his doctor. As we approach this first year milestone, that's one of the things that's really eaten at me."

We'll never really know all that we lost in the past year. Somewhere, someone never got to flirt and fall in love in a loud and smelly bar. We know, for a fact, that many women have left or lost their jobs during the pandemic. What have they lost, and what have we all lost, as a result? And what of the person who just retired, who had planned to finally travel or to read a book on some soft-sand beach? Maybe next year.

We're left to imagine, to speculate, and in some ways that's harder still.

Last winter, Julia Oller had applied for jobs "all around the country." She planned to go wherever the best job offer took her, and in the end, that meant San Francisco. She remembers the car ride from Ohio in late February, her parents, her cat and all her possessions crammed into a Honda Fit.

She imagined a year of going to concerts and making new friends, of trips to Los Angeles or maybe Big Sur, of being 25 in a brand new city.

Instead, the past 12 months have been quiet, filled with walks along Ocean Beach. She knows the city's outdoor stairways, and the best, most beautiful paths through the Sunset. But her only real connections here are her partner and her roommate.

"If you asked me to describe San Francisco culture, I couldn't tell you," she says. "I could tell you what the weather is like or good walking routes, but that's about it."

She's lost just being 25, too. She thinks about that sometimes. "It kind of comes in waves. You can't sit around and think 'I've lost a year of my life' every day," she says. Still, "I think I'm going to look back at this year and think, 'Wow. I was so lonely.' I don't really have an option to feel otherwise."

Oller was not alone in her loneliness. For so many of us, the past year has been one of lost connections.

The last dance party Frida Ibarra threw was Jan. 17 at the Stud, San Francisco's longest-running queer bar, a place where stars like Etta James and Sylvester once danced. The party, called T4T, was one she'd been hosting and DJing for a while, but this was the first time it was held at the Stud. It was Saturday night and the place was packed, all sticky and warm. "That really felt like the beginning of something new for T4T, where we were building this new community of trans folks and trans allies," Ibarra says. "It was honestly the best T4T ever."

That night, the future felt full of parties like that one.

Those parties are gone, and the Stud, as she knew it, is, too. Ibarra still DJs virtual parties — she even got voted Best DJ in the Bay Area by the readers of the website 48 Hills — but it's not the same. "I think we've all been grieving the dance floor."

When people talk about this lost year, there's almost always some sort of an acknowledgment. As though to say "what's a lost year, when so many have lost entire lives?"

"I'm a total crier," Chiara Wine says. She says it like an apology, like she's sorry for getting teary while talking about her lost year. A year she spent watching her daughter, a junior in high school, fall behind, racked with anxiety, and her son, a fifth-grader, miss out on all the milestones that come with the final year of elementary school. "They have all these things that have just been canceled and they're not going to get that time back."

She'd imagined a much different year, a "super busy, super scheduled" year. Her son would go on the school camping trip and to the school's Halloween celebration. She'd make the most out of one of the last years with her daughter before she graduated. "There's just such

limited time with her before she goes off to college,” Wine says, and she knows from her friends that kids don’t come home that often once that happens.

“We’re OK. We have a home. We’re not going to lose our house,” she says. She took a salary cut, but she hasn’t lost her job. There’s been none of the displacement or death that other families have suffered. Looking back, she says, “I feel like a lot of the things I have to say, I know so many other people feel the same way.”

She’s right, of course. The pandemic affected each of us differently, but we can all mourn the year we lost.

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