

In Progress

A COVID Journal

by Chavisa Woods

Part One: Breakthrough

Everyone keeps telling me they're exhausted.

Last week, my girlfriend asked me, "Why do you think everyone's so tired all the time?"

"Because we don't have anything to look forward to anymore," I told her matter-of-factly. I didn't even have to pause and think about it.

On the phone yesterday, with my dear friend Thain, a South African transplant to Bushwick, who makes his living practicing magic, I lamented, "I'm so tired *all* the time. My bones hurt. Every day, my head hurts. I feel like I'm made of lead. It is supreme exhaustion. I have to work in fits. I could sleep all day and all night. Why are we all so tired?" I asked him this forgetting that I already knew the answer.

"Because the anti-vaxxers were right, and the vaccine is slowly turning us all into lethargic zombies!"

He was making a joke. Unfortunately, I have to clarify that this absurd statement was a joke, and not something even my witchy friend, or I, actually believe.

I'm writing this from a very dark place.

In early July, I was diagnosed with a breakthrough case (contracted post-vaccination) of COVID-19. This was just before a wave of breakthrough cases swept the U.S., so at first, my case was thought of as very rare.

I began journaling my progress with the sickness. Ishmael Reed recently asked if he could publish these journal entries, which were partially posted in real-time on social

media, documenting my experience from the day I received my diagnosis, until... well, I'm honestly not sure what the end of this story will be. In some ways, my breakthrough COVID journal ended when my fever broke in July. But then I lost my sense of smell and taste, so in some ways, it ended when those senses began to come back. But in another more profound way, it's still going.

The thing about a story is, it can be as big or small as we're willing to tell it. All stories are truly as vast as the universe. Human history is also natural history. That our tales are never-ending is not a child's fantasy. One life ties to the next, and the generations before shape the world that shapes those who come after, on until infinity, or perhaps much sooner than that now. Everyone keeps reminding that the end of humanity is not actually the end of the Earth, but is it the end of stories?

With one good telling, this story started on July 8th 2021, and ended August 15th, when the worst of my symptoms subsided. But in another type of telling, the ending is still being written, right now, its characters carved into my heart painfully at this very moment. I am here, barely able to contain my grief, anticipating and hoping against a kind of end that I've feared to be inevitable since I was a child, which is probably where this story really began.

More on that later. For now, let's start here, simply, as Mr. Reed requested, with my COVID journals:

Thursday, July 8th 2021

I'm fully vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine, and have been since late March, and I've been feeling very sick since July 5th. I just went and got a rapid test in Brooklyn, and tested positive for COVID-19.

This is a breakthrough case, which I thought was very rare, and thought, if it did happen to me, that I'd only have mild symptoms. But I am extremely sick. I have a fever of 101. I'm having a lot of trouble breathing. My chest feels like there's a block of ice on it and my throat is on fire. My whole body hurts and I am exhausted.

Can't write more.

Tuesday, July 13th

I am having a burst of energy that's lasted a couple of hours so far, so I'm going to try and write about this in more detail. I am 39 years old, and my only known underlying health condition is mild asthma. I was vaccinated with Pfizer in late March. I responded quite harshly to both of the vaccinations, which is typically a sign that they worked. I was sick for two days each time, with a slight fever, pretty much totally knocked out with body aches and extreme fatigue.

I first started feeling like I had a scratchy throat on Monday the 5th of July. I didn't think anything of it.

Tuesday, I started feeling tired, possibly feverish, and my throat was still scratchy. By Wednesday, I felt so exhausted, I could do nothing but lie in bed, and I had a fever of 101, and my throat felt like it was a sandpaper factory burning down.

Wednesday evening, I forced myself to get dressed and make my way to urgent care/City MD to get tested. It said on the website that the walk-in center was open until eight for rapid testing. I called beforehand and the voice message also said they were open for rapid testing until eight. I got there at seven-thirty and was turned away, being told that they actually stop testing at 7:30pm, even though there was no indication of that from any of the information I had seen and I was visibly quite sick and it took all of my strength to walk five blocks away to the walk-in center in the rain.

The next morning, I woke up and forced myself to go one more time and get tested. At this point, my throat felt like it was on fire and my fever was 101 and I was extremely weak and my whole body hurt. I was dripping with sweat, and I was also having severe stomach issues.

I walked down the street to city MD in Brooklyn and there was a line about 15 people long outside so I stood for 20 minutes in the hot sun sweating and coughing. It was torturous.

I registered inside and waited another 20 minutes and finally saw a doctor. The doctor began examining me and asking about my symptoms. I listed them for her and told her I thought I had contracted Covid. She laughed at this and dismissed me saying, "You're vaccinated! You don't have Covid! Get this out of your mind." She explained, "Your immune system is low because you've been quarantining and you probably did something for the holiday (July 4th) right?"

Yes, that was true. I confirmed I'd had a gathering of about ten vaccinated friends on my rooftop to watch the fireworks, and we also mingled in my apartment some of the time, because I thought it was safe since we were vaccinated.

She told me, "It's most likely allergies, or something bacterial you got from one of your friends, but it's not COVID." She was weirdly emphatic on this point.

I told her that I'd heard about these new strains being very powerful and she again laughed at me and said, "No, no, no don't worry about the new strains. That's so rare."

She listened to my chest and heard that I was wheezing and then she looked in my throat and saw that it was red and swollen. My vitals showed that I had a fever and my oxygen level was 94. I told her again, that I'm an asthmatic, so was very concerned about Covid, and I asked her to please administer the test for Covid anyway, and she said okay to that.

After she administered the test, she told me again not to worry, and that she was sure I didn't have Covid, and just to go home and rest.

I went home and collapsed. I was dripping with sweat. I was having more difficulty breathing than before.

Because the doctor had been so adamant that it wasn't Covid, I did try to talk myself into taking a shower, shaking it off, and going to my film shoot for the Howl Happening residency (I was the artist in residence in July, and was supposed to record a performance with some fellow authors and artists reading my short stories), though it was difficult to simply stand up. I lay on the couch contemplating whether or not I should cancel my plans for the next several days. I insanely tried to talk myself into showering, and just going to the film shoot, but I couldn't actually physically get up of the couch, and within 20 minutes, I got the email from City M.D. saying that I had tested positive for COVID-19.

The same doctor who had examined me called to follow up and was very solemn. She seemed to be embarrassed about being so wrong, so I didn't rub it in her face, though I thought the way she had spoken to me previously was very unprofessional, and possibly dangerous.

She prescribed me antibiotics in case I got an infection in my chest, which I have not taken yet. I have asthma, so she also prescribed steroids and other asthma medications.

Thursday was my fourth day of sickness and my second day of feeling extremely ill. I spent the day on the edge wondering if I should go to the hospital but hoping to avoid the New York City emergency room system. It was very difficult for me to breathe so one of my good friends brought me an oximeter. Most of that day my oxygen stayed between 93 and 95 which not great generally but is fine for Covid patients.

The next day, my oxygen went down to 89 for a couple of hours and I seriously considered going to the hospital. I utilized my inhaler and steam to get my oxygen back up to about 95. That was the worst day.

I have experienced almost all of the symptoms except for confusion and vomiting.

I have been in touch with the New York City tracing system. This is very important to note. They are tracking my case as a new COVID case, but they are *not* specifically tracking breakthrough cases. This means, they are not noting the fact that I have COVID after being vaccinated, anywhere. They are not tracking that with the general population.

I spoke with my doctor, as well as two people at the NYC COVID tracing system about this, and I have it triply confirmed that the only way that my case has been counted is that it is a new case of COVID, not that it is also a breakthrough case, which I find concerning for the public health in general.

They are tracking my symptoms and my case, but **there is no way to actually have an accurate count of how many breakthrough cases are occurring.** There is no coordinated system in place tracking that as of now.

It is my understanding that they are only tracking hospitalized breakthrough cases. My case is considered “mild,” since I did not go to the hospital.

I am still bedridden. I have not had a fever for nearly two days. I’ve been sick for seven days. I am extremely weak. My whole body hurts. It is difficult to describe how weak I am. Walking from the bedroom to the bathroom and back exhausts me for several hours. My throat, at first, felt like the worst pain I’ve ever felt in my throat. To say it felt like it was on fire is an understatement. That has now subsided, thankfully.

Yesterday, I completely lost my sense of taste and smell. I’m sicker than I’ve ever been in my life. This is not what I would have ever described as mild.

I don't even want to imagine how much worse this would be if I hadn't been vaccinated. Everyone I know well that I've spent time with over the last two weeks has been tested and

they've all come back negative, and I can only attribute that to the fact that all of us were vaccinated.

I'm just lying here drinking lots of fluids taking my medicine staring at the ceiling and sometimes listening to a show. I appreciate the outpouring of support I've had from my friends. Luckily, as has recently been made quite apparent I'm very loved and haven't been alone through this. I am so grateful to have such amazing and warm people in my life who've been coming over and bringing many things and checking in on me constantly. I cannot even say how much I appreciate this community of artists showing up for me this way.

I decided to write everything out here, in one go, because in between my long naps I am seeing that people are messaging me and posting many questions about my case, because, logically everyone is so worried about this new strain. So there it is.

Stay safe out there, people.

July 13th (Evening)

I just slept for 13 hours straight.

July 16th

It is day 11 of my breakthrough COVID case. My most serious symptoms have subsided; through a mild fever came back briefly, I don't have a fever today. My throat feels much better, and my oxygen levels are up to normal, but I am still coughing all the time and still need to use my inhaler every few hours (typically I only have to use it once every few months). I still have a horrible headache and am extremely weak.

I don't even know how to describe how weak I am. Just walking to the bathroom and back is almost impossible.

I am so beyond ready for this to be over.

July 19th

It's been 14 days. I'm still extremely, I mean wildly weak, laid out from this breakthrough case, and still in some pain most days. It has completely knocked me out for two weeks now.

I cannot believe I got this sick after being vaccinated.

So far, no one who has spent time with me while I should have been contagious has tested positive.

That tells me that what the scientists and doctors are saying is true; that even if you get sick, if you are vaccinated, you are MUCH less likely to spread this virus. That also tells me that whomever I contracted this from most likely was not vaccinated. To be honest, I'm not sure I would've survived this if I hadn't been vaccinated. Scarily enough, if I could get sick after being vaccinated, that means I can just get sick again and again with this. Getting sick one time does not mean you won't get it again. If it's still around when my vaccine wears off and I get sick again, I am horrified to think about what might happen. The only way we are going to eradicate this is by getting the majority of the population vaccinated.

I kind of can't believe I'm saying this, because I am not one to beg people to trust big Pharma or the government, but this is not a partisan issue. This virus is insanely strong. The vaccine is the only real defense we have against it right now.

If you won't do it for others, please do it for yourself.

If you won't do it for yourself, please do it for others.

Please get vaccinated.

July 25th, 2021

I'm watching CNN now reporting that the CDC needs to start tracking breakthrough infections because we have no idea what the rate of breakthrough infections actually is. We don't know if it's one in 10 or one in 1,000.

I'm glad they're finally saying this so clearly on mainstream news stations.

This is the sickest I've ever been in my entire life. And I've been sick for longer than I've ever been. I still don't know how long I'll have to wait until I feel normal again.

The fact that you can get sick more than once, that this could happen to me again forces me to ask, what this means for how we're supposed live? Is this just going to go on and on for years?

Do I have to completely quarantine myself from the unvaccinated, indefinitely? The virus is mutating in unvaccinated people. We literally have the unvaccinated to thank for these new strains. Unvaccinated people are much more likely to spread the virus. They are much more contagious if they contract it. I most likely got this from being indoors with an unvaccinated person. There are still people out there who refuse to participate in the cure and they are also the same people who are against social distancing and masks and locking down.

We needed everyone to get vaccinated as rapidly as possible to stop this. The longer people wait to get vaccinated, the worse it will become, because the immunity of the vaccinated will start to wane, and we will all need to get vaccinated again and again as long as the virus is still prevalent in the population.

What world do the anti-vaxxers want? A world where dozens of COVID super-strains repeatedly infect large portions of the population and we all are subjected to enduring debilitating illness again and again? When will this madness end?

America has truly failed here.

July 26th

I just watched Joe Biden's press secretary respond antagonistically to reporters asking why they aren't tracking breakthrough cases. One reporter asked how many vaccinated white house staff have contracted COVID post-vaccination. The press secretary responded angrily, asking, "Why do you need to know that number?" and refused to answer.

It seems obvious that they're suppressing these numbers because they're afraid it will make the vaccine (and thereby, the Democrats¹) seem like a failure, and result in fewer people getting vaccinated. Instead though, it's just painfully transparent they are lying about something, which causes more people to rightly feel they have no information sources they can trust.

This lack of trust is what will really result in fewer people getting vaccinated.

The truth is very simple. The new COVID variants are strong enough to get through the vaccine. But the vaccine provides enough immunity to almost completely ensure you will not get hospitalized or die if you contract it post-vaccination. But, many people with breakthrough cases do get very ill for a shockingly long time. A national mask mandate needs to be put in place to prevent this epidemic from becoming even worse than it has been so far. The Delta variant is shockingly strong.

^{1 1} When I refer to "the Democrats," I'm not referring to everyday people who register and/or vote Democrat, but the majority of the elected representatives of the Democratic party.

The Democrats won't say this, because, as usual, they believe they can manipulate reality into a narrative that makes them feel the most comfortable. There is some truth to what the right-wing say about "the lying liberal media." I really wish there weren't.

I'm sitting here typing frantically as Jen Psaki flips her red hair, and points a finger to the back of the room, and repeating that she is not answering any more questions about breakthrough cases.

I'm so angry, I could scream, except my lungs literarily aren't strong enough for that.

Today is Tuesday, September 14th, 2021. I stopped writing and posting updates on my health a long time ago, because I found that every time I announced I felt better, the next day, I felt horrible again. So those little celebrations became pointless, if not a bit morbid. As I write this, I'm still taking things day by day. The exhaustion whose dissipation I've been anxiously awaiting, has come to be a part of my daily existence. I'm taking supplements, ginseng and turmeric, and all the vitamins that might help boost my immune system. Some days it seems to actually make a difference, and I take advantage of my energetic days to work, and to get outdoors and kayak and enjoy nature as much as possible. But It's been more than two months in and this "mild" breakthrough case is still, often wreaking havoc on my body, something I would have thought impossible after being vaccinated.

More than two months...

Three days ago, was the twentieth anniversary of September 11th. I remembered this because every news channel and radio station were dystopically blasting nauseatingly kitsch/nationalist programming twenty-four hours straight, as if all other newsworthy world events were on pause that day.

So, of course, this prompted me to recall where I was on September 11th 2001. I was nineteen years old, living in Saint Louis Missouri. That day, for the first time ever, I was accused of being a terrorist. It was my boss who called me this.

I was standing in the small, catholic, family-owned telemarketing office, where I worked booking conferences for the local Marriot Hotels, with my arms wrapped around my sobbing girlfriend. My girlfriend and I worked in the same office. Our desks were right next to one another. We were temps. It's strange to remember, but we pretended to be "just roommates." I still had to be in the closet sometimes back then. If our bosses had known we were lovers, they would've fired us immediately, and it would've been legal to do so. But, I let my guard down that day. I held her like she was my lover and I was comforting her. I remember that I was still worried someone might recognize that we were lesbians, while we stood together watching the Twin Towers collapse on a tiny, boxy, silver television that sat on a small platform on the wall near the office lunch station. We were horrified. Most people in the office were crying and sporadically screaming watching bodies fall. Fox news kept showing images of Afghanis celebrating for a few seconds at a time, and then cutting back to the live feed of the smoking towers. ²

One of the owners, a man of the family, looking red-faced and bewildered, "Who are these people? Where is Afghanistan? Why would they hate us like that in Afghanistan? Who are they? Why do they hate us?"

I was nineteen, and overwhelmed and didn't think about this much before I said it. And this was said with a tone of solemnity and through my own tears, but I said, "Afghanistan is in the middle-east. America and Russia have been fighting a war on their soil for decades, arming different insurgent factions, and a lot of the citizens there blame us for their country being destroyed, for the ongoing violence. So, that might be why they would be celebrating. I'm not sure." I simply meant to explain why, in this other culture, in this other part of the world, they might feel this way, not that I agreed with the sentiment.

² It was [later brought to light](#) that Fox news was actually playing pre-recorded footage of Afghanis celebrating an entirely unrelated event. Splicing this footage with the towers falling was pure war-hawk propaganda.

His face turned somehow ever redder, he pointed a fisted finger at me and screamed, “You’re a terrorist. Get out of here. I’ll fucking kill you!” Then this large man in his mid-forties, lunged at me and took a swing at me. I jumped away just in time for another man in the office, his cousin, to swoop in, grab hold of him and shove him back out the door, demanding he get ahold of himself, as he continued to scream, “You fucking terrorist bitch! I’ll kill you!” I was fired the very next week.

I’ll never forget that moment. Simply stating geographical and historical facts had elicited homicidal ideations in this proudly patriotic Saint Louisan.

It certainly wasn’t the last time that a simple statement of facts would cause a conservative to become violently enraged.

A few days ago, I sat on my bed, watching the flag waive over the shadow of lost towers on CNN, briefly recalling all this, before I crumpled into a ball on my blankets, and cried like a child, so hard, loud and plaintive, like I thought anything could be done for me.

That morning, I’d received the news that two of my close family members who currently live in Southern Illinois, had been hospitalized with COVID-19. One was my grandmother, the woman who raised me, a woman I love as much as I could possibly ever love anyone. The other, her son, who is my biological uncle, who feels more like a much older brother. Over the years, we’ve had our ups but mostly very deeply divided downs since I became an adult.

Neither of these people are vaccinated. They are both *adamantly unvaccinated*, or at least, have been so far. My fifty-nine-year-old uncle is currently on a ventilator in a medically induced coma. He has been for several days now. My grandmother is conscious and receiving care in her local hospital.

In her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion wrote, “Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.” She’s right. And different griefs are all completely different places, but they do all seem to inspire magical thinking in me.

I find myself telling myself magical things like, “If I don’t eat eggs today, they’ll live. They’ll *both* live through this.” And asking myself if I had to choose one or the other to

live, which would I choose, and wondering what would they want if they could choose, like I'm making inane deals with death's invisible pawn broker, who probably wouldn't give a fuck about the spiritual trinkets I have to offer, even if he weren't imaginary.

Half of my family are, how should I put this? *Against* the vaccine doesn't sound quite right. But to say they *don't believe in it* is also not right. They think it might hurt them either physically and/or metaphysically. My aunt told me she thinks it would make her sick, and that it's better to get natural immunity from COVID, than from the vaccine, because natural immunity lasts a lifetime. Another family member told me she thinks it might be the proverbial Mark of the Beast, and another, that is part of a military experiment, which also might somehow be tied to the rise of the Antichrist.

If I still believed the same things I did as a child, I would agree with them.

I was raised in a poor farm town of 1,200 people, about an hour and a half south Saint Louis. I was a very adamant evangelical Christian until my apparent queerness made that place and belief system impossible for me by the time I reached sixteen. As crazy as their ideas might sound, I actually understand what they believe, and why they might be willing to sacrifice their lives and the lives of their loved ones for these convictions.

I've been writing about these people all my life, not because they are some well-contained, niche population, that one might find it interesting to take a novel interest in, but because I know that poor, white, conservative, rural, Evangelical America has power to steer the future of our entire nation. I am aware just how much of this country can be described as deeply isolated. I've been aware of how stunningly the beliefs that take root in these areas impact American domestic, as well as foreign policy. This has been true for decades. I am also aware and continuously disturbed by the fact that liberal Democrats, especially those with political and economic power, refuse to acknowledge the reality lived by, and the far reaching consequences of ignoring, the American, rural poor.

It seems to me that the liberal Democrat politicians in charge of the DNC, don't like to acknowledge white poverty, because they don't like to acknowledge generational poverty, because if they did that, it would expose the massive failings of capitalism (that it is actually near impossible to climb far out of the class you're born into), and the Democrats in charge are staunchly capitalist, protecting their own bottom-lines.

This of course, feeds into the racist rhetoric of the right wing; if you really can pull yourself up by your bootstraps, then there really is no reason that descendants of people who were enslaved can't go out there and achieve the American Dream. If it really is that easy, under capitalism, to start out with no inherited wealth and end up wealthy, then there is no good reason that a disproportionate percentage of black people should be living in poverty. In other words, according to the far right, it's their own damn fault. This message is fed to poor white people in rural America, who believe that they are going to get rich any day now. The Democrats, also quite happy to never acknowledge the massive number of white people living in poverty generation after generation, because of their afore-mentioned interests in preserving the myth that capitalism is the only system that can foster the true American Dream. In this way, the messages of Democrats and Republicans work together to oil the gears of this bloody machine, which keeps poor white people voting against their own interests, and feeds the fires of rural racism.

I'm not, by far, the first person to say this. Many great writers and theorists before me, including, of course, Ishmael Reed, have documented this phenomenon. I think I first heard Ismael speak about this in 2003 at Steve Cannon's place, A Gathering of the Tribes. He did a lecture on the film *Winter's Bone*. I was twenty-one years old, and had just moved to NYC after spending two years in Saint Louis. Before that, of course, the small farm town where I was born and raised was my home, and the landscape of *Winter's Bone* was all too familiar to me. Ismael said, "I'm surprised Hollywood even allowed that film be made. They don't want us to see white poverty. They show us black poverty every day, and that gives us the message that black people are failing. But if they showed us white poverty, then people would see the *system* is failing, so they won't show us that."

I knew all this in my bones before he said it. I knew it was true, but I didn't have words for it at that age.

He was absolutely correct, and capitalist Democrats are just as guilty of propagating this racist, anti-poor, pro-capitalist narrative as capitalist conservatives are. The grizzly culmination these two lying factions spinning their respective yarns for the entire country decade after decade, was Donald Trump, an absolute disaster of a human being taking reign over one of the most powerful countries in the world, which has

pushed us into a recession and a global plague, and another human rights crisis in Afghanistan.

And yet, they persist.

The Democrats and Republicans are participating in the exact same type of tag-team propagandistic exercise with the COVID-19 vaccine. Republican leaders are getting vaccinated while at the same time, playing into the ignorant fears of their isolated base, propagating misinformation for ratings and clicks, profits and votes. They are talking about the vaccine as if it is by and for Democrats only, and of course, running with the narrative that the Democrats are lying about the success of the vaccine and are not to be trusted. And then, of course, the Democrats are exaggerating the success of the vaccine, whitewashing the severity and prevalence of breakthrough cases to make themselves look better, thereby handing the other side the truth for their lie. Just like they do with rural poverty. The truth to Trump's "lie" was that the Democrats do not care about poor and working-class people. This seemingly endless, self-interested, sinister duet of our two-party system is an absolute dirge. I'm listening to it with my head hung. I am exhausted with this song. How many loved ones have I already lost to these thoughtless cantors? How many more will I suffer before they are done?