

Pandemic Smells and Silence

When the pandemic became widespread enough for schools to start shutting down, it seems that's when life really changed. I remember - it was March 2020 - and my school district had just gone on spring break. It was still uncertain whether teachers and students would be returning to their classroom after break's end. We were asked to come into our classrooms to gather any teaching supplies we might be able to use to teach virtually in the event that we would be told to remain at home. When I arrived at school, it was so quiet. There were a few cars parked in the parking lot, but no people to be seen. The usual student chatter, catching fragments of conversation as they walked by, the bustle of cars parking was gone. As I entered my building, a wave of chemically cleaned and sanitized air blasted my nostrils. The smells of bleach and whatever other industrial cleaners schools use wafted through the halls. They had recently been cleaned - I had never seen them so pristine. A few custodian cleaning carts were scattered nearby, but still no one to be seen. Every footfall seemed louder against the backdrop of silence. The deserted hallway and the chemical smell assaulting my olfactory system had turned my second home into something sterile and unwelcoming. Entering my classroom, I noticed it, too, had been sanitized with heavy chemicals and a jug of hand sanitizer had unceremoniously been plopped on my desk. I surveyed my classroom, nostrils burning from the bleach again, grabbed what I needed and went home. It would be the last time I would see my classroom for a long time. The memory of that shining, white hallway and the burning air of "purification" has stayed with me.