

The Road to Nowhere in the Land of No Life Ronda Del Boccio

When the Covid-19 pandemic shut down the US, much of my life stayed the same.

As a blind person living rural, getting around isn't easy. For the first decade after moving here for Mom, I got out fairly often, but by 2019, she, my only available driver, had become slower and more insular, narrowing our world to basic necessities two or three times a week. No entertainment. No shopping. Just the store, the bank, the post office, breakfast or lunch out a couple of times a month, and the occasional unavoidable errand.

The things you'll do for family. She is all that keeps me living here in the little house next door.

I purchased my usual amount of toilet paper, chiding those who hoarded butt-wipe against a respiratory virus. I shopped as normally as one could, given the supply issues, without overstocking. Sometimes I did without or sufficed with less, like everyone else.

Lockdown gave me no reason to live in pajamas. Being home all the time had become my normal, and I didn't reduce myself to bra-free, slovenly living just because most others did.

Social distancing suited me well enough, as I didn't like crowds. I had to teach myself to endure wearing a mask without panic attacks. I taught my guide dog, Diva, how to stop six feet back. She had to acclimate to the look of humans with their faces covered, which is not a thing dogs like.

The lockdown brought with it couch-side concerts and Zooms. I enjoyed the increased access to live performances. At last, in-real-time shows even I could attend! The visual elements added little for me anyway. Sure, I wasn't in a theater, but neither was anyone else. Although I must admit feeling for the entertainers singing at places like Grand Old Opry with nary a soul in the huge hall except for the handful of people making the magic happen. A weird dynamic for those who thrived on the audience's energy and applause.

The virtual meetings provided great connections with the outside world. I hosted online parties and coffee klatches just for the pleasure of deepening relationships with my contacts. I started offering monthly socials and training classes for my writing organization to fill the live event gap. I loved chatting without having to endure a crowd. What a boon for an introvert who only craves the masses if I'm performing or speaking onstage.

Diva and I took our daily stroll down the road to nowhere, as I call it.

Our area lacks sidewalks and the roads have no shoulders, so I am restricted to only one safe place to walk, past houses. The nearest diner is a mile away down a state highway. Walking there is unsafe because of crazily-speeding drivers and the lack of pedestrian comforts. A trip to the closest grocery store involves a twenty-minute car ride. No Uber, taxis, or public transportation.

My morning-only, twice-weekly outings diminished to once weekly. Mom's digestive issue, untreated by her choice, meant that even after the public health order allowed indoor dining, we couldn't go out for a meal. City folks had close restaurants or the option of apps like Door Dash, but we ruralites had to cook for ourselves or reheat congealing take-out food after it sat in the car too long to be edible without mechanical intervention. Because who wants to eat tacos, pizza, or pancakes in the car?.

Folks here just don't help each other the way they have everywhere else I've lived. Normally, I'd move into an area and develop a network of neighbors who looked out for one another in a matter of weeks. Homemade meals for sick elders, mail gathering for vacationers, and the like. Someone would always offer to take me to the store before a storm. Not so here. The pandemic didn't change that, unfortunately.

I asked myself what I could do to make life better. While most others binged old TV shows and got fat, I exercised and connected more. All hail the internet. I spent an hour or two each day on social media chatting, uplifting spirits, and watching for warning signs of depression. Having shared daily beauty, humor, and inspiration for years, I now passed along ideas for coping with the madness.

I also indulged in my favorite pastime of paper crafting to create fun and inspiring goodies. Every time I made a card or journal, I imagined the delight of my friend receiving happy mail amidst the junk and bills. An occasional adhesive shortage curtailed my efforts, but I went right back at it once I could order more. Give me stamps, ink, paper, and glue and I can entertain myself for hours crafting.

I cultivated relationships with contacts all over the world, many of whom I'd met once or twice at a conference, and some not at all. Facebook groups and various Zooms introduced me to such cool people, and I never had to endure a throng. One such Facebook connection blossomed into a deep friendship. After some Messenger chats, we started phoning each other and then sending cards for birthdays and holidays. I call Angie my big sis and I'm her little sis. Her husband marvels that she and I are so close but have never met in person.

Touching other people filled my lockdown life with purpose, but still, my loneliness increased. Flying to another city, I used to enjoy more living than I ever have at home. I attended conferences at least a couple

of times a year, but my restrictions, both blindness- and pandemic-related, sank me into an ever-deepening hole

One hot August day in 2020, I opened Facebook intending to share a pretty flower to share, but that little question in every blank message, “What’s on your mind?” begged an answer.

I wrote, “I want a cat” and tapped *POST*. My reason for not getting another after my previous purr passed was now a moot point: travel. Mom, my former cat-sitter, couldn’t get around well enough for pet care, and my local friends live an inconvenient distance away. But no trips. No life.

The pandemic and five feline-free years turned that deepening void into a chasm.

I didn’t just want a cat. I *needed* one.

Minutes later, a friend told me about a tortoiseshell kitten recuperating at a local vet. Someone found her scrounging in a dumpster. Her photo grabbed me by the heart. When my mom, Diva, and I went to meet the scrawny critter, we all fell in love. The friendly feline and my dog started nuzzling each other, and I knew she would complete my little family. I named her Twitch after her tail, so active when on the hunt for fun. Dozens of photos of my girls playing and snuggling fill my phone’s gallery.

During the first year of the pandemic, I got vaccinated, lost twenty pounds, and gained a new fur baby. Meanwhile, the US weathered ever-changing CDC guidance, an election debacle, and more than a half-million deaths from the dreaded virus. Everyone in the USA got a taste of my daily life

But then, the world started opening up for most people in the summer of 2021, despite virus variants crashing down like tidal waves. Back to real living. No more couch concerts. No more virtual festivals.

Online-only events going hybrid or in person. Never mind the increasing death toll and prevalence of long covid. People were tired of restrictions.

And here was I, still walking with my guide dog along the road to nowhere, brightening everyone else's spirits, and longing for my life to begin.

I spent much of 2021 trying to get a job, remote or, preferably, in nearby Fayetteville, Arkansas, but to no avail. I felt it should have been easy since employers cried and cried for good help. But, no. It seemed you have to live there to get hired, whether in person or remote. At fifty-six I was too old to be young enough to easily get work. When they brought much of their staff back into the office, choices dwindled even further. Though I badly wanted to move, job hunting sucked me dry, and I lost faith in myself.

Late 2021 brought full-on living with gusto for everyone else, but not for me. Each day, I walked the road to nowhere with Diva, cried a lot, and yearned for more than one outing a week in this land of no life.

Days after 2022 began, reality pulverized my spirit. Bloodwork Revealed Diva's mystery illness to be terminal cancer. I couldn't process this.

Couldn't do anything other than care for my animals. No job hunting. No trying to get out of this hole. Just my furs.

Seeing the impending retirement, I applied to Leader Dogs for the Blind while Diva lived out whatever time remained. It could take several months for them to find a match. Since she had no pain and still enjoyed life, I hoped for a few months more. My contact even offered to take her for me, but I could never give up my golden girl.

I promised Diva that when my bestie came to see us over spring break, we'd go to her favorite attraction, the Branson Star Wheel, one last time. We'd get her a pup cone from Andi's Frozen Custard, and I'd let her eat a whole banana smeared with peanut butter.

But life had other plans.

Two weeks after her diagnosis, Diva awoke from a nap blind. Instant retirement.

Blindness ruined Diva. Ironically, I had to lead my Leader Dog everywhere, after a lifetime of her guiding and protecting me. Perhaps because she couldn't see her toys, she stopped playing—even when I put her beloved hedgehog between her paws. She grew afraid to jump on the couch or into the car.

No more adventures.

No more fun.

I wanted to give her so much before we said our final good-byes.

The day before her eighth birthday, I felt the end looming near. My normally cuddly golden retriever didn't want me to touch her. We celebrated her birthday a day early. I gave her the only one of the promised treats I could—the whole banana with peanut butter.

The next day, she took her last breath and I sunk into a deep depression, grieving the years of independence, love, and joy cancer had robbed from me.

No Diva, no reason to walk that pointless path.

The school asked me to provide more video footage for my application and took ten forever, or so it felt to me in my grief-crushed state, to respond to update requests. Every moment without a guide dog robbed me of what little life I had here. I have never been so grateful to be on Social Security Disability. I could barely get out of bed, much less work.

The pandemic had finally beaten me down to a pulp. Fighting the urge to stay in pajamas all day, I declared victory simply for getting out of bed and dressing in street clothes.

And yet, the warrior inside me refused to give up.

Happily, only a month after Diva's death, Leader Dog called to say they had found me a match. The month after that, I flew to Michigan and began a new story with a happy, stub-tailed yellow lab. Oh, how I enjoyed three weeks of going to actual places almost every day. The only thing I missed about home was Twitch.

The inevitable return flight happened. Today, I'm walking down the road to nowhere with Glamour.

No matter what, this absolutely must be the last year I forgo my life just to help mom. Somehow, someway, I will break free of the road to nowhere and escape the land of no life.