

Business  
Post

# Magazine

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**Online and  
upwards**

Fashion duo Jill & Gill  
make new plans

**Songs of  
substance?**

U2 get their report card

**Diving into  
the macabre**

The rise of the Irish  
horror podcast

## Letter from America

Writer Johanna Gohmann takes her family from Brooklyn to Indiana in a tense Covid-19, pre-election landscape, and dreams of a more hopeful future

# Schism NATION

In this Covid travelogue, ranging from the Black Lives Matter murals of Brooklyn to the anti-maskers of Kentucky, **Johanna Gohmann** takes a snapshot of life in the US one week before the most momentous presidential election in modern history

**M**y husband and I were in Indiana, lying side by side, though several feet apart. He sprawled sleepily in what used to be my mother's bed, while I was perched in my father's old bed. Just as when I was a child, the two queen beds were pushed together.

I whispered to David to turn up the volume on the set of headphones we were sharing, as I was having trouble hearing what naked Connell was saying to naked Marianne. Beneath the television, a statue of the Blessed Virgin eyed us warily, as we watched the lovers passionately embrace, then weep into each other's seemingly poreless skin. I scratched at my own dry skin, my hands cracked from sanitising that day's grocery delivery with Clorox wipes.

Looking back on this moment, I can confirm that watching *Normal People* in your childhood home while lying in your parents' old bedroom during a global pandemic is perhaps the least sexy way to enjoy this television programme. But what can I say: we were seeking a bit of normalcy via some... *Normal People*.

At that point, we'd been living with my mother for several weeks. Like many New York families, we'd packed up our child and fled back in March, right before Covid-19 exploded and devastated so much of the city. We were all too aware of how incredibly fortunate we were. Not only were we able to leave, we had a place to go.

That said, it was rather disorienting to move from our Brooklyn two-bedroom place to my mother's rambling old house in the Midwest. In my childhood home, paintings of Christ watched us from every corner, while large flags proclaiming "TRUMP!" billowed on the lawns of homes around town. We initially imagined we'd only be there a few weeks, and our hastily packed suitcases reflected as much. We ended up staying five months.

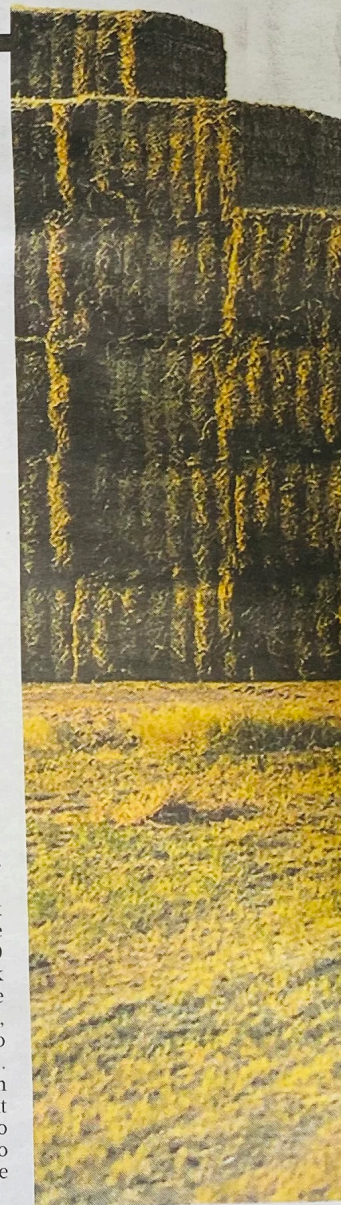
If the experience was bizarre for me, I can only imagine how surreal it was for David. He's originally from Armagh, and has only lived steadily in the States for nine years. We got together in the early 2000s when he was over on a work visa. I joined him back in Ireland for a few years, but after we married we circled back to Brooklyn. While I look back on my time in Dublin with great fondness, I can still easily recall how unmooring it was to live in a country that was not my own. I still remember the feeling of "otherness": of looking around the pub and being not quite in on the (undoubtedly very, very dry) joke.



Johanna Gohmann and her husband David; right: Trump signs on Arizona State Route 95 between Needles, California, and Laughlin, Nevada

DAVID WALTER BANKS

Though in truth, the biggest cultural challenge I probably faced there was getting my head around the concept that I had to flip a switch and wait (wait?) before I had access to hot water. Now, when I think of the past year in the United States, well, I can't quite imagine the mental funhouse of experiencing 2020 America as an expat. To watch our president talk about face masks during a pandemic like they are paper horns at a kids' party. ("Maybe they're great, and maybe they're just good. Maybe they're not so good. If you don't take it off, you're very muffled...") To watch our president, when pressed to speak on the country's racial divide, throw out a response that gives a white supremacist group new ideas for logo design. To watch frenzied, maskless crowds gather to cheer the infected president on, as if standing before a blonde, contagious Elvis. ▶





Black Lives Matter mural in Brooklyn

Granted, David grew up in 1980s Northern Ireland. He is certainly no stranger to political unrest, and to living in a land divided. Even still, I wonder what he makes of the woman in Starbucks spitting on the cashier when asked to wear a mask. Of the husband and wife standing on their lawn in St Louis – the woman clutching a handgun, the man in his pink polo shirt brandishing an AR-15 – both of them pointing them at protesters. At any rate, I imagine his expat experience is a bit more intense than trying to remember to flip the immersion.

I have seen his face shift during the evening news, and I've come to think of it as his "tree frog face". On one of the nights at my mother's house, we were standing at a window, when suddenly there came a prolonged guttural croak from outside. David whirled to me in alarm.

"Christ, what was that?"

I explained with some amusement that it was just a tree frog, which are common there. But my explanation only curdled his expression of fear and confusion into one of disbelief. *Tree frog?* Which is pretty much the same cycle of movements his face moves through when we watch the news: slipping from alarm, to confusion, to disbelief.

It has been many, many months of tree frog face.

**M**y mother's home sits on the edge of Louisville, Kentucky. When the Breonna Taylor protests erupted, we stared at the television and the clouds of tear gas blanketing the city, the storefronts ablaze. We sat in my parents' pushed-together beds, stunned. Here was more chaos and sadness. A new kind of chaos and sadness. This time unfolding just across the river.

In the days following the protests, we would regularly see a white car cruising through the streets of my hometown. The owner had taken what looked like black spray paint and written in massive letters: ALL LIVES MATTER! across both sides of the car. David peered at the car, pondering the commitment of destroying one's own automobile for such a racially charged sentiment.

"I mean, where do you suppose he works? Does he roll up to his job at the bank in that thing?"

We lived in Indiana long enough for David to adjust to the sight of swarms of turkey buzzards perching ominously in trees. Long enough for our son to begin to greet people with a midwestern drawl. "Hihihi, hoooney." Long enough for us to get used to the discomfort of being the only masked people passing a maskless cluster. Many people there did not wear masks, opting instead to wear expressions of mild contempt or amusement.

We would scurry past them, heads down, hoping to enjoy a stroll of a nearby park while avoiding both conflict and Covid.

By the time we readied ourselves to return to New York, we decided to do so in our own car. We had been borrowing my mom's during our stay, but now, with the NYC subway no longer feeling like a safe transportation option, we felt like we needed a car of our own. I hadn't owned a car since my early 20s. David had never owned one. So we were rather nervous about the process of purchasing one.

"Just play it cool," David cautioned. "We don't want to seem overeager."

When we arrived at the lot, a masked salesman beelined over to us. Our son turned to him, and pointed to the nearest vehicle.

"We're here to buy that one!" he announced, "We need to buy it today!"

Our negotiating powers quickly decimated by our seven-year-old, the salesman nodded and ushered us inside. We were assisted by two salesmen – Ryan and Brian. There was a bit of a snafu with the paperwork, as the bank was curious as to why two New Yorkers – one of them Irish, at that – were buying a car in Kentucky. While Brian worked with the bank to verify that we weren't in fact a family band of thieves attempting to buy a Subaru on stolen credit, we sat with Ryan and awkwardly made what constituted pandemic small talk. I noted that their free hand sanitiser smelled strongly of tequila.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "All of these distilleries that switched over to making sanitiser . . . a lot of it still smells like booze. One of my buddies, he drank a bunch of the stuff the other night. Said it made him sick."

We nodded along politely, though I quietly worried if it was wise to buy a car from someone who kept company with someone who guzzled sanitiser.

When we finally left the lot in our very first car, it felt like a tiny burst of freedom after a season of lockdowns. As we pulled away, waving excitedly to

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**Back in New York, I passed a Halloween decoration featuring a green-faced Trump in a makeshift jail**

Ryan and Brian, I realised we had no idea what they looked like under their masks. They could have been toothless for all we knew.

Back in New York, we returned to Biden signs. Instead of the All Lives Matter car, there was an enormous Black Lives Matter mural stretching down the block. I passed a Halloween decoration featuring a green-faced Trump sitting in a makeshift jail. Here, the looks of contempt were saved for anyone who dared to step outside with their nose and mouth exposed.

With the newfound freedom of our car, we drove to Maryland to visit David's brother. His family usually reunites every summer in Ireland, but this year, obviously, the trip was cancelled. Every week, he talks to his mother on Facetime. She can never quite position the phone correctly, but he chats with her forehead. Asks her forehead about the weather. About the infection rate in town.

He hasn't seen any of his family in person in almost a year, and I know he misses them – and Ireland – intensely. When his sister mails us a massive box of Taytos, he inhales a bag of cheese and onion like a man wandering the Sahara who has stumbled upon some Gatorade.

On our drive to Maryland, the Biden signs once again faded back into Trump placards. We passed a large billboard that showed Trump weirdly clutching at the flag. It was unclear if he was cradling it or choking the life out of it. We listened to a political podcast as we drove, while our son watched YouTube videos of someone driving over different kinds of pasta.

The podcast talked of the president refusing to concede. About stolen ballots and fake ballot boxes. Of protesters rising up. Or militias standing down. *The election is coming. The election is already under way. The election is the most important election of our lifetimes. . .* I felt my shoulders tensing, and took deep, calming breaths. Behind me, my son watched a minivan crush through some uncooked penne.

**I** clearly remembered the morning after the 2016 election. Which, until that point, had been the most important election of my lifetime. I hadn't slept, and had to bring cupcakes to my son's school for a belated birthday celebration. I remembered how the teachers and I stared at each other with stunned, bloodshot eyes, as they led my son and I through the classroom birthday ritual: we were to walk around a lit candle four times, signifying how many times my child had been around the sun. As I held his little hand and we circled the flame, the children counted aloud: 1! 2! 3! 4! With each revolution, I couldn't help but think this was the same length of the presidency. And I struggled to imagine what the next four years might bring.

I thought of this now, and all that had passed, and I was quite right that I never could have imagined any of this. And I can hardly believe we are poised to circle the flame once more. 1! 2! 3! 4! I can hardly believe that this time around, the unknowns feel even more frightening and mysterious. Here in Brooklyn, I can't imagine the eruption of rage if Trump is to win again. While back in Indiana, I can't imagine the fury if he is to lose.

Though we won't be able to go to Indiana for a while. The state is now one of the dozens of the restricted list of places New Yorkers may not visit without quarantining after. So, I don't know when we'll do that drive again. Don't know if Christmas will involve holding up presents on Zoom, and saying "This is what I would be handing you if I were there".

These days, when we speed down the American highways, I fantasise about our car morphing into a plutonium-fuelled DeLorean, and streaking us into the future, where the election has long since passed. A future where the overpass signs don't flash warnings about the spread of Covid-19. Where the signs sitting in yards don't summon images of white nationalists with torches, or of women being casually grabbed by their genitals.

I hold David's hand, and watch the landscape of my country zip past – McDonald's blurring into Jesus Saves blurring into the graffiti tags of my city – and I daydream of a more hopeful future for my son. One where everyone can at last pull off their masks – both the fabric version and the ideological kind – and really see each other as we all truly are: fragile against the forces of nature. In need of each other. Fellow countrymen. ■