

I WAS SOCIAL DISTANCING BEFORE IT WENT MAINSTREAM, AND ITS EARLY STUFF WAS BETTER

BY K.E. FLANN

Back when I started “social distancing,” there wasn’t even a term for it. I mean, I’ve never been into major labels. I first got into doing it when I lived in Europe. I basically didn’t even see Europe. Like, at all.

In those days, you had to work at it. You had to seek it out. It was all word of mouth stuff. The words of my mouth were “I’m sick” or “I have to take care of my kid.” I was so socially distant that there was no chance I was actually sick or had any kids. And that was the thrill of it.

I’ve been not going to things for years. For example, parties. When I did have to go to them, I hung in a corner and talked to one person the whole time. I answered polite questions with ungenerous, mono-syllabic answers. I watched the desperation build on the person’s face to escape. After they finally excused themselves for a refill, which they definitely earned, I spent long breaks in the home’s only bathroom. Back then, there weren’t even phones to read while I perched on the bathtub. I read the shampoo bottles — that’s how hardcore I was. I left the party early, too, at the same time as the host’s elderly relatives.

Back then, you had to let your phone ring to avoid invitations to concerts or sporting events. You had to play a careful game

of phone tag chicken, returning calls at times of day that you were pretty sure the other person wasn't home.

It was all D.I.Y. I even made my own zines, which, if you don't know, were paper calendars filled with "events" that made it possible to avoid commitments to other events. Work deadlines and early-morning dental appointments could be maneuvered to supersede dinner parties.

It wasn't a performance for my friends, either. It was a lifestyle. If a stranger in a store said, "Excuse me, miss," in a loud voice, I would pick up the pace, but only a little, so the person might think I didn't hear. I could do a mean serpentine to avoid helpful salespeople.

I've always had a counter-culture sensibility, like Jack Kerouac, except without all the domestic traveling, which is really the overrated part of *On the Road*.

Since way before it was cool, I've been wearing high-waisted pants and cutting my own hair. I was the first to not get any tattoos, which was actually a rad way not to connect with like-minded people. And if by "brunch," we mean eating at 11 AM, I was doing that, too.

I never needed a mask to sweat profusely when engaging with others outside the home.

I couldn't believe it when I first heard someone talk about it on the radio. It was like everyone used to crap on me for it,

and then it was suddenly ubiquitous and cool. I guess I have to realize that people have deep insecurities about viruses that make conformity appealing. It's like Michel Foucault says about the invisible oppression of "the new normal" or whatever.

Still, sometimes it's like now that everyone's doing it, what even is the point? It's so easy when it's sanctioned. My mother used to say, "You'll never meet anyone in your living room." And I was like, *Exactly*. My living room used to be this totally exclusive place, but now it's full of poseurs beaming in for Zoom meetings. Social distancing is overly produced now, and slick.

I mean, I don't exactly blame social distancing for selling out. It must be hard to maintain an authentic edge, to avoid becoming corporate when you're getting so much attention for being this sanitized version of yourself and "saving lives," whatever that means. I do wish it hadn't started appearing in commercials, though.

The struggle with being as real as I am is the vulnerability to disappointment. Someone who I know, but don't spend time with, used to be romantically involved with social distancing, and guess what? It's not even vegan.