



Silver Linings

Taking stock at the end of a hard year

By Cynthia J. Drake ✪ Illustration by Andy Ward

I walked to my backyard garden recently and found a cluster of sunflowers unfurling cheerful petals beside my cucumber plants. I smiled, thinking: *The birds must have known we could use a few more flowers around here.*

There's no sugarcoating the fact that Texas, like the rest of the country, has suffered great hardship and loss in 2020. COVID-19 ushered in a wave of unemployment, illness, and death. Most of us suffered from the disruption to daily life: Work, school, and travel (which I still dream of most nights) all changed overnight.

In this state that prides itself on "big" things, the scale of life suddenly became very small. Instead of planning my next European jaunt, I've been trying new

walking routes through my neighborhood with our dog, Rosie, as neighbors fish the local lake at dusk. Since I'm not hitting the open road much these days, I have more time to putter around the garden, which yields surprising gifts.

As we prepare to celebrate a holiday season that encourages us to focus on thankfulness and togetherness—in a year in which we may not feel particularly thankful or together—I'm reflecting on all the good that came out of the bad.

I'm grateful that my two kids found something to smile about every day, even when that was challenging for their parents. We might not have left the house much, but my boys took adventures by way of their Lego creations (spaceships, aquariums, and hospitals) and comic

book tales (*Calvin and Hobbes*, *Dog Man*). We became experts at decorating our family minivan with balloons, streamers, and painted messages for friends' drive-by birthday parades.

Perhaps not entirely unrelated to the realities of parenting without reprieve, I'm grateful for the pandemic-era blessing of delivery and to-go margaritas. Cheers, y'all.

Like many parents, I'm grateful for all the teachers who rose to the challenge of online education in March, and then spent the summer scrambling to create safe learning environments—whether online or in person—for fall, and beyond.

I'm grateful for the doctors, nurses, and first responders fighting on the front lines of the virus.

We went through an unspeakable amount of consolation tortilla chips and guacamole from our H-E-B bakery. I'm grateful to grocery stores for offering expanded curbside service.

I'm grateful for the ways Texans gave back, inspiring me to dig deep and find ways to help more myself. My friends at Carrying Hope in Austin and Houston recruited more than 100 volunteers to supply foster families with emergency backpacks filled with supplies for kids in crisis. Texans rescued more pets, with increased adoptions and emptier animal shelters during the pandemic. Even Texas distilleries like Tito's Handmade Vodka and Garrison Brothers Distillery switched their taps to provide much-needed hand sanitizer, free of charge.

It was a challenging year, and there will be plenty of work to do to regain our footing in 2021. One thing I hope to take away from this experience is the way I've looked to the small things for comfort and hope—the seeds of tomorrow's flowers, which turn out not to be so small after all.

Cynthia J. Drake loved perfecting her margarita recipe during quarantine, but she is looking forward to getting back on the road.