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### Two Parties One Year Apart

Kelci Baughman McDowell

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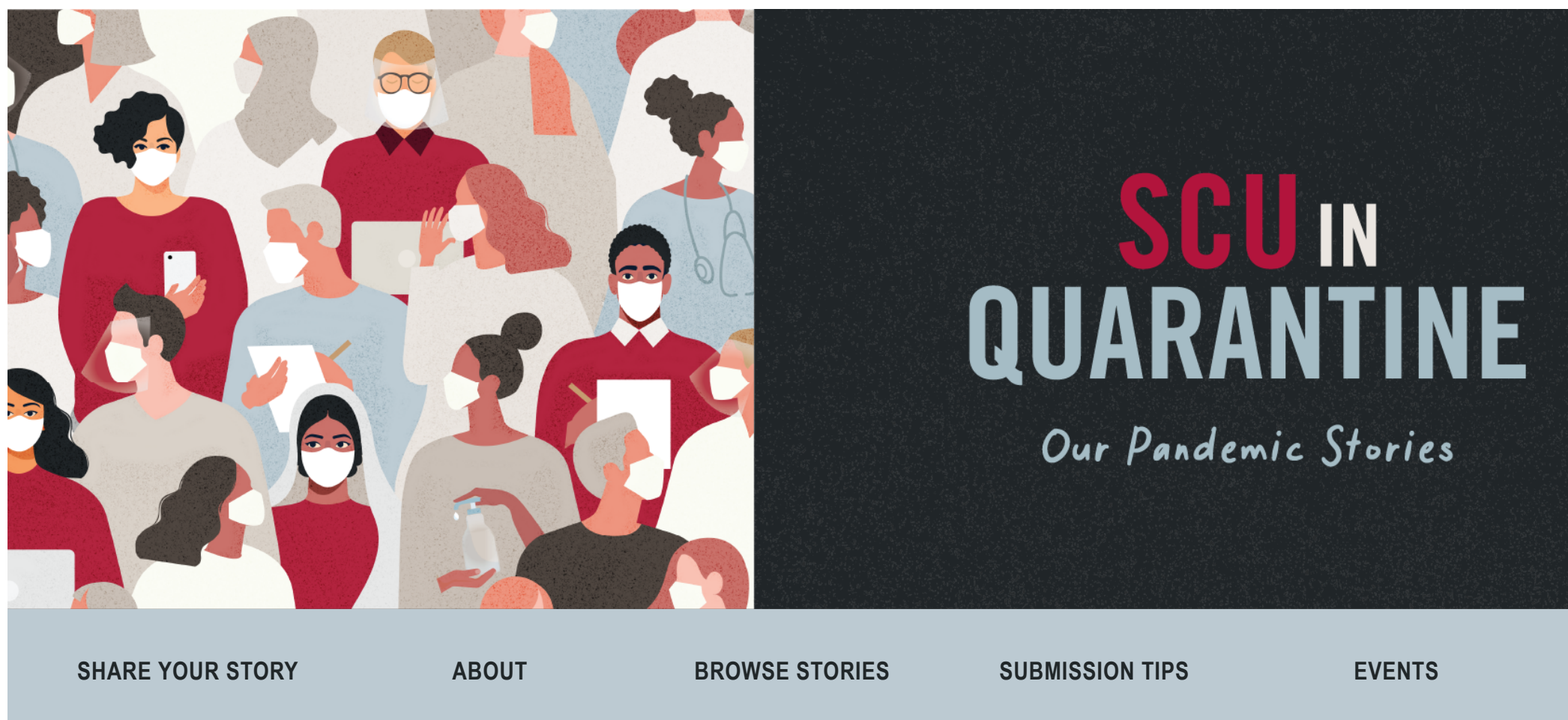
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#### Recommended Citation

Baughman McDowell, Kelci, "Two Parties One Year Apart" (2021). *Isolation - Physically Separated and Wearing Masks*. 3.

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## Two Parties One Year Apart

Kelci Baughman McDowell

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February 29, 2020. I had pushed my usual birthday collage party out a couple weeks, and on this leap year Saturday evening, a few friends took up my invitation and came over for drinks and to clip up magazines to paste fragments on a large poster. Fewer people than usual had turned up—were people just burned out from social obligations, or were they already heeding the media outlets and avoiding gatherings? Listening to the news on KALW earlier in the day, I had momentarily panicked and considered canceling the party. Ultimately I went through with it, figuring folks would make the best decision for themselves, and here a handful of us were, tipsy on cider, circled up in my living rooms, and scoffing at the new coronavirus. How dangerous could it really be? Many of us had survived the flu. How different could this new virus be?

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February 13, 2021. My birthday fell on a Saturday this year and despite COVID-19 still being a real danger, I knew I had to find a way to do my annual birthday collage party. It had been a very hard year. But by now we knew how to be safe—masks, ventilation, and avoid crowds. I was especially heartened that my elderly mother, who I had been protecting from being exposed to the novel coronavirus all year, had received her first Pfizer vaccine shot a week earlier.

One by one different friends—individuals, couples, and small groups—cycled through my garage at their assigned time slot to slap some magazine clippings on the poster tacked to the wall. All were masked and many wore two masks. I sprayed peppermint thyme hand sanitizer on their hands as each cluster arrived and departed. The sunny yet crisp San Francisco day passed in increments outside the garage, the shadows growing longer as the collage filled up. Fueled by the vodka shots I insisted people take out on the sidewalk, we talked and checked in: How was your work handling the shelter-in-place mandate? When do you think it would be safe to travel again? Check out these awesome black surgical masks my aunt got me for Christmas! We all seemed extra energized to be at a party even though it wasn't anything like a normal party. No one had partied for a year. I hadn't seen anyone for a year. But now we were partying.

Towards the end of the afternoon, as twilight crept over the Richmond District and a chill started settling in, we postulated what my party would look like next year. We'll be totally back to normal in your apartment without masks, a friend said. He was sure of it, and I think he's going to be right.





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