

Passing Shadows

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Forward

These are a series of portraits of life as it unfolded in the year 2020, generally in the northeastern portion of the state of Minnesota. With a single exception, the persons described here are fiction, but the experiences reflect news stories and personal accounts of negotiating a pandemic. Several of the stories draw upon the healthcare field because the author is in healthcare. In no way are these portraits intended to be comprehensive. In no way do they do justice to the worries and trials that people faced in Duluth and in the Northland as COVID-19 tore through our country and our lives.

Prelude

"Come on, Annie, join the party already," Eve said. "One hour and twenty-three minutes to ring in the New Year! Or are we ringing out the old year right now?" She laughed, tossing back her hair, and offered the pipe to her friend. The mismatched furniture and paraphernalia scattered across the room looked as though they could belong to a frat house rather than to that of a successful businesswoman.

Annie accepted. She already had a lighter in her hand, but she paused. "What are you celebrating so hard?"

"We have everything to celebrate! Jeez, Annie, this is the biggest year since the double naught. I couldn't party in '99, but I've got my own house now and I'm sure as hell drinking the end of '19 away."

"You really think 2020 is the year?"

"Hell yeah," Eve said, and she took a swig of her drink. "Hit it or pass it, hon."

Annie passed the pipe as readily as she had accepted it. "I actually think you might be right this time." The sip she took from her wine glass was more careful, but still generous.

"It's like 20/20 vision. It's going to be perfectly clear," Eve said, and paused to light the pipe and inhale long and slow before blowing the pungent smoke out the basement window. "We're going to vote that asshole out of office this year, at least. That's something to celebrate!" Her winsome smile lit up her face as she offered the pipe again to her friend.

"You're right, you're right. I'll smoke to that!" Annie laughed, and this time she did light up and take a long drag before coughing hard.

"I wonder what else might happen," Eve said, pondering the splash of rum and Coke left in her glass as though trying to make an important decision, but drank from her water bottle instead.

Annie let out a hum as she felt her body loosen under the effect of alcohol and marijuana. "I almost blew you off this year," she said, uninhibited.

"I knew it took a while to convince you to follow tradition."

"Nothing ever happens up here. Fucking Eveleth, Minnesota." Annie lit up and took another practiced drag. "The one time my whole social circle is partying and my priorities lie with you," she added.

"Amen, sister," Eve laughed, raising the glass to clink against Annie's. "Remember when we had to do this with grape juice?"

"Better with alcohol, isn't it?"

"Alcohol and weed."

"Amen, sister," said Annie, and she laughed harder than necessary, reeling back against the back of the recliner.

"Oop, there's the limit, I see." Eve snapped up the pipe from where it was held loose in her friend's hand. "I still can't believe you only smoke one day a year. How do you live the rest of it?"

"Very slowly."

Tapping the ashes out of the pipe, Eve pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I wonder if it's going to be easy to get Trump out."

"He does have about a ton of loyalists, no matter how he screws up."

A small frown transformed Eve's face into worry as she took her time refilling the pipe with more weed. "Just gotta have faith, I guess."

"Don't worry, Eve. There's time for him to screw up even worse. It's election year, after all."

This struck both women as funny, and they laughed together until they could barely breathe.

"But in all honesty," Eve said, "I'm just not sure there's anything that would shake up his base, or shake the Democrats enough to turn out in the kind of numbers we need."

"We could hope for a war."

"Jesus, girl, no one hopes for a war. Maybe a sufficient crisis for him to screw up. That might work." Flicking the lighter, Eve lit the fresh green tucked into the end of the pipe as she drew in another lungful of smoke.

On the television, a crowd of people in New York City watched the ball begin to lower above a giant screen ticking down the last minute of 2019. The clock above the television read 10:59.

"Oh, here comes the future!" Eve said, mood changing again as she rapidly replenished the rum and Coke in her glass.

Wine splashed across the lip of Annie's glass as she poured, dripping red upon the worn basement rug. "Oops!"

"Don't worry about it."

"Think this year the world ends?" Annie asked, raising her wine glass. It was the same question every year.

"I'll be glad to get an hour's head start if it does," Eve said, clinking, the same answer.

...four, three, two, one...

The women threw back their drinks together as the crowd in New York cheered and the east coast clicked over into the year 2020. The world had ended and neither knew it. Happy New Year.

I.

Rachel clung to Kenny's hand, almost shaking with tension. Protesters dotted the area around the corner of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue, clustered in small, familiar groups. Three days ago, the corner had meant nothing, served as the site of no revolution, seen only

the usual foot traffic that passed through Minneapolis around sunset on a cheery day in late May.

Two days ago, Rachel had been barbequing for Memorial Day and Kenny had been mixing the potato salad. They had set their picnic table on the shores of Lake Vermillion with no idea that the world had ended *again* in 2020, and it was like the old poet said, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

I can't breathe.

Rachel could almost hear the whimper linger on the spring air, and though surely there were thousands of people filling up the streets, the crowd itself was hushed, as though everyone was listening to it. Sunset would be 8:49 pm, and the sun was already low in the sky, casting deep shadows across the place where he had died begging.

Behind his mask, Kenny smiled at her, his eyes reassuring. Everyone Rachel could see was masked against the visible enemy of the police, guilty of murder, and against the invisible nemesis of the coronavirus.

The fact that one man, a black man, had died unable to breathe disturbed Rachel and her husband. The parallel fact that either of them might be hurt by those paid to protect and serve disturbed them more. Kenny had spent twenty years participating in social justice efforts and protests. Rachel was protesting for the first time. Both of them were afraid because of a third fact, the fact that there was a virus, invisible and silent, somewhere lurking.

"If you see them put on gas masks, take note of the wind," said Kenny. "I've been tear gassed many times. We might have to unmask if we get hit. You have your spares, right?"

Rachel patted the strap of her bag, where a handful of extra cloth masks were stored. The fear coalescing in her skull made her feel vulnerable. She was afraid of the police, but more afraid of unmasking and the possibility of infection.

Still, Rachel and Kenny were invested. They had traveled hours to join the protest despite fear, despite the virus. Every protester was masked and uncomplaining; praying as the sun set to God or to Freedom or to nothing at all that the mask would be enough, that the *protest* would be enough, although it likely was not.

"Racism is the worse virus," Kenny said, something he had told her before. To Kenny, there had been no question of whether to go to Minneapolis.

Rachel thought about the insidious spread of racism that was, much like coronavirus, steadily ticking deaths upward, ever upward. Indeed, COVID was already impacting black lives harder than others. Like generations of protesters before her, she knew the risk of injury or arrest, but this year there was the added chance of infection and death.

Yesterday, she had spent far too much time weighing the worries against equality. It felt petty to be afraid now when she had the privilege of feeling safe most of the time. *He* had been held down by a knee on his back, and begged for his mother as society itself, set up to keep him underfoot, played through the farce through literal means. *He* had, like every black man, woman, and child, a reason to fear every day.

So when Kenny put together his protest supplies, Rachel also made a bag, and when he climbed in the car, she joined him. Because she had to choose equality. Because she could not live with her own privilege anymore.

I can't breathe.

The sun passed the horizon in shades of orange and pink, bronzing the sky to dusk. It was May the 27th. The night would see Minneapolis burn. The police precinct, the very cradle of murderers, would burn. As the sun set, seeing the determination on her husband's face and feeling the rising crest of energy moving through the crowd, Rachel set fear to one side. It was time to move.

II.

"Maybe we should buy some extra PPE," the infection control nurse said to Peter, as they sat at a morning meeting with the other nurses. "This coronavirus in China looks like it might be a problem."

Her boss laughed. "How many people have died of the flu this season, just in the US? What do you think, Sherry?" He looked away from his infection control nurse and at the older woman at the end of the line.

"I don't know," Sherry said. "Four thousand people, maybe?"

"What about you, Mike?"

The younger man cleared his throat in habitual nervousness. He had graduated nursing school four months prior. "Ten thousand."

"You guys are way off. Hannah?"

"Fourteen thousand," she said, busily scribbling on her notepad in chaotic scrawls.

"What do you think, Nicole?" he said directly to the infection control nurse. A small smile pulled at his lips and his eyes were bright and laughing.

Nicole just shrugged, the hand below the table a fist in her lap.

"Somewhere between eighteen and forty-five thousand people," Peter said, and grinned. "How many people have died of this coronavirus?"

"Over two thousand," Nicole said, her mouth so dry that she could hardly swallow.

"Trust me, this is nothing," Peter said, and laughed again. He clicked his pen and wrote the date on the report sheet for the day.

Monday, February 24, 2020.

Two weeks later, Peter had stopped laughing. It was too late to stock up on extra PPE. It had probably been too late on February 24th. Thousands and thousands of nursing facilities across the country saw the pandemic coming, emptying the stock.

Sixty-two thousand people died in the flu season that year.

In the first six months of coronavirus, over one hundred and sixty thousand people died, a number that only kept accelerating.

III.

"I've signed the boys up for camp on the 19th and 26th of October, and the 2nd of November," the text from Chelsea read. "If you aren't going to send them on your week, please update the camp so they can staff appropriately."

Logan looked from his phone to his children, who were arguing in the living room over who would get the first player controller. He grimaced. Three years he had been divorced and the two of them still could not talk on the phone civilly. Or at least, she could not.

Sighing, he tapped out his answer, “I don’t think they should go to camp. The cases are going up in Duluth. I want to pull them out of school and do distance learning.”

He watched as his eldest made an impassioned plea that he deserved to be first player because he was the first child.

“If you can’t share, Hunter, you can’t play,” Logan said. There was no need for steel in his voice. The boys were pretty willing to share if reminded. Soon enough, the agreement was reached: Hunter would hand over the first player controller after exactly fifteen more minutes, and then Eddie would get a full hour. Logan was tasked to keep the time.

He noticed a new text from Chelsea as he went to set the timer on his phone. It read, “It’s important that the boys get to play with other kids. They practice strict social distancing at this camp and at school. It really helps me to have some time to work at home. I think you’re being over-protective.”

Logan paused to rub his temples before finding and linking the article detailing the increasing rates of infection in St. Louis County. The lines were trending quickly, frighteningly upward. On the heels of the link, he texted, “Don’t send them to camp, Chel. I know you love them and they adore you.” Belatedly, he set the alarm for thirteen minutes.

Chelsea did not reply, but on October 20th, she took the time to send a picture of Hunter and Eddie, masked, at work on a snowman alongside two other children. “Only four at camp today! They had a lot of fun and want to go on your week.”

Logan did not send the boys to camp or to school. On November 3rd, he received a message from the school principal. “You and Chelsea should come to some sort of agreement. If your children are following the hybrid model, it’s important for their education for them to come into school.”

But only a week later, he received a message from Myers-Wilkins that all the elementary schools would be going full distance learning starting the next week.

By that time, the lines on the graphs Logan referenced each day were so steep that the virus seemed out of control.

IV.

“Frankly, I’m disappointed that it’s distributing under Trump.” Simon rubbed his temples wearily.

“Why’s that?” Emily was filing her nails, more out of nerves than any sort of vanity.

“Incompetence. We already know that he turned down the option to buy more doses. I don’t know that we can trust that whatever system they devise will effectively get them where they need to go. And how do we know that they’re being divided across the country fairly? Minnesota is getting less than two hundred thousand doses.”

“For the entire state?” A frown troubled her usually bright face.

“Exactly 183,400,” said Simon. “Or so claims MPR.”

“Does that even cover healthcare workers?”

“Supposedly there are 500,000 people in priority populations. Healthcare is just one.”

Emily leaned over, peering at the tablet upright against Simon’s knees. “You’d think vaccinating the workers would protect the nursing home residents.”

"No, it's everywhere by now." Simon shook his head. "We have to protect the most vulnerable, and that's absolutely octogenarians."

"It's the workers bringing it into the facilities. Old people aren't spontaneously sprouting COVID infections."

"I think you're just being selfish, Em. You work a desk job at a rehab facility. You aren't exactly front line."

Emily gave Simon a gentle tap with the flat of the nail file before scrolling the article further. "Oh God, look at this."

"Six weeks until immunity?" Simon raised his eyes skyward, sending a silent prayer to science and reason. "This is escalating through spring, isn't it? People are going to go out and celebrate as soon as they get the first shot."

"I suppose no one really listens to the after instructions... although this is deadly serious." Slipping the file back into her nail kit, Emily frowned at nothing.

The tablet screen dimmed, and Simon turned it off. "It always was. That hasn't stopped... you know, any of the bad decisions. Your damn mother just had all your sisters over for Thanksgiving, and I thought she was being really smart about this."

The frown on her face turned particularly sour. "Don't be a dick. You know she's really suffering this isolation."

"Hey," Simon said, and caught Emily by the hand. "I'm not unsympathetic, Em. We're all suffering the isolation. I think you and I have quarrelled more these past few months than the four years prior, but I am still grateful every day that I have you, and that I'm not toughing it out alone."

Letting herself be reeled into his arms, Emily said, "You're so sentimental."

"Disgusting character trait," Simon agreed, and placed a kiss upon her cheek. "I think I'm saying it because we have to avoid premature celebration."

"I'm not sure that I can stand six more weeks with *you*, let alone whatever time it is before they actually have the supply to vaccinate us." She was smiling, but the worry lines were drawing her brow.

"We'll make it, Em. Maybe it's okay distribution is starting under Trump. This has got to get rolling, for all our sakes."

V.

Timothy James Walz shared a problem with three hundred and fifty million or so Americans. But, like forty-nine others, his major concern involved only a fraction of the whole, about two percent of the population.

Over five and a half million, he thought to himself. Tim was worried about his people, his state of Minnesota. They had elected him Governor in 2018, and until this year he had no worries that the population of his state would significantly change in any particular way.

Then there was this coronavirus, COVID-19, which had added several levels of complication to an already intricate job. In the first few days after he was briefed on the situation, he thought that some governance would come on the federal level on how to negotiate a pandemic.

But instead of guidance, even instead of silence, Tim and many of the other forty-nine governors in the country were startled to be met with resistance, both from above and from the average citizen. The death rate in Minnesota became a constant worry for Tim, and the hospitalization rate even more so.

"I don't know what to say to convince people to even wear a damn mask," he said to his wife, Gwen, one day late in the fall. "There's plenty of people who do, but the rural areas are going to get slammed over the holidays and they don't have the hospital beds to cover the need."

Gwen set her lips in a thoughtful way that Tim had loved for almost thirty years. "You know not everyone's going to vote for you again, Tim..."

He twirled his fingers in an impatient circle, listening.

"I really don't know what to tell you. It's horrible to think that if this continues, you'll be voted in by a landslide because the people who would have voted against you will be dead."

Tim raised an eyebrow, thinking.

On November 16, 2020, well into the eleventh month of the pandemic, the eleventh month of pushing back against people determined that their rights were more important than everyone's health, Tim addressed the resistance directly. Behind the podium, thinking of over three thousand dead Minnesotans, he said, "Wear your mask and stay healthy if for no other reason... that'll keep you healthy to vote against me in two years. If that's what it takes, just keep yourself healthy."

Tim would rather *not* be the Governor of over five and a half million Minnesotans than see his reelection in death.

VI.

"Mom, Bill Gates isn't a doctor. Why does he keep talking about vaccines?"

Raine smiled at her daughter. "That's a great question, Emma. What do you think?"

"Maybe he should stick to what he knows." The girl beamed.

"Maybe you should run the country," Raine said, laughing. "Now go finish your packet for the week. Let me know if you need help."

As Emma disappeared into the dining room, Raine glanced at the clock above the television and let out a slow, silent sigh of relief. It had been almost five weeks since Nett Lake Elementary had started distance learning and Raine's job had sent her home to be with her child seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day... sixty minutes an hour, sixty seconds a minute...

Raine loved Emma fiercely, and she was so proud of the seven-year-old that she sometimes felt like no other emotion could fit into her heart. The child was precocious, exuberant, and full of wild, aimless ambition and joy. Since distance learning, she was also an incessant pest, demanded attention, and could rarely spend more than twenty minutes diverting herself with play or schoolwork before running back to her mother. The record, in fact, was twenty-one.

There was not a lot to be accomplished in about twenty minutes. Raine elected to turn on the television this time.

Some of Raine's happiest moments during quarantine were after 8:30 pm, when her beautiful, amazing, bratty daughter was finally tucked into bed. She had always valued this time, but her days used to involve eight hours of focusing her mind on spreadsheets and data, then the commute. By the time she picked up her daughter, Emma had spent the day with her classmates and seemed happy to play alone for a while. Raine, too, was happy to snuggle up to her daughter and relax.

Raine rubbed her temples, not even sure what channel was on. What was most frustrating about the whole mess was how pointless the lock down was. Influenza had never shut the schools down before, and as far as Raine could tell, this coronavirus was simply a flu. Despite the commotion, none of her friends or family were sick, and no one they knew were sick, and even the official numbers for her county were almost zilch.

The television blinked off again and Raine tossed the remote to the other end of the couch. She was not sure, but she suspected that some powerful hand had manipulated this situation into place. Perhaps Governor Walz thought that using this as an excuse to frighten the people of Minnesota would ensure his next election went well. Certainly, the supposed numbers in the Cities were high, where people would vote Democrat before sense and probably were not paying close attention. The numbers in Orr, or Cook, or Ely, or Virginia were low or zero, and yet still Raine was stuck here in the house with Emma, making the best of an infuriating situation.

"Hey Mom, can we play Uno?" Emma was standing in the door to the kitchen with the cards already in her hands.

The clock above the television read a mere nine minutes later than it had when Emma disappeared. *Just great.*

VII.

"What's his name?" Kiara said into the megaphone. Her mask was pulled down below her chin so her voice was undistorted. She paced back and forth in front of the protestors, always at least six feet away. Black and white, they were her people, here for a purpose, and as the leader she felt responsible for them.

The gathered crowd shouted their part. "George Floyd!" They all wore masks properly covering their faces, but with so many voices they were clear and loud in the emptiness of downtown.

Across the street, a group of counter protestors stood in a restless clot of bodies, every nose and mouth uncovered. Two held American flags and one an even larger Confederate flag.

Prowling into the open street, Kiara said, "Say his name!"

The crowd moved with her, mimicking her, and shouted, "George Floyd!"

The man with the Confederate flag laughed and a woman bearing the flag of their nation jeered, "Fuck that."

"I smell bacon," one of the protestors said from the safety of the crowd, and Kiara noticed the men in uniform who had appeared at either end of the street. She felt the tension rise among her people and gestured them back.

Kiara heard someone faintly saying, "Stay legal, guys. Off the street."

Most of the protestors had stepped onto the sidewalk when the man with the Confederate flag said, far too loudly, "Why do black men always bow to their bitches?"

A masked figure broke rank to run at the counter protestors, shouting indistinctly. Her name was Tiffany, and she was not quite eighteen. The police had been watching closely, and they closed in on the runner before she came anywhere close to the Confederate flag.

"Hands up!" Kiara said into the megaphone. She cast a prayer to God, feeling her heart pounding in true fright.

"Don't shoot!" the crowd around her shouted back, each holding their hands up in the air.

Across the street, the counter protesters laughed again. The woman waved her flag with great fervor.

Two of the officers were holding Tiffany, who struggled openly. Her mask had slipped out of position and her eyes burned like those of a trapped animal.

"Sir, sir," a protester called, "Why aren't you wearing masks? You're supposed to be protecting us, sir."

One maskless officer glared into the crowd. Several protesters were holding their cameras up along with their hands, recording as the crying girl was pressed into a patrol car.

"Good job arresting a teenager, guys," Kiara said into the megaphone angrily.

Behind the gathered protesters, a street lamp illuminated the unsmiling faces of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie, carved larger than life upon the wall of the memorial where the protest met each week. The lettering above their stoic visages read, *An event has happened upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to remain silent.*

It was a pretty memorial, although it carried a lie. If life were just, the three depicted there would be perhaps forgotten, if not for their untimely lynching on a street lamp one hundred years ago. Now they were dead and remembered while scores of other poor black souls much like them also die.

It is not *impossible* to remain silent. Indeed, it is possible to build a memorial, cry to heaven regarding forgiveness and repentance, and yet still be stubbornly, inexplicably silent.

Atonement is impossible without change, and despite their uniforms, the maskless officers resembled the maskless counter protesters as they closed the car door on the teenager and prepared to drive her away.

Masked, the protesters watched, with Elias, Elmer, and Isaac watching behind them.

VIII.

Life is good. Life is good. Life is good.

Ginny picked up the bottle and reached to drop it into the bag with the others. She paused, blinked. Her eyes were drawn to the label. *Vodka*. So cheap that the brand name was printed in smaller letters. Not cheap enough, of course, not with only Ginny able to work and her husband drinking three or four of these a day. She slammed the car door closed, dropping the bottle in her bag. Her lip hurt where he had split it against her teeth the night before.

Every morning since COVID, she had checked their car, and most mornings she found something on the floor in front of the passenger seat, sometimes tucked in the glove box, occasionally tossed in the back, always empty. Even though she drove only once a week to the

grocery store, she was not keen on seeing trouble for someone else's open containers. She was, after all, a professional.

As she walked to the dumpster in the alley, a futile guilt fluttered in her head. The bottles were recyclable, she was sure. She threw them in the dumpster anyway. Recycling meant keeping them in a bin that would soon be overrun by liquor bottles, and would sit in the house where guests could see them, although there would be no guests during lock down. Quietly, underneath that, her brain whispered the truth: it would be worse that *she* would have to see them. The slim contours of the bottles, and especially the *Vodka* label, filled her with a quiet, creeping dread. She liked to get up early enough to bag them up in the dark so she would not have to look at them long, and she never held them for more than the time it took to thrust them in a bag.

Ginny had experience with PTSD, the esoteric disorder haunting some of her veteran clients and even some of the women who had, in their way, lived a life much like Ginny's own. She knew about triggers, but that knowledge did not immediately apply to the bottles. If she had put the two thoughts together, she might have realized that the feeling that rose in her stomach every time she saw *Vodka*, making her nauseous and light-headed, was the trigger firing. The trouble was that she was not yet ready to realize that she had *trauma*. Traumatized people reached out for help, and he would hurt her for trying, and he was always there in the house, listening in case she misspoke or broke a dish or walked too loudly for his taste.

Life is good. Good. Good.

In idle moments, especially struggling with the bottles, or when her husband got angry, or when he got worse than angry, or when she simply remembered any of these things, her brain filled the yawning abyss with this sentence: *Life is good*. After all, she was a professional. Her job was important. She was in a happy relationship. Happy. She was not forced to lock down alone, and had even kept her job. All of her ducks were in a row. *Life is good*.

Ginny felt better as the dumpster slammed shut. The bottles were gone for today and it was time to move on. Usually, just last month, she would proceed to get in the car and go to work, but now, working from home, she headed back to the house with leaden feet, hoping that he woke up without a hangover, without a reason to shout at her, without the urge to hit her again.

IX.

"What do you mean, you aren't allowing visitors?" Violet drummed her fingers on the steering wheel in agitation. In front of her, the sliding doors at the entrance to the nursing home where her grandmother lived were locked. She glared at a figure hurrying past inside, as though her ire might change the story she was being told.

"The Minnesota Department of Health is telling us to restrict visitors." The voice on the other end of the phone sounded like a sigh, like it had been telling angry families the same news all day. "We really have no option here."

"You can't just keep my Grandma hostage like that!"

"Trust me, Violet. We want nothing more than for visitation and activities to resume as normal. Greta has been asking for you, and we want you to see her. Will you reconsider the window visit?"

A sign near the front door read, "Family Visiting Area." It had been put up in a hurry; Violet could tell because someone had tried to fit the first two words on the same line, leaving far too little room for the *-ing*. All that stood beside the sign was a bench turned towards the picture window looking into the facility.

"How is Grandma supposed to talk to me through the window? And she can't hear anything on the phone, you know that." Although she had chosen not to say so, she suspected that her grandmother might not even recognize her through the window, and the thought hurt.

"Understand we have thirty-some residents to keep safe."

Suddenly the fight went out of Violet. "I guess no one wants to see what happened in Washington here."

"We are doing everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen. Staff members get their temperature taken at the door every shift, and they fill out a..."

"But how is my Grandma doing? How is *everyone* doing? Mom told me that you have everyone eating in their rooms now, and no activities. What's going to happen to them?"

There was silence on the line for so long that Violet wearily thought that maybe it had disconnected or the poor besieged social worker on the other end had even hung up.

Finally, the voice said, strangely without a hint of emotion, "Everyone... everyone is fading. It's like some of them have decided that without their family, life isn't worth their time anymore."

Violet held her breath, trying not to snifle. A tear gathered upon her lashes and wet the inside of her glasses without sliding down her cheek.

"I don't know what they will look like on the other side of this. I mean, it hasn't even been a month. I don't know how many of them will be there when COVID is over."

"Please," Violet said, voice cracking. "Please look after Grandma."

"We're doing the best we can for all of them."

X.

"Are you kidding me?" Greg said, frowning.

"No, we want her to be properly protected," the woman with the adult surgical masks said, holding one out like an offering.

"We made an appointment..."

"I'm afraid everyone has to wait in line."

Greg looked down at his daughter, Harper, as he tried to keep his cool. The hot pink cloth mask covering her nose and mouth was perfectly tailored to fit her child-sized face. Her eyes had glazed over in boredom, and they had only arrived at the DECC ten minutes ago.

"Trade ya," he said to her, offering the baby blue surgical mask in exchange. Her eyes came into focus and her brow furrowed in distaste. Greg wished, not for the first time, that they were at home instead of out enjoying their free test for COVID-19.

"Aww, Daddy, don't make me," Harper complained. Lately nothing but pink pleased her, and blue was a foreign, vaguely-offensive concept.

"Them's the rules, offspring."

Thankfully, although the girl was not happy, she deigned to trade the cloth mask for the official, adult-sized option. It slid immediately under her nose and she yanked it up.

"Isn't it *less* safe to have her wear a mask that won't stay in place?" Greg asked, then noticed that the woman had moved on to the next group coming in the DECC door.

The convention center had only opened for COVID testing in the past week. Greg knew it was a total coincidence that Harper would have an exposure so quickly, after months and months of keeping her safe, but that fact could not stop his brain from suspecting that the exposure was some sort of elaborate ruse to test out the capacity of the DECC and the testing process. He shook off the paranoia only with some difficulty. Obviously locking down for so long had addled his good sense.

"Harper," he said, with more intensity than he meant. She had been pulling on her mask again. It was so loose on her face. Guilty, she put her hands behind her back.

The line passed through the area, then looped and snaked back against itself, so that Greg and Harper were less than three feet from people who had arrived before or after them.

Over half an hour had passed. Harper had pulled on and adjusted her mask more times than Greg had the patience to count. He was too busy trying to make sure that she stayed relatively close to him, as she seemed absolutely determined to wander off and catch COVID in truth from one of the many people who had come to see if they had COVID.

It was only a potential exposure, Greg thought irritably to himself, wishing, not for the first time, that he and Harper were home. It was well past their appointment, which made the whole experience of waiting in line with everyone else rather surreal.

"I guess this is like the whole damn pandemic," he said to his daughter's back. They were close to the end of the line, where scattered people were standing at tables, maskless but finally able to socially distance as they struggled to fill tubes with enough saliva to test. "Just a goddamn mess."

Harper turned to look at him, and although she was only six, Greg figured that at thirteen she would probably look at him the same way, like he was the most embarrassing and mildly unintelligent father on the planet.

He wished, not for the last time, that he and Harper were home.

XI.

"I had no idea Frannie was going to die."

Lynn checked her blind spot before merging into the right lane. Both hands were on the steering wheel, but thanks to the magic of Bluetooth, she said, "Well, she was on Hospice."

The voice of the nurse on the phone sighed. "Yes, but usually I can tell when it's about to happen, you know? Something changes."

"Sarah, she just came on Hospice the other day, didn't she? Maybe you missed something." The little car jumped into gear as Lynn sped up the ramp to match the highway speed limit.

"No, I'm telling you, none of the signs were there." Sarah sounded actually distraught.

"Hospice isn't a science, you know. I've seen people go very fast. Remember Georgie?" Clicking on the cruise control, Lynn relaxed back in her seat to pass the twenty miles northeast to Two Harbors.

"Georgie's blood pressure dropped the day before and his heart rate took off. I'm telling you, Frannie was fine on Friday at two o'clock and dead by noon the next day. Hospice, sure. I haven't been doing this too long, but none of my other patients died like *this*."

Lynn paused, considering the almost ten years of experience that she had in caring for the dying. She had not always read the signs, but there was always something to notice, even in retrospect. Her expertise had made her very good at picking up when to rush those difficult conversations, and when to instruct lost sons and daughters to get there or lose a chance to say goodbye.

There was something naturally astute about Sarah; she was made for Hospice work. Even so, Lynn doubted that the death was such a surprise. Her car stereo made a noise. "Hold on, Sarah, I've got to put you on hold."

"Okay."

With a click of a button on her steering wheel, the line shifted to the new caller. "This is Lynn," she said in her professional voice.

"Hey Lynn, this is triage. Just got a call that a patient of yours, Ruby Leino, has passed away."

There was a long moment before Lynn replied, "Got it. I'll head there now. Can you put the death visit on my laptop?" The nurse on the line agreed, so Lynn flipped back to her conversation with Sarah.

"My admit from yesterday died."

"The one with the daughter in Fargo? COVID, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I... I had no idea."

"I'm telling you, Lynn. COVID is a thief. We need to treat all of these admits like they might pass on at any moment."

XII.

"But where are we going to go?" Nikki asked the man in uniform, staring at the collapsed tent at her feet. She had not picked up a winter coat yet this year, and the first cool winds of mid-October made her shiver.

"Ask CHUM," he said, referring to one of the local shelters, and shifted his stance to the left a few inches, the holster on his hip coming into full view.

With no reason to think differently and every reason to fear the police, Nikki took this as a threat. She ducked her head and began pulling apart the tent supports. All of her belongings, everything she had left, was heaped in a meager pile. She hoped she would not have to leave much behind.

"Need a pack?" An older man who called himself Runner had joined Nikki. Behind him, what he owned was piled awkwardly in the kind of stroller some parents run with. One of the back wheels had broken off.

Tears welled in Nikki's eyes as she took what had once been a backpack for a small child. "Thanks."

The officer turned abruptly and walked away, weaving between the scattered tents and structures. He rejoined the handful of officers watching casually as the homeless encampment at Point of Rocks was pulled apart into piles of component materials and scant possessions.

"Where are we supposed to go?" Nikki asked Runner. This was her second year on the street. Last winter had been snowy and cold, but she had felt safe and warm enough in shelters and on the occasional couch. The virus had come with the spring, and by June she was avoiding the shelters, avoiding the indoors, and eating what she could get without lingering too close to others. She had joined Point of Rocks at the end of August, but only found the tent sometime in September. Just last week, she had grimly thought to herself that, if she had to live outside through winter, at least she had the other thirty-odd people in the homeless encampment for support.

And now she and her friends were dismantling their home as a knot of officers stood by staring, only some of them wearing masks.

Runner shrugged. "Get the virus. I hear that CHUM has some sort of deal with a hotel to shelter any of us who get it." This was not his first or even fifteenth winter on the street. If he froze, he claimed he would have no regrets. The illness in his mind had long kept him away from the crowds of shelters. He had told Nikki that freezing to death was even supposed to be pleasant.

Nikki frowned. She had just turned nineteen. Purposely getting infected with COVID did not appeal to her. On a bad night last year, few and very far between, she had walked, dusk to dawn, back and forth down Superior Street. Maybe this would be an easy winter, but if not, she could walk. If she got too cold or too tired, well, at nineteen she would probably survive corona. Probably.

The tent supports went into the Paw Patrol pack first, followed by a tattered paperback. Nikki sighed at the rest of her belongings. Something would have to stay behind, she was sure.

XIII.

Randall had poured himself a drink and, sitting on the wrong side of the bar, watched as John and Beth ushered the last customer out the door at the stroke of midnight on November 21st. The click of the lock seemed to echo. They turned to him for direction and Randall just gestured at the bar.

"Have at it, guys," he said through his mask, swirling the gin and tonic in his glass.

"Long island iced tea," Beth said to John, and he went around to begin the process. She took up a table at least eight feet from the bar and waited.

John took his time. He lined up the liquor, measured generously, and soon enough had Beth's drink and a fresh sex on the beach. Beth wordlessly got up to get her drink and went back to her table, and John leaned on the bartending side, as far from Randall as he could stand.

In the time before the virus, a stranger glancing through the window would think that none of them were very good friends.

Randall pulled his mask down below his chin and took a sip, and only then did his wait staff do the same. "Well, I think this is it," he said, feeling strangely neutral. "Make sure you put in for unemployment; I won't fight you on it."

"Randy, don't give up yet. Everyone in Aurora knows you've worked your ass off to keep this bar going for twenty years. No one's going to make you shut down." Beth had worked for Randall for almost all of those twenty years. Her big blue eyes were tired.

"There are other bars. I simply don't have the capital to get through another month without revenue. You know I tried, Beth. The first shut down took everything I had."

"It's only four weeks," John said. His drink was already empty.

Randall shook his head. "Four weeks won't cut it. I could throw everything I own at this, but when Walz extends it a month more, I'll end up without a house, too."

"Maybe Biden..." John began.

"Maybe God himself!" Randall slammed his glass on the bar hard enough that it broke. Beth jumped out of her seat, upturning her chair and her glass at once.

Randall cast an apologetic look at Beth before turning back to John. "If you really think Biden is going to come through for people like me, look... We barely had that first relief bill, and by the time I got to the bank the money was gone. There *is* no help coming. They've been arguing in DC and getting nowhere for six months now." He paused to casually inspect his hand and, finding no cut or blood, began carefully picking up shards of glass and putting them on a napkin.

"I guess pride goes before the fall," Randall said. "I should have laid you both off and let you soak up that \$600 in unemployment, but I kept you working, and I ate up what was left in the bank, and now I can't do it anymore. The money isn't there."

"I'll work for free," Beth said, the chair still at her feet.

"Like *hell* you will," Randall said. "You guys get out of here. I'll pay you until one, and of course you'll get your holiday bonus early this year." He paused. "Well, call it a gift. No need to report a gift as income, right?"

XIV.

"I wasn't sure you'd be here."

David was not entirely surprised by the voice. He opened his eyes; the sun had risen over Lake Superior almost an hour ago, and most of the pink had faded from behind the silhouette of Wisconsin. He patted the rock beside him.

"Mighty cold today, boo," Mark said as he sat down alongside. They were situated on a small curve in the shore that dipped inward, and were partially protected by the protruding roots of the trees lining the shore.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"Lief Erikson is where you go when it's warm. Starbucks in the winter, but that's nowhere to be right now, so I thought..." Mark's gloved hand crept across the small distance between them and touched David's elbow. "But why did you need two hours on the shortest day of the year?"

"Solstice isn't until Monday."

Mark tugged David around to face him. "Close enough. At least you have your balaclava on, but scrubs are awful in the cold. When you weren't home at 8:30, I worried about you. Come on, boo, what's worth freezing in the park for two hours?"

There were lines of fatigue weighing on David's face, and his usual bright smile and mischievous eyes were drained and worn instead. He was silent so long that Mark started to count the sounds he could hear around the two. The freezing wind, engines from the nearby

road, tree branches rubbing leaflessly against each other, the faint rustling of David's parka as he breathed.

Mark waited because six years had taught him that David needed time more than anything else when his emotions ran high. He thought about all the fighting they did the first six months they were together, and how quickly the quarrels had died off when he had picked up the habit of patience that had, in the end, seen the two of them into a marriage he hoped would last forever.

"Someone died," David finally said.

At this point, the waiting was a formality. Mark reached for and took David's mittened hand with his own gloved one, and although the touch was muted, they both felt comforted.

"Someone died," David said again, "but didn't have to die. Normally he wouldn't have died. A year ago he wouldn't have died."

Mark watched as David adjusted his name badge, a gesture meaning that he was deciding how much information he could share about his job.

"This guy came in with... something... we just don't have the capacity to fix, but it's fixable. Easy, even, in the right hospital. Rapid-tested for COVID, and that was negative, so called down to the cities to find a place to life flight him."

David looked out over the water again. "There was no place. I tried everywhere... Madison, Milwaukee... finally found a bed in Des Moines, but then our chopper was busy, and by the time it got back, he *died*, Mark. He died because he had to wait for care."

"That isn't your fault, boo..." Mark began.

"God, I know, but it just feels *shitty*. I know there was nothing else I could have done, so I thought I'd come watch the sunrise."

Mark opened his arms invitingly, and David curled into the embrace with a sigh, half contentment and half sorrow.

"I wish this were over," they both said, almost entirely in tantum.

David managed a wan smile. "Jinx."

Mark rolled his eyes. "I owe you a soda."

Epilogue

Eve placed her glass on the coffee table so that she could cough weakly into her hand. "Some celebration," she said. "Although it isn't like you could go out and party this year."

"Tradition is tradition," Annie said, and frowned as she watched her friend pull the blankets closer around her body as though she were freezing in the warm house.

"You sure you don't want to smoke without me? I still have some weed."

"That was really your thing. Wine's enough for me."

"Try not to spill this year. This is the carpet I care about." The weak smile on Eve's face made her look fragile.

The sitting room they were in was just inside the front door. It was comfortable and neat and tastefully modern, a room that was kept nice by virtue of being used primarily for anyone who might need to be impressed by Eve's success.

"It's so weird to sit up here," Annie said, refilling her glass, but very carefully.

"You're telling me. I haven't even been to my bedroom since I got out of the hospital. I had to ask my Mom to get some clothes for me." Eve's eyes shifted briefly to the stairs, and she looked absolutely miserable.

"Ever figure out where you caught it?"

Picking up the glass again, Eve paused to sip at the grape juice. "I really don't know. I can barely remember what I was doing in August. My planner has something about meeting Jim in the cities, so I guess I picked it up there."

The clock on the wall cheerfully began chiming eleven o'clock. Eve seized upon the closest pillow and tossed it weakly, falling about six inches short of the teddy bear she had tossed at ten o'clock. "Do me a favor and run that thing over, Annie. Jesus."

"We missed future New Year's."

"I don't care. If anyone is actually in Time Square, I hope the ball drops right on their faces."

"I guess the world already ended." Annie drained her glass in one gulp. The wine seemed stale. Most things just seemed stale lately. She imagined it was the knowledge of how many people were dying every day. The only person in her circle who had actually caught COVID-19 was Eve, and though she had been in the hospital for a week, and still seemed irrevocably broken on some level, she had survived.

There was no reason to complain about a stale bottle of wine. Annie presumed, incorrectly, that Eve had opened it a few days ago and forgotten. A lot of things were slipping out of Eve's mind lately.