

## In this Together

### Day 1

It's my first day under house arrest. Well, not exactly. We're sheltering in place. The virus has spread its wings everywhere. Now New York City is becoming a hotspot. It seems as though the number of infections doubles every few days. There is no end in sight. I'm not scared. I am woman, hear me roar!

I just turned 65, Happy Birthday to me! A few months ago I decided to let my hair go gray. How fortuitous! No need to go to the beauty salon. As my hairdresser advised just before the lockdown began, if worse comes to worse I'll have a ponytail for the first time in decades.

As a freelance editor, I'm used to working from home, so that's no sweat. I have several gigs in process now but don't know what will come next. Will I keep getting work? Don't know. I'm putting every penny I can in the bank. But I can't afford to be without income right now. So I'll take as much work as I can get.

On day one, I make some critical decisions. No need to shower! Or wear a bra! Who's going to see me? Even when I'm in a Zoom meeting, they only see my face and neck and the very top of my chest. And my breasts aren't up there anymore! I'll put on a nice looking top and keep my pajama bottoms on. For all I know, the others will be naked from the waist down! More tomorrow.

### Day 2

Still no bra. But I did shower!

I live alone in a small studio in the Village. I've had the place since the 70's. A walk-up. The good news is I can't infect anyone in the household since there isn't anyone here to infect. The bad news is I won't get to see my closest friend in the flesh for a while. I'm trying to grok that. These are still early days, and we have a long way to go.

I'm working on a job today for a client who writes short stories. Velma. She's a strange gal. Her story is about a French Poodle who speaks Gaelic but with a German accent. It is literally the worst story I've ever read. Furthermore, she switches back and forth between sentence fragments and run-ons and uses a kind of Joycian stream of consciousness, minus the flair. But, hey, it's putting food on the table.

My own writing suffers these days. I have no inspiration. I'm certainly not going to write about this virus. Too obvious! Everyone will be doing it. So this journal is the best I can manage right now.

Every day I call my best friend, Magda, who lives in rural Kentucky. Older than me, she is worried and frightened. She tells me she's afraid to go to the grocery store, and there are no deliveries in her area.

"What did you do today?" I ask.

"I fed the dog, took him for a walk, made lunch, read a little."

"You're vying for the 'most productive during a pandemic' prize, huh?"

Magda chuckles. The only person I know who thinks I'm the least bit funny.

"Are you being careful?" she asks, knowing I live in the big bad city where she also grew up.

"Of course I am. You know I'm not leaving the house."

"Yeah, but, there's those delivery guys, the mailman, the super..."

"I'm being careful. Washing my hands a zillion times a day until they're raw and I'm grouchy."

"You're grouchy regardless."

"You think?"

We ring off, and we know we'll have a similar conversation tomorrow, but it's comforting all the same.

I keep the news on, in the background. It's so depressing. But I just need to know the latest. The newscasters end each broadcast saying things like, "We're in this together." I guess we are in many ways. And in so many ways we are not. Poor people will suffer the worst of this, as they always do. Our politicians will fight each other and score points and fail us in so many ways. As they always do. Are we in this together? We're all subjected to the potential of getting sick, possibly dying. But that's where the togetherness ends, as far as I can tell.

I hear that people are having Zoom parties and concerts and classes and chat sessions. They make it sound like fun. But I'm not into that. I prefer the solitude of my own company. I know that's considered bad form, but I don't really give a fuck. I'm not donating to the Red Cross or the hunger organizations because I don't trust them to actually do good. Swindlers and con artists, in my experience. But I pay my cleaning woman even though she can't come to clean. See? Not heartless! I only try to project that image. Even Magda knows it's not so.

There was a story on the news that touched me. A gal at the supermarket checkout asked a customer why she wasn't wearing gloves. The customer told her she hadn't been able to find any. The checkout clerk pulled out her own box of gloves and held it out for the customer to take some. She gratefully took a pair. The cashier said, "No, take more. Take what you need." I cried for the first time in this whole crazy mess. I was so moved by her decency. I may be snarky, but I do have feelings. Then why, you may ask, am I so defensive? Who do I have to prove myself to, anyway? My older sister, Susan, would say I only think of myself. Susan is never going to understand me, and I will never understand her. Best to just keep our distance.

### Day 3

I woke up this morning and heard the birds singing. They must be fucking out of their minds. Don't they know there's a pandemic going on? Also, it's supposed to be spring, but it's freezing out, not that I have any intention of going outdoors. But it's nice when it starts to warm up and I can feel the sun on my face when I sit by the window. No shower today. I figure every other day is sufficient. And definitely no bra.

My groceries were delivered today, what little there was available. I hear there are lines everywhere to get into the stores. I'm not messing with that! I got a few things I needed, but they had no chicken or eggs. Decided to forage through my cupboard. I've got some things stocked away in the freezer which I promised myself I'd leave alone, unless and until there's a food shortage. I've got a can of cannellini beans, some pasta, some kale. It's enough to make a soup.

We have no real weapons against this scourge. Hand washing! Stay inside! Wash your hands for 20 seconds! Sing Happy Birthday twice! No need to wear a mask unless you're sick, but there aren't any masks available on-line, because no one believes that story. I ordered some. They're due to arrive in July. This is March!

#### Day 4

I'm no longer discussing the shower question or the bra question. My bras are now like the dinosaurs. Extinct but with skeletal remains to be found in numerous locations.

Velma's story continues to amaze. Her French Poodle has metamorphized into a giant tarantula and is now devouring everything in sight. This might be Velma's take on the Coronavirus. But I think it's more likely that she is overmedicating. Speaking of which, my supply of bourbon is getting low. Note to self: order several more bottles.

Today I looked out the window to the park across the street and saw tons of people everywhere, standing close together. There were young men playing basketball. A large group was having a picnic on the grass. Teenagers cutting up, all in a huddle. I screamed out the window, "You never heard of social distancing? Get inside! You're too close together! If you don't skedaddle, I'll call the cops!" A few scattered in response. The rest glared at me, then went about their business. Not my issue if they want to kill themselves. But they have no business spreading this thing to others. People seem to be this weird combination of oblivious and frightened. I'm hoping the fear wins out.

#### Day 5

The stimulus package finally passed. Don't even get me started. I'm not really understanding how \$1200 is going to help anyone get through months of being unemployed or underpaid. I'm glad that unemployment was extended and expanded. But we are literally functioning months behind the pace of this thing. I am lucky that I am ok, at least for now.

I go online in search of provisions, and it's exhausting. The corner grocery store has chicken wings but no whole chicken. Fresh Direct has vegetables but they're out of toilet paper and tissues, indefinitely from what I can tell. Whole Foods has select items, but when you go to the check-out cart, it turns out they're not available on the day you selected. If you try to change the date for delivery, they're not available then, either. It's like playing roulette. You can't afford to put everything on Number 7, you have to spread your chips around. If you select enough numbers, you might win something. Same with the groceries.

The news just keeps getting worse. Now there are refrigerator trucks ready to function as temporary morgues. It's so horrific I don't think any of us can let this in. We watch the news to find out what we are or aren't supposed to do, since the guidelines keep changing. I keep it simple. I don't go anywhere. Ever. And when

deliveries arrive, I yell thank you through the door and slide an envelope with a tip under the door. Again, people say I'm heartless. Harumph!

The news keeps revisiting the same topics every minute of every day. Which businesses are considered essential? What are the protocols for restaurants providing takeout and delivery? What about masks? How many people can congregate in public? Not only are people dying, but they are dying alone. How does that even happen? When I go, I plan to be in my own home, in my own bed. And if no one can come to me, we'll speak on the phone. It's just as easy to say goodbye that way, at least for me. But I know not everyone feels that way.

At night I look for entertainment that is relaxing. No apocalyptic movies. No conspiracy theories. No thrillers that involve intense, frightening story lines. I watch endless re-runs of *Downtown Abbey* and *Victoria*. For some reason, British costume dramas are soothing. Why is that? I'm staunchly anti-monarchy. But I lap this shit up. Go figure.

Most nights I sleep ok, but last night I found myself unable to unwind. Then, when I woke up this morning, I was shocked to learn this is real, it wasn't just a bad dream. I imagine most people have some version of this. In this together, right? But not true. The lucky ones continue to be lucky. The unlucky ones are screwed.

### Day 10

I know, I haven't been writing lately. Don't give me a hard time about this, there's a global pandemic going on, for Chrissake. The news continues to be doom and gloom. As of today there are 40,000 cases of the virus in New York State alone. Doctors and nurses don't have the protective gear they need. They're wearing garbage bags instead of gowns. They're re-using protective masks. I find this absolutely infuriating.

And I wonder, will something good come from all this? Will we learn something that will change things in a positive way? Will we decide to provide health care to everyone? Will we figure out how to kill this virus? Will we keep some of the upside going, like fewer people commuting, fewer cars on the road, fewer people riding the subways, less pollution? Or will we devolve into ever-more tribal and fearful individuals? We are going to have to decide, and soon. But I'm not holding my breath. Unfortunately, I don't think people are going to change. Look at me, I'm not changing. And nobody is going to make me.

### Day 13

This morning I woke up with a cough and a fever. I did not get alarmed, I breathed deeply, called Magda, called my doctor. The doc was very sympathetic, told me to

stay home, take Tylenol and monitor my temperature. And rest. All the things a doctor would tell you for the plain old everyday flu. How odd. The same treatment as for a non-killer flu. My sister Susan keeps calling me and I keep not taking her calls. She betrayed me so many times, I don't bother with her anymore. And I'm definitely not in the mood to talk to her now.

### Day 15

The fever is worse, I have chills. I'm beside myself. Up until now, I wasn't that worried. But this is starting to look bad. Magda is frustrated beyond description. I tell her not to worry, I don't have any underlying medical conditions. I'm strong and healthy. I'm not going to die. But she is inconsolable. And, to be honest, we've learned that anything can happen to anyone, regardless of their age and health status. So yeah, I'm putting on a brave face for her. I pull out my will, just to double check it. Not much to it, everything goes to Magda, but still, it's something.

When my fever goes up and I start having trouble breathing, I call my doctor again.

"What's your temp?"

"103 degrees."

"How's your breathing?"

"Can't seem to catch my breath."

"OK. Listen to me. You need to call 911."

"I don't want to go to the hospital. That's where people go to die. Alone."

"You're alone now."

"Yeah. But I don't feel alone. I'm in my own home, my own bed."

"Everyone isn't dying, many people are recovering. Most people get better."

"I don't want to go. I won't."

I hang up the phone, and he calls me back.

"Cynthia, listen to me, you have to call 911. You have to go to the hospital."

I hang up again.

Magda calls.

"Cyn, you've got to do it, I don't want to lose you."

"Magda, I just can't. I'm sorry."

"Cyn, you can do it, you can. I'll stay on the phone with you. Just call 911."

I fall asleep and dream about Velma's French Poodle. When I wake up, I hear a real dog barking outside. I look out the window and see a neighbor walking his dog. He's wearing a mask (the neighbor, not the dog)! I stare at him for a while, and it suddenly hits me that absolutely everything is changing, and if I don't do something different, I will die and I will die alone. And I'm no longer ok with that.

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When the ambulance arrives, I see the fear in the EMTs' eyes. A man and a woman. They've been doing this for weeks and they're scared out of their minds. You can see it, you can smell it. They put a mask on me and start to put me on a gurney.

"I can't do this, I can't. Please don't take me! I've changed my mind"

The woman looks surprised. The man just looks down.

"It's going to be ok, we'll take good care of you," she says.

"No, you don't understand. I'm ... I ... I can't leave my apartment. It's not *possible*."

Her eyebrows go up and she looks right through me.

"Really? Are you agoraphobic?"

"If you must label me! Yes, that's right. I haven't left home in years. I CANNOT do this!"

"You haven't left home in years? Then I can see why you might be afraid to leave now. But listen to me," she says very softly. "You need treatment, you need medical care."

"I don't want to be in a hospital. And if I die there, I'll be alone. Same as here."

"No, you won't. You'll have people taking care of you, and they will be loving and supportive. I see it every day. And there's a good chance you *will* survive. You have to try."

"But ..."

"Why don't you call someone now and tell them what's happening? And we'll put you on the gurney and bring you out to the ambulance. While you're on the phone with them. You can close your eyes until we get to the hospital."

I do it. I close my eyes. I call Magda and tell her I'm going, and I tell her something I've never told her before, that I love her. I guess this is what happens to people when they think they're dying. They get all mushy. I guess it's happening to me. She tells me she knows that and feels the same.

"Oh, and call Susan. Let her know what's happening. Tell her if I make it, I'll give her a call. And I'm sorry I've been so stubborn." I bite my tongue. I hate to admit that kind of thing.

"She'll be so glad to hear that."

"Yeah, I know. Magda, I'm sorry I didn't listen to you..."

"It's ok. You're listening now."

They take me into the ambulance and the doors close. I don't know what will happen to me. I don't know what will happen to the EMTs. I don't know what will happen to the doctors and nurses, since so many are getting sick themselves. I don't know what will happen to Magda and my sister Susan, and I don't know what will happen to everybody else on the planet. But this is what's happening to me. And I'm not ready to give up. I'm out here now, in the real world. It's a pretty frightening place, much more frightening than when I was last out here.

As we ride down my street, I wonder how I got this thing, after being shut in for so long. Was it one of the delivery guys? Was it the mailman? I don't know. I guess we're at a point where absolutely everyone is responsible for spreading this and absolutely no one is.

"We're here now," says the female EMT. "Close your eyes again, you'll be inside in no time."