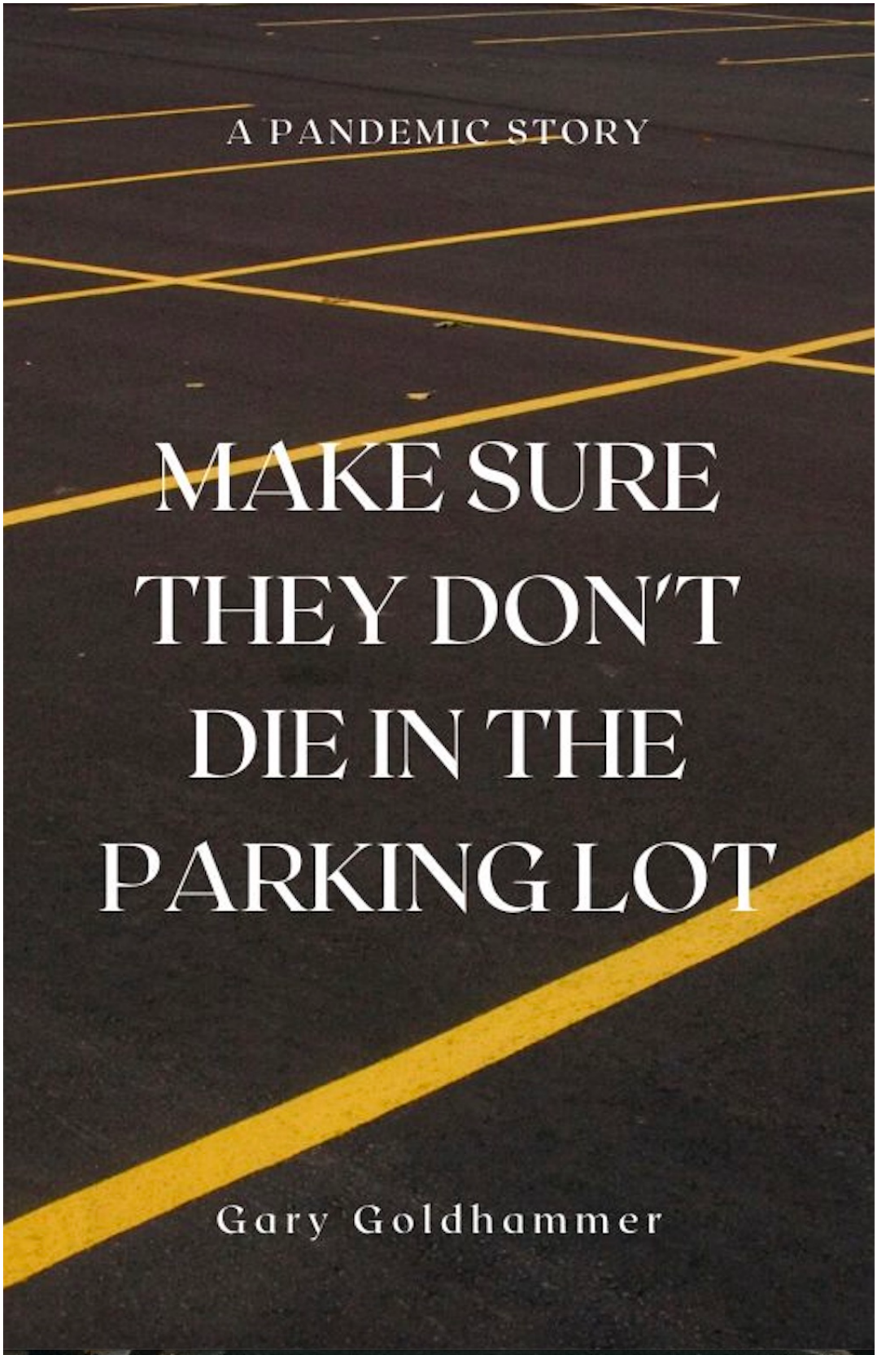
A PANDEMIC STORY
MAKE SURE THEY DON'T DIE IN THE PARKING LOT
Gary Goldhammer

One

To be honest, the thought of dying never occurred to me.

Not when I tested positive. Not when my wife quarantined me in the spare bedroom that used to the baby's room, the one with the hand-painted Winnie-the-Pooh mural telling the story of the Hundred Acre Wood and its cuddly if not socially awkward residents. We couldn't bring ourselves to paint over it when our daughter outgrew diapers, or when she went off to college, or when she bought a house in another state 2,000 miles away. Besides, I could relate to the characters, to Tigger's ADD and Pooh's appetite and Eeyore's non-stop… well, Eeyore-ness. Like me, Eeyore was a good soul. But also like me, I expect he listened to way too much of The Cure and The Smiths, which prevented him from assimilating into the general population.

I didn't go into this room very much anymore. It always felt so, I don't know, frozen in time. As if the house and the world outside moved on years ago and left this room to die from loneliness. Which if you think about it is a pretty shitty way to die, right up there with "from a broken heart" or "by choking on a donut" or "from taking Joe Rogan's medical advice." But when I got the Vid and realized I had to shut myself off from the world and my family and the 65-inch flat screen TV well, then the sad forgotten room at Pooh Corner it was for the duration.

This all started on Dec. 22, 2020, before Christmas, before New Year's, and before vaccines. Just a few more months and I would have made it, would have gotten the shot felt round the world so the world could turn once again. I was like Murtaugh in Lethal Weapon, blasted in the chest just before retirement. I've never had great timing, but this was about as ill-timed as it got. Not to mention that I'd have to suffer through an incurable deadly virus while watching some of the worst Bowl matchups in college football history. Seriously, this was my first thought – if Covid didn't kill me, then the Buffalo vs. Marshall game would do me in for sure.

I thought it was just a winter cold ("winter" in Southern California, which means the temperature dropped below 60 degrees Fahrenheit.) But after a few sneezes here, a sore throat there, and anxiety through the roof, I knew I had to find out. My daughter was home for the holidays, and I needed to know if I was going to kill her with a cough.

Now remember, this was December 2020, only about ten months removed from the Before Times. We were in the de facto Dark Ages of the Pandemic, with nothing new to watch on Netflix and a good portion of humanity living off homemade bread and red wine. Okay, so it wasn't all bad. Wear a mask, close all the restaurants, never see your friends again, but you can take my alcohol when you pry it out of my cold, dead fingers.

Right, which brings me back to Covid.

December 2020 also meant no at-home Covid tests. So it was with great trepidation that I got in my car and drove to the Orange County Covid Clinic, conveniently located in a parking lot outside an Irvine hospital (remember that for later – I don't foreshadow lightly.) It took me about an hour to get through on the app and pay $150 to get a rapid test that the US government now provides for free, but far be it from me to spit in the face of capitalism. It was also my only option at 4 PM a few days before Christmas.

In true Orange County fashion, the "clinic" was a drive thru. As this is also the home of Disneyland, I fully expected the health care worker to say, "please keep your hands and arms inside the vehicle while we shove this Q-tip up your nose and halfway into your brain." I mean that's exactly what they did anyway, but it would have been funny to hear them say it. Instead I was just one of the countless dozens rolling through each hour, nervous and scared, not wanting to know the results but also needing to know. The attack against my nostrils was the least of my worries.

The most of my worries came about two hours later.

Now my wife is a wonderful human so don't take this the wrong way, but when there's a crisis, she doesn't fuck around. She's a tall, attractive Lutheran girl from Missouri of German and French descent, not prone to hyperbole or disorder. If my wife were a computer program she would be Excel, with every Macro enabled and more columns than in all of antiquity. I'm more like MacPaint – endearing but essentially useless.

Within minutes of texting her from the Pooh Room that I tested positive, I was in lockdown. She brought in some clothes, told me she'd bring me some dinner, and that was it. I was alone, my wife and daughter a few feet but also miles away. We avoided each other like…well, like the plague, which perhaps for the first time since the 14th Century, was not just a figure of speech.

That was the thing about Covid in those days: you did it alone. The forced solitude was as much a symptom as a sore throat or loss of smell. My daughter avoided me completely, staying in her room whenever I had to go pee or, when I had the energy in those early days, take a shower. My wife came in to deliver meals or take away empty plates, but even then, she was fully masked and wearing rubber gloves. It was like being in either the world's best prison or shittiest hospital.

The nights were the worst. I had chills, aches in my bones, a headache that measured 9.7 on the Fucking Kill Me Scale. Sleep came in small waves, which just made me more tired and miserable. I couldn't catch a full breath either, which caused me to freak out, which then made me unable to catch a full breath. Goddamn vicious cycle. I had asthma years ago, as an adult, and until Covid I assumed I was cured. But I knew that

feeling all too well; I knew the panic from your lungs constricting, from your throat conspiring with your nervous system to suffocate you.

And the coughing. Oh, that coughing. Incessant, insistent, maddening. Almost every truncated breath was followed by a desperate cough, as if my throat was begging me to stop and call it a life. It had been about seven days by this point, and I thought well, I just need to make it another week and I should be fine. Most people were fine after two weeks, right? My doctor also didn't seem concerned, telling me to "take Advil and rest." I like to believe that he did his best, but I also know that he, as well as so many others, didn't know what the hell to do unless you needed to be on a respirator, and by then the primary course of treatment was Xanax and a Priest. Being Jewish, I just curled into a ball of guilt and shame instead.

I was doing okay – as okay as I could be with the OG Covid attacking my respiratory functions – until Dec. 31. I didn't sleep at all during the night, and by morning I was more miserable than Blake Shelton at a Maroon 5 concert. It's not like I expected to ring in the new year with champagne and caviar, but I was at least hoping to stay alive long enough to watch Anderson Cooper get girl-drink drunk on national TV.

Oh, I forgot to mention: My one constant companion during this ordeal, other than Pooh and his creepy animal friends and the even creepier Christopher Robin, who I'm pretty sure grew up to be either a wildlife conservationist or a serial killer, was my $20 Oxygenator from Amazon. I checked it multiple times a day, sometimes once an hour, sometimes after every particularly bad coughing fit. I watched the numbers like it was a literal life meter from a video game, praying the level would stay in the "safe" zone.

That zone was 93 and above, according to my doctor. By late morning the most I could muster was hard-fought 91, sending me into less of a panic and more into a resigned foreboding. Being New Year's Eve, my regular doctor wasn't around, but the physician on call told me to "keep an eye on it, if gets any lower you might want to go to the emergency room."

An hour later I was at 87. I couldn't sit up on the bed or in chair, didn't have the energy. I lay on the floor, coughing my throat raw, listening to my lungs go sotto voce.

I never lost consciousness, but I was coughing so much, getting so worked up, that I don't remember a whole lot of the next few minutes. I think my wife asked if I wanted to go to the emergency room, and the next thing I knew we were in her Mercedes turned ambulance, heading toward the hospital, toward help or oblivion, unsure whether I would return home.

Two

On the short drive to the Irvine Medical Center, I thought about another hospital 80 miles to the north, in the poorly named bedroom community of Thousand Oaks (I mean, they had maybe a few hundred oaks, max.) I was there four years earlier, in 2016, days before the US Election that was supposed to be a Foregone Conclusion that turned into a National Nightmare of Zombie-Apocalypse Proportions.

I spent most of October 2016 in that hospital, in her room, standing watch over her endless slumber. Complications during surgery put her into a comatose state; she didn't wake up and likely never would, but there was still a shred of hope, and you don't pull the plug on hope. You just sit with her and watch her favorite baseball team, the Chicago Cubs, win the World Series. You tell her about your family, about her granddaughter's first semester of college in Washington, D.C., about that crazy reality TV star running for President who wants to build a wall to keep out immigrants, the same guy who couldn't build an outhouse without going bankrupt.

You buy shitty pre-packaged food in the hospital cafeteria, sit in Formica chairs and eat off plastic trays. You coordinate the next shift with your sister, the one you rarely talked to anymore but who now might be the only family you have left. You lean on each other because the only other alternative is to fall.

You try to work. You drink too much. You secretly want it to end, and then you hate yourself for the thought. You want her to make the decision for you instead.

The day before the election, I flew to D.C. for a business meeting. I liked business meetings in D.C. because they doubled as free trips to visit my daughter. Nothing like a corporate expense account to make your kid's heart skip a beat.

I was afraid to go but the doctor said mom was doing better and that nothing was going to change in the next week at least. The trip was just three days anyway, I'd be back well before the week was out. With my wife and sister's support, I left to see my kid.

You know how this ends.

But I'm going to tell you anyway.

I went to my meetings. I saw my daughter that afternoon and took her to dinner, then to Trader Joe's to load up on groceries. She was in a good mood because we were about to have our first female President. My

daughter's dorm was just a few blocks from the White House, and she was excited to go there later with her friends to celebrate.

After dinner I went to a favorite local bar to watch the election returns. Joy turned to confusion turned to shock when CNN called the race for not-Hilary. It was like exchanging the best Christmas gift ever for a roundhouse kick to the crotch.

Thankfully, my daughter and her friends were already wasted from playing Hilary Beer Pong. The march to Pennsylvania Avenue was still on, but they decided to turn their celebration into a protest. I in turn decided to call it a night and get some sleep.

That lasted about five minutes. My sister's text simply said, "Mom died." It was just after 9 PM in California. I called my sister to confirm, to find out anything I could, as if that would change the outcome. But that was it. "She died." She never woke up. And worst of all, she was alone. I left her alone.

And now I had to tell her granddaughter. I had to make an already bad night the worst night of my kid's life.

She didn't pick up when I called, but being a resourceful and now near-manic individual, I got in an Uber black car and headed toward her dorm. I saw the crowds and called again, this time reaching her just as I saw her about 50 yards away, just as she saw a Lincoln Navigator flashing its lights and pulling alongside, moments before she collapsed on the sidewalk, her friends scared and unsure as I pulled her into the car and drove off without saying a word.

The rest of the night and early morning was filled with phone calls and funeral plans. My daughter finally fell asleep as I packed to take an early flight back home. She stayed in my hotel room, would go back to her dorm at some point, would not come West for the funeral because in Jewish tradition it had to happen in a couple days, and there were tests and stress and I won't go into it all here, but having her stay in D.C. was the right choice.

At least there was comfort in being there that night. My mom died alone, but my daughter wasn't when it happened. I couldn't be there for my mom, but I could be here for my kid. If my mom could have made the choice, she would have told me I did the right thing.

And in the end, she did decide for my sister and I when it was time. She waited until we were gone, took care of us in her final moments with her last selfless breath, with the final beat of her precious, perfect heart.

My thoughts returned to 2020, my non-stop coughing throwing me back to the present. I stood in front of a folding table outside the emergency room entrance, nearby a huge white tent that took over the back parking

lot. My wife said some things, signed some things, and then for some reason stayed behind the makeshift barricade while I was led to some benches to wait for my turn inside the tent.

She and my daughter looked confused, then scared. They said “I love you” and left.

Of course. You don’t let healthy family members into a hospital during a deadly pandemic. Of course I was going to do this myself. Survive alone or die alone.

Three

I found out later than my wife and daughter sat in the car in the hospital parking lot and cried. I wish I had known, but also it was better that I didn’t. I’d probably just make a morbid joke about them being upset for not taking out a bigger life insurance policy on me, and then somehow I’d be the bad guy.

Besides I was doing just fine, thank you very much. Well, doing just fine for someone who couldn’t breathe. My oxygen level was better, but the damn coughing canceled that out. So into the tent I went.

I expected – hoped? – to find a scene from M*A*S*H inside, complete with a moonshine still and Hawkeye sipping a martini in his robe. It was a scene from that show alright, just of the medical ward albeit with nicer equipment and no Hot Lips.

Two other patients sat across from me on my side of the tent – a young woman, probably in her 30s, and an older woman in a wheelchair. The older lady seemed in worse shape; her eyes looked glassy, tired. A doctor and nurse stood next to her and chatted quietly. The noise of the tent, the buzz of machines and activity, drifted into the background as I saw the old lady’s face, saw the young woman’s fear.

Until now, Covid was a news story, a TV show, a statistic and a color level that told you when you’d be allowed to sit in a restaurant again.

But here in the tent, Covid was people. Covid was me.

They sat me in a chair/reclining bed and began attaching wires. A needle went into my arm, tubes shoved into my nose, and I was told to relax. Someone would be right with me.

And then I was alone.

There was activity all around, just not around me. Maybe this is what dying felt like, being there but not there. Not invisible but fading. A dress rehearsal for the afterlife.

This was why I never liked hospitals. In my world hospitals were places where people died, not survived. My dad died in a hospital when I was eight-years-old, a hospital he built. He also built a bunch of Taco Bell restaurants, which as an eight-year-old I thought was much more impressive.

The day before he died, he was sitting up and laughing with the nurses, a picture of perfect health. Then 12 hours later he was gone. How does that happen? Why didn't the hospital save him? These were the questions of a child, of a kid who knew nothing about cancer, who thought the disease was just a bad cold that could be cured with cartoons and chicken soup. But I still wonder if it had to happen right then. I'd sell my soul to have a father for just a little longer.

At least he and my mom didn't have to see me now. But as I sat waiting, looking for the next breath, I wondered whether I would see them very soon.

Every breath felt futile, like climbing a hill made of quicksand. I was cold, shivering under blinding spotlights, waiting for the doctors to do something, anything, to ease the suffering or end it.

Breathing hurt, as in eyes watering pain hurt, but I took the breath anyway. And then when I had no other choice, I took the next one, and the next.

I didn't think about breathing anymore – I focused on just one breath, just one inhale as best I could. The next breath was all that mattered.

Four

No one saw Covid coming in 2016. Sure, there were warnings of potential pandemics and movies about killer diseases, killer zombies and killer asteroids, but in 2016 the biggest threat to humanity was humanity.

To be fair – and I do try – Trump didn't cause democracy's entropic demise. He didn't invent racial injustice or prejudice or ignorance or the political Jedi mind trick of lying until it becomes truth. These attributes of the American Experience were fomenting long before The Apprentice went on the air. But Trump was damn good at all of it. He made it art.

For years he was a cult leader without a following – now he had the Republican Party and a bunch of pissed off white people, and nothing in America is more frightening than pissed off white people.

We had new monsters now. Historically this was inevitable – after all, history is a story filled with monsters, from Mongols to Nazis, from despots and dictators to conquerors and criminals of all kinds. Some we created, some we embraced, and almost all disappeared. Those who stayed, who decided to lay low, who convinced their minions to hold fast – they just hid under our metaphorical beds. We knew they were there, but after a while we stopped paying attention. We moved ahead and our culture progressed. We had CDs and the Internet and reality TV, so we were good. The monsters became little more than silly childish fears that no adult would take seriously.

We got confident. We became arrogant. We belittled the monsters, made them feel insignificant and weak. We admonished them to their faces and laughed at them behind their backs. We pretended they didn't matter anymore.

And that's when it happened.

That's when the monsters had had enough.

In 2016 they came out from under the bed – and for the first time in a very long time, people believed in them again. That's all it took.

Racism roamed free. Hate roared. Discrimination danced with joyful abandon. White supremacists marched in the streets, and some put on police uniforms. Too many refused to take them seriously and still expected them to go back under the bed where they belonged.

This country, this insane experiment gone sideways, was founded on empathy. We put ourselves in others' shoes and made a nation. We manifested something unique in the world, something to be envied. And in less than a decade, we broke it.

We see a lone gunman and we call it an inalienable right. We see bodies bloodied and call it the price we pay for freedom. We see 24-hour coverage of carnage and call it a TV show. We call it anything but wrong. We call it anything but vile and horrific. We send our thoughts and prayers but not our common decency.

We reap what we sow, my fellow Americans. We don't get the country we want; we get the country we deserve.

Five

The lady in the chair was sleeping. I knew she was sleeping because the machines still beeped, no one called for a crash cart, no one yelled clear or administered an IV drip with Ringer's lactate or asked Rampart for permission to transport (I watched a lot of '70s TV growing up, so sue me.) The young woman was gone, walked out on her own, relieved to leave our little corner of asphalt once reserved for compact parking spaces. At least one of us was going to make it, which gave me hope.

And what did I hope for? To make it home in time for midnight (well New York midnight, which is 9 PM Pacific Time – I'm in my 50s for chrissake.) I wanted to watch more crappy Bowl games on New Year's Day. I wanted to take a shower without leaning against the wall for support, to eat a meal without coughing on my food.

I wanted what we all want, if you think about it – simple things, normal things. When we're healthy we want money and cars and great jobs and luxury vacations. We're not happy until we get all those things and more. But when we're sick, when mortality rears its ugly head, it all changes.

We no longer want wealth or possessions, or a yacht so big as to make a Russian oligarch jealous. We just want breakfast with our families. We want to ride a bike.

And we want to get out of this fucking hospital tent.

The pandemic took so many moments from us. Right before the world put out its "Sorry, We're Closed" sign, one of the worst calls I ever had to make was to the restaurant in Washington, D.C., where we were going to have a graduation dinner with our daughter, her boyfriend and his family. Not only was it a stinging reminder that our daughter wasn't going to graduate with her friends – that she may never see them again, not knowing when she bugged out of Foggy Bottom that she wouldn't be going back – but I had to tell a beloved restaurant owner that yet one more event was being cancelled. She wanted to waive our cancellation fee; I refused. I couldn't stop the world from spinning off its axis, but I could do that.

Instead of great fanfare, a seminal rite of passage passed with a whimper; pomp canceled due to circumstance.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. We were supposed to be on the National Mall, not in our Orange County living room. We were supposed to clap and cheer and laugh and cry, not stare at a YouTube stream of well-meaning commencement speakers, pretending with them that this is fine, this is fun, this will be a great story someday.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, having her home for her last two months of college, watching her take classes online and turn in her final papers from the same room where she grew up. And now she was home for the holidays, crying in a parking lot with her mom wondering if her dad was gonna die in some dystopian sick bay.

But now looking back, despite all we missed, despite all the memories that now lay forfeit, I'm not sure I would be so quick to change anything.

Because seeing her in that childhood space was more special than I ever could have imagined. Spending time together, all three of us, was the graduation gift I never expected or thought I needed.

I didn't just get to see my daughter, the 21-year-old college graduate. I got to see my little girl again. I had resigned myself to the reality that she might never come back home. Her life now belongs elsewhere, albeit in an uncertain future.

No, it wasn't supposed to be like this.

Or was it?

The future is uncertain, but that's what all futures are. That's what they're supposed to be. Futures don't come with guarantees, pandemic or no pandemic.

What we miss isn't certainty, it's familiarity. We never knew what the future held; we just knew the patterns of the past. And we clung to them like talismans, thinking they would protect and guide us as we moved forward.

The familiarity is gone but the future is still out there, with all its formidable power and limitless potential.

I'm proud of the woman my daughter has become; I can't wait to see what her future holds.

And while it wasn't supposed…okay, while I never expected it to be like this, I'm also grateful I got to see the little kid who still loves Harry Potter movie marathons, who does puzzles with her mom and who likes to microwave her ice cream before she eats it. I will always be her dad, but I'm glad I got another chance to be the annoying older brother she never had.

I'm happy for her, scared for her, proud of her. I know she will give that uncertain future all she's got.

And speaking of uncertain futures – how's that for a brutal forced segue – it was now hour four by my count and no one had come over to talk to me, poke or prod or even give me a look of "well, he's a lost cause." I felt

like that table at the restaurant where no server was assigned, so they all keep walking by expecting someone else to take your order. No way was I leaving a tip if I got out of here.

I tried to focus on my breaths, one after the other after the other. Some were short, some longer, but each time some oxygen got in. The more I relaxed, the less I coughed. And the less I coughed, the more I started thinking I might just make it home after all.

And that's when I saw several nurses and doctors suddenly descend on the old lady in the wheelchair, yelling orders I couldn't understand, and then rush her now unconscious body outside.

Six

I never saw her again.

I don't know for sure what happened. She could be alive and well and reading this right now thinking, "who you are calling old, buddy?" Okay, she probably would use a word stronger than "buddy," but I'd gladly take the hit.

I'm not optimistic, however. Covid doesn't care about happy endings. It's more Shakespearian Tragedy than Hero's Journey. All the world's is its stage, and no one is immune from its reach.

As things returned to whatever stood for normal in the tent, the doctor came back to check on me. Good news: I was going to be released. Bad news: I now not only had Covid, but pneumonia. That's why I was coughing, why I couldn't breathe. It wasn't the Covid per se, it was the pain-in-the-chest yet very treatable pneumonia that landed me in Dante's Big Top of Despair.

They could give me medicine now. They could treat me with more than hope and a prayer. I would see the dawn of 2021 and maybe a lot more dawns after that.

I should have been happy, and not just because I didn't yet know how much this was going to drain my deductible. I was going home. I had looked the Black Plague in the eye and made it blink. I won.

But all I could think about was the woman in the wheelchair. Because when you share a foxhole – or a Covid ward – with someone, you are forever connected. The Object Permanence of the experience is overwhelming. I had to know.

"What happened?" I said, nodding in the direction of the now empty space in front of me.

The doctor's face fell into a somber crease. She looked away, as if searching for a place to hide.

“She’s inside, upstairs, I think,” she said finally, her voice quiet as she fiddled with my monitor. “We try…” she stopped. “We don’t want anyone to die in the parking lot.”

She mumbled something about getting my medication and discharge papers, and left without looking at me again. I felt bad, like I had violated some unwritten rule. I think she was embarrassed about telling me the truth, or upset with herself for being so blunt. I don’t know and never will. But I do know that this was not her first day in the tent – it was one of countless days and nights surrounded by patients who for the most part you couldn’t help. All you could do was try to keep them comfortable, and make sure they didn’t die in the parking lot.

War is filled with casualties far beyond the injured or dead. And a pandemic is the worst kind of war, the kind with an invisible enemy who kills with indiscriminate fury and leaves countless amounts of collateral damage.

Every day the news delivered updated numbers of Covid hospitalizations and deaths. Like everything else of monumental significance, the news media had an uncanny ability to reduce it to a horse race. A chart or an infographic. A number.

Numbers are cold, impersonal. The numbers for Covid are downright incomprehensible, so much so that they don’t mean anything – until a number becomes a name. When you can put a face on a statistic, it’s different. It’s personal. Because if it happens to someone you know, then it can happen to you.

I don’t see numbers anymore. Instead, I see a colleague juggling childcare and work while his spouse is quarantined with symptoms. I see relatives in the hospital, a close friend smiling despite the breathing tubes. The numbers now have faces and families, people I know and care about. The virus wants to treat us all like numbers – it’s up to us to treat each other like human beings.

A pandemic is the worst kind of war. And we don’t know the casualty count yet.

Seven

My wife picked me up at 6 PM. I took my pneumonia medication around 7 PM, and slept for about 15 hours. Prior to that, I hadn’t slept more than a couple hours at a time.

I awoke in a New Year. By this time my wife and daughter had both tested positive – thankfully with mild symptoms – so we could finally at least be in the same room together. After about 15 minutes of seeing what they were watching on Netflix I almost wanted to go back to the purgatory of the Pooh Room, but I stayed if

just for a momentary sense of normalcy at the end of the most abnormal few days, after the most abnormal year.

2021 held so much promise and hope in its infant hours. There was a new President, not a perfect choice by any means but far better than four more years of continued narcissistic descent into fascism. As a people we are really stupid, but thankfully not that stupid (at least not yet; there's still 2024.)

Vaccines were just around the corner, not soon enough for me but in time to save thousands upon thousands of other lives. We had done the impossible, because when our best selves decide to show up, that's what we do. We find a way. We take the moonshot. It was hard being an American from 2016 through 2020, embarrassing at best and abhorrent most of the time, but we somehow came out the other end relatively intact.

This country has never been a single anything – it's a mosaic of many things, many places and cultures and faiths and opinions on what's the best burger (In-N-Out is the answer.) We can be messy, a Jackson Pollock painting come to life, but we can also be a thing of beauty. We can make magic in the form of a spaceship or a syringe.

There was much to love about 2021, an insurrection at the Capitol notwithstanding. we had fans back in the stands. We had Wandavision and a new season of Ted Lasso. We had live music again, Dave Grohl sweating his ass off again. Marvel destroying the box office again.

We got together, with masks and then without. We celebrated and reminisced about doing our own grocery shopping and picking up our own takeout. When online learning was an option, not an expectation. When we worked in offices, not in sweatpants in that spare bedroom no one ever used.

It was a year of Once Agains and Remember Whens. Of science breakthroughs and NFTs and Dolly Parton being awesome (okay that's every year.) 2021 was full of more normal than not, whatever normal means now.

2021 was a year to exhale, to reflect, to wonder. And I do. I wonder if the end of 2021 was just the beginning of a new wave of uncertainty.

We moved ahead and then moved on to new variants and renewed resistance to taking precautions, to protecting ourselves and others. We're "over it," we said. We did this already, in 2020. We won't do it again.

Disinformation still flows, from Fox to Facebook, from Tucker and Taylor-Greene and to every stop on the train through Crazy Town. We are still divided, still don't trust each other, still discriminate, still hate and still murder each other Every. Fucking. Day.

So I wonder: will Year Two after the worst year in generations be any better? Will we be any better? I believe we must move forward – because if the Pandemic Age has taught us anything, it's that there's no going back.

I've come a long way since New Year's Eve 2020, struggling to breathe and wondering whether this was it for me. Laying there, listening to machines speaking to each other in melancholy rhythm, I expected more out of 54 years. I expected life to do better by me, and I was kinda pissed that it had let me down.

Before Covid I would "what if" myself like crazy, playing out a thousand multiverse scenarios for every stupid decision I made. It was hard to go with the flow when all I saw was a raging tsunami coming to drown me in a wave of missed opportunities and regret.

But I get it now. I finally understand. The unknown isn't an anomaly, certainty is. Perfection is. Expectation is.

"Unknown" is our default programming; it's the factory setting for humanity. And fear of the unknown is not only counterproductive to, you know, living, but the unknown is what all of us experience every day, all the time. So get over it already. Hug the porcupine of life and tell fear to fuck right off.

From now on, I own the unknown. I decide what I should expect from life, from my decisions – good, bad, or monumentally stupid. And you should too.

I'm doing better now, and for that I'm grateful. I still have some lingering effects, from memory issues to a mild heart attack that may or may not have been "Long Covid" related. My challenges may be temporary or indefinite – Covid doesn't make any promises.

All you get is the next breath. That's it. You get the next breath and the next one and the one after that, on and on until all your breaths are spent.

Don't worry about what you would do with your last breath, with your final moment. Don't look so far ahead that you can't see what's right in front of you – a family who loves you, friends who care about you, a world that gave you its oxygen to breathe in the first place.

Just take it all in, one breath at a time.