

Postcards from the Pandemic

MARCH 2020 The evening news has been reporting a new virus breaking out in China that is highly contagious and highly lethal. At first, authorities say there's no evidence of person-to-person spread, so there don't seem to be too many precautions we can take against it. Then it becomes apparent that people can spread it, and at once there's a mad scramble for PPE, which we learn means "Personal Protective Equipment," and hand sanitizer. Competing information suggests that we don't need to wear masks, but then we learn that that advice was necessitated by the critical shortages of these items at hospitals; when enough masks are available, we will all be advised to wear them almost all the time. The colossal failure of the government to provide the necessary medical supplies, masks, gowns, gloves, ventilators, etc., devolves into a vicious political football, the President refusing to take responsibility for production or procurement of any of this stuff, passing that job onto the states. States become competitors for essential supplies, as the number of cases of virus grow exponentially. Bob Kraft puts his huge Patriots air plane into service to bring a giant load of PPE to New England from Korea. The local news channels carry images of huge pallets of cartons being lifted out of the belly of the plane onto the tarmac. Supporters of Trump link masks with a criticism of their hero, and can be spotted everywhere with their uncovered faces, even after science definitively proves that transmission of COVID-19 occurs by droplets expelled from our noses and mouths when we so much as breathe. Those of us who believe the science scurry to buy or make masks, find sources of surgical gloves, and clean the stores out of hand sanitizer. At first, everyone goes overboard, wiping down absolutely everything that might have been touched by another person –

Trump assures us that this is nothing. It's only one person. It's only fifteen people and it'll soon be down to zero. It will go away of its own accord. It will disappear when the weather warms up. Sunlight will kill it. We'll be back in church full capacity by Easter. Nothing to see here, folks.

Schools are closed! There's a giddiness among the neighborhood kids at this unexpected time off. Two weeks, they say. Two weeks will turn into the rest of the year, and even through the next school year, as towns scramble to find ways to create virtual learning experiences. Most towns are completely unprepared for this. Kids in private schools move almost seamlessly into the new way of doing things with their laptops and wide band connections while poorer communities come face to face with the extraordinary lack of equipment and connectivity. Becky is suddenly on break. Her students have nothing, and Worcester isn't able to do much about it. When she finally goes on-line in the fall, she has to allow students to enter the Zoom classrooms without turning on their videos in order to protect them from discrimination, should they live in squalor or even be living in their cars.

The announcement comes in the middle of an NBA game: "The game is being cancelled. Everyone should leave the arena immediately." The players are stunned. The crowd is stunned. The TV audience is stunned. People start moving toward the exits as the announcers try to explain that Coronavirus has broken out among the players and no one is safe near them. Before a day or two passes, all professional sports will end and sports leagues will spend months trying to figure out how to conduct safe contests. The NBA will create a "bubble" in Miami, where players will seclude themselves, having no contact with anyone outside the limited circle of players and staff. They'll be cut off from their families, playing all games in the same place, being tested daily for COVID. Other sports will find other systems, and by

winter, games will have to be cancelled because so many of the team members are positive and quarantined. Other teams will play with sharply reduced line-ups. The stadiums will stand empty of fans, artificial “crowd noise” annoyingly piped in, drowning out the commentators in many cases.

It’s 6:00 a.m. and I’m outside Market Basket in the dark. The wind bites through my coat and gloves as I walk to the end of the line of elderly shoppers waiting for the doors to open for “Senior Hour.” We stand six feet apart in our masks, hugging ourselves against the cold. The line snakes around the front of the building past the main door now blocked off with shopping carts, around the corner, and all the way to the back of the store. It will take me over a half hour to get to the entry door where an employee stands with a counter in her hand, clicking each time a shopper enters or exits, keeping the number of people inside to the pre-ordained number. Another worker swipes down the handle of each wagon before you take it, and the aisles are marked with giant arrows indicating the one-way direction you’re allowed to walk. Occasionally, a shopper comes down the wrong way, and I feel myself getting angry. Will he/she jeopardize my health by disregarding the guidelines? Doesn’t the shopper who won’t wear a mask risk exposing me to COVID? I want to speak up but I don’t. I’ve seen the fights break out over these issues on the videos posted on TV. Better to keep my head down, walk fast, and get out of there as quickly as I can. After a month or so of negotiating these early morning shopping trips, I discover that the store is much less busy in the middle of the day, and so I change my routine and risk contagion by mixing in with the younger shoppers.

I leave the grocery bags on the porch, reach inside for my roll of paper towels and Clorox bleach cleaner. Before anything comes into the house, I will wipe everything down, then disinfect my hands and wash them in the sink, singing the “Happy Birthday” song twice before wiping them dry. I’ll bring the mail in and drop it on the chair in the living room, leaving it untouched until the next day and washing my hands again. We disinfect everything, wash everything, paranoid about touching anything outside our own house. Eventually, we’ll learn that we don’t really have to worry so much about picking up the virus from surfaces, but still, we’ll wash our hands a lot.

Easter comes and goes. The churches are empty. A few creative pastors arrange for their congregations to assemble in the parking lots of their churches, parishioners remaining in their vehicles, services conducted outdoors. St. Peter’s Square is hauntingly empty, no Papal audience to the gathered throngs of previous years.

Spring Break this year finds throngs of young people packed into bars and restaurants, packing the beaches, drinking in the streets of Florida, where the governor rejects any kind of COVID restrictions. They will return home and new outbreaks will spike in their communities, and even though most young people won’t get terribly sick if at all from the virus, the vulnerable in their families and towns will continue to die in horrifying numbers. One young man who went to a “COVID party” as a joke is reported to have said to the nurse caring for him in the intensive care ward, “I think I made a mistake,” just before he died.

MAY Mother’s Day dawns chilly. I haven’t seen my children or grandchildren since February. Matt comes over with a gift and I want so much to hug him, but hugs are something we don’t do anymore. He, Alan, and I sit on the deck at the table and visit for an hour or so. We wear masks. We breathe cold air. We share stories and observations, opinions and speculations about how our world has changed. We don’t like what’s going on, but we know it’s what we must do, and we naively think that maybe by

the fall this will all be over and life will return to normal. I miss the rest of the family and I won't see them for months.

May 26: George Floyd is dead. We are horrified by the video of his murder taken on her cell phone by a teenaged by-stander: nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds of Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck, his body prone, face down, wrists handcuffed behind his back, his voice pleading for air, for his mother, for his life. There's no turning away as we watch the life ebb out of him, as we witness the smug indifference of Chauvin, hand in pocket, pressing relentlessly down on George's neck. The summer will be rent by Black Lives Matter marches across the country and around the world. COVID restrictions notwithstanding, crowds are huge, but most wear masks and seem to be trying to socially distance. Contrary to the coverage on FOX news, these protests are over 90% peaceful. The list of Black people killed by white cops and self-deputized vigilantes grows ever longer, and the prospect of racial harmony grows ever dimmer. The streets ring out with the cry, "Say his/her name!" The Reverend Al Sharpton stands at the pulpit during George Floyd's funeral, demanding, "GET YOUR KNEE OFF OUR NECKS!" He will eulogize many dead Black people this year. Thankfully, in his trial covered non-stop on national TV early next year, Derek Chauvin will be found guilty of murder.

Hate and anger are awash across the country. Because of Trump's incessant use of terms like "China Virus" and "Kung-Fu Flu," anti-Asian attacks have increased exponentially. Elder Chinese citizens are knocked down in the streets, kicked and punched, episodes caught on security cameras and cell phones, broadcast on the national news. The number of these events will only increase as the year wears on. Jews are not exempt. Anti-Semitic crime increases. Synagogues are vandalized. Swastikas show up on buildings. To be "other" in today's America is to be in danger of attack. White supremacy has crawled out from under a rock and finds sustenance in Trump's tacit support.

Summer comes and we go to the lake. Quarantining is easier there. We don't usually do much socializing anyway; we don't go to our art class; my bridge group takes a break; even the writing group gets summer off. So sitting on the porch reading or going down to the dock for a swim feels normal. We chat with our neighbors from our respective porches, which is what we usually do anyway. I Zoom a couple of times with the art class, but it's not like sitting in the upper room of the senior center with my paints spread all around me, chatting with the other people as we work on our masterpieces. I do have a painting going almost all summer long, but without the feedback from Steve, our teacher, I don't feel like I'm learning anything new.

At first, I write letters to friends I haven't seen in years. I make "telephone visits" to others. I feel the need to reach out and stay in touch, but it just isn't the same as being with people. After a while, the days settle in to a kind of routine: read the paper, watch Morning Joe, make a pot of coffee, work on a project like that quilt I began hand quilting years ago and almost gave up as hopeless, do my painting, or occasionally do some writing. The news about the pandemic just keeps getting worse. Almost every day breaks a record, whether it's the number of new cases, number of hospitalizations, or number of deaths. The experts project spikes that follow the holidays; a week or two after Memorial Day, the numbers go up. Fourth of July provokes another spike. Labor Day another. This will continue through the fall with all the holidays of November and December. In spite of this, picture after picture show throngs of unmasked people crammed into bars, on beaches, at large gatherings. There are those who are trying to do what they can to "flatten the curve," as they say, and those who apparently don't give a damn.

Trump holds mega-rallies all over the country, at which defiant supporters crowd together mask-less and yell their support, spewing disease-laden droplets all over each other. Herman Cain, a former Presidential candidate and now an avid Trump supporter, sits grinning from ear to ear at one such event, is dead two weeks later. Each state that hosts a rally experiences a spike in cases within a couple of weeks.

Trump suggests that maybe we can inject light into the body, or maybe bleach – disinfectants can kill the virus immediately, don't they? Debra Birx, the White House COVID task force coordinator, sits stone-faced in the news conference, pain written all over her features, either unable or unwilling to contradict what she is hearing, a lifetime of distinguished work in the field of medicine and research being torpedoed by the orange-haired buffoon at the podium. Dr. Anthony Fauci becomes the lifeline to those of us who want to know what's really going on and how we should respond to it. He is exquisitely tactful, but nonetheless sets the record straight at every opportunity. Rumors fly periodically that he is going to be fired by the fire-er--in-chief. Managing the pandemic without the wisdom and common sense, never mind the expertise of Dr. Fauci, is unthinkable.

JUNE Four kids on Barrows Road are graduating from high school this year. There will be no ceremony at the field house. Instead, we are finding other ways to mark important events, to celebrate achievements. On the news, clips show families arriving, masked, outside hospital windows behind which a young woman has given birth to a child surrounded only by the docs and nurses. Her husband lifts the sign he's written, expressing his joy and love for her and the baby he will not see for days. Families come up to the windows of the nursing homes, behind which their aged relatives sit, pressing a hand to the glass, smiling from a distance, the best we can do for now. Our Barrows Road graduates meet out on the street under a tent erected at the end of the road, tables spread with cupcakes emblazoned with the logos of each of the four colleges they will be attending in the fall, although Nicholas next door will spend the entire first semester in his bedroom at home, tele-commuting to his UMass Amherst classes remotely. The high school will organize a giant car parade, graduates driving through the town in a massive line, cars bedecked with signs, balloons, and streamers in red and black, horns honking raucously. Birthdays provoke car parades, families and friends hanging out of windows in a drive-by tribute to the birthday boy or girl, balloons and streamers floating behind. One family in a nearby town crafted huge cardboard letters gaily painted by the children of the family spelling out "Happy Birthday" and stuck them on stakes across their front lawn. After that special day, a neighbor asked to borrow them, and before you know it, the entire town was signing up on a register to borrow them for their own birthday celebrant. Our anniversary this year is low energy – some logs in the fire pit overlooking the lake, some champagne, a sprinkling of fireflies dancing overhead, and a shooting star across the ebony sky. It's really quite a lovely evening.

JULY No parade this year. I've always thought that the July 3rd fireworks and the 4th of July parade in downtown Ashland is pure Americana. Homemade floats, bands, antique cars, clowns and Scouts and civic groups marching, the women's Zumba group dancing their way down the street, candy from participants showering down over the children clustered along the sidewalks who scoot off the sidewalk to grab up as many pieces as they can, cowgirls on horseback, sometimes the Shriners in their miniature cars weaving figure 8s from side to side along the length of Main Street, followed by the parade of fire engines from more nearby towns than you can imagine, sounding their sirens and shooting water from their hoses over the crowds. We all wear t-shirts in shades of red, white, and blue, tie-dyed or spangled

with glitter. We have beads and hats and flags. Every year, rain or shine, the parade kicks off with a bang. Not this year.

On one of my trips home to collect mail I find a couple of applications for mail-in ballots for this fall's upcoming Presidential election. The news is all over the dangers of voting in-person, and most people I know intend to vote by mail. The President is doing his best to cast as much doubt on that process as he can, predicting rampant fraud. He appoints a new Post Master General, deJoy, who promptly decommissions mail processing machines all over the country, as well as removing mail drop boxes, cutting back overtime hours, and limiting locations that will accept mail-in ballots. It seems that the Trump administration is doing its level best to totally screw up the election for anyone who is afraid to go out on Election Day and vote in person. The tension and distress surrounding this election intensifies daily throughout the summer and fall.

OCTOBER Halloween comes. Facebook and TicTok are full of videos that people make showcasing the clever ways they've devised to deliver candy "touchlessly" to the children who are brave enough to go house to house. We put out a big plastic bowl with mixed candies on the front steps, a big sign spelling out "Happy Halloween; Help Yourself." When it's time to turn out the porch light, the bowl contains just about the same amount of candy as it did when we set it out. Of course, we'll have to eat it ourselves – maybe would have bought less if I'd known!

NOVEMBER The 2020 election comes amidst the pandemic. The number of people voting by mail sky-rockets, including us. It's comforting to know we can drop our votes in the white drop box in the parking lot of the town hall, but we're among the lucky ones. Nightly news chronicles voting sites all over the country where people are having trouble voting: one drop box for tens of thousands of voters inconveniently located where few can reach it; extremely long lines for those who choose to cast their votes in person, some wearing masks and socially distancing and others ignoring the pandemic protocols; Trump-inspired poll watchers threatening voters and lurking over the voting sites with their ceaseless claims of fraud, and all the while, Trump himself on air non-stop claiming that he has won the election despite absolutely no evidence to support his lies. Every day word of yet again another law suit launched by him or his supporters is thrown out of court due to lack of evidence, and still he persists. Polls reveal that about 70% of the Republican Party believes that the election was stolen through voter fraud.

Against the backdrop of the post-election turmoil, we're looking at the holidays coming up. This was my year to host Thanksgiving dinner, and I'm so disappointed that it can't happen. I manage to find a nine pound turkey that looks like a Perdue Oven-Stuffer chicken, but it's real. Alan and I will have all the usual side dishes: creamed onions, candied yams, mashed potato, broccoli casserole, roasts yellow veggies, mashed butternut squash; pumpkin pie. The house will be filled with that heavenly aroma so familiar, and the TV will be running a virtual Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. There will be football. So many of the little things will seem almost normal, but it will be so abnormal – no people, no family. Other families are ignoring the advice to stay within their households. Thousands are travelling – the roads are filled with cars; the airports are active. The medical people are predicting post-holiday spikes in the number of cases, and they're right.

There is no trip into Trinity Church to hear "The Messiah," which has signaled the start of the Christmas season for me for years. So many lost traditions, so much loneliness at the times that traditionally mean family. Any shopping that has been done has been through Amazon, which, as frustrating as it might be

to see Jeff Bezos take over the world, has been a godsend when the stores are closed and/or you are afraid to go out among the crowds. Christmas Eve comes without any guests. We have our tree all lit and decorated. There are red candles on the mantles and greens wound with tiny lights draped around the house. The nutcrackers stand watchful over the family room. I've made my meatballs, enough to divide into three portions and deliver to Becky and Matt; Matt has brought over a bottle of his traditional glogg, the first stop of the string of them he'll make all around the state and up to Chris and Ally in Nashua, and Karen has arranged a family Zoom get-together. It's a little weird, isn't it, to sit at the butcher block in the kitchen in front of a computer screen, looking at all the little faces beaming out from all their separate houses. On the other hand, how great is it that we DO have Zoom! In a new and completely wacky way we're able to be with each other without actually being together.

JANUARY I was fundamentally shocked in 1963 when John Kennedy was assassinated, my naïve little bubble of a small town girl from a white suburban town in Massachusetts burst violently. Any remaining naiveté died in the rest of that decade with the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, the riots and violence of the Civil Rights movement, the shooting of anti-war protestors at Kent State, and the unrelenting turmoil of the anti-Vietnam protests. Much was wrong with America, yet in the midst of all that eye-opening upheaval, the institutions of the government, the symbolism of the White House, the Supreme Court, and the Capitol building somehow remained inviolate. They were sacred places; as much as we could get angry about the behaviors and decisions often made within their walls, their existence as the seat of all we believe remained.

All over the country, states conduct recounts of their Presidential election votes and Trump continues to go to court to challenge the results. The calendar ticks forward to D-Day, January 6th, the day when the Electoral College vote has to be certified by Congress. Trump supporters become more enraged and primed for action. Trump issues a call to them to amass in Washington on January 6th for a "wild" rally, and then when they stand in front of him as he rails against the legitimacy of the election results, he exhorts them to march on the Capitol to "stop the steal." Every TV channel in the country covers the ensuing melee, horrified as people carrying Trump flags swarm over the stairs and walls of that iconic building, looking like evil insects infesting the People's House, raging through the halls, screaming for the hides of Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi. The TV screen is filled with images of Confederate flags, Nazi flags, sweatshirts bearing the legends "Camp Auschwitz" and a shorthand standing for "six million were not enough." The Capitol police are overwhelmed, pushed backward and crushed up against unyielding doors, beaten with pipes and American flags on poles, afraid that they will die here under the hate of their fellow citizens. Where did America go?

This attack on January 6th, 2021, is so far outside my concept of what America is, what it does, what WE do as citizens in this country. These were raging animals, no sense of law, no sense of respect either for our government or the very processes of our democracy. Democracy be damned, as far as they were concerned – seven million voters more cast a ballot for Biden than for Trump, but that didn't matter to them. They decried the legitimacy of votes from primarily Black and brown communities as fraudulent. They claimed all manner of illegalities had occurred. They had no use for the counted and recounted votes in state after state; they called for the heads of any Republicans who acknowledged the legitimacy of the election outcome; they swore to primary anyone who dared to suggest that Trump had not won. It doesn't matter that in state after state, Republican election officials testified to the legitimacy of their elections, that the Attorney General of the United States, William Barr, charged with finding fraud, confirmed that there was none. We are in a fact-free zone these days. Conspiracy theories abound, and

otherwise sensible people actually claim to believe the garbage spouted by the likes of QAnon, a wacky group of people who have abandoned reason. We are on the cusp of the disintegration of our country, I fear, if the people in Washington and around the country in state capitals don't stand up and start speaking the truth.

Like the pandemic isn't enough to deal with!

Now we watch TV as Joe and Jill Biden and Kamala Harris and Doug Inhoff go to the Mall the night before inauguration to stand silently facing the reflecting pool in the dark as four hundred sconces light up sequentially along the entire length of the water in memory and honor of the four hundred thousand souls who have perished from the pandemic thus far. This is the first national acknowledgement of the magnitude of loss, of the collective grief of the nation. For the first time, we share the sorrow together, the somber glow of all those lights a stark visual representation of accumulating deaths, and it will not stop either. When the Inauguration comes, we are witnessing nearly 4,000 deaths a day. By the time we reach Biden's first one hundred days, we will be nearing six hundred thousand dead. But at least now we are called to acknowledge it by the Biden administration, something Trump never did.

Inauguration on January 20th is largely virtual. The Capitol is still occupied by armed troops and surrounded by metal fences, testament to the lingering threat from the January 6th insurrectionists. In relative terms, no one is there. The Capitol steps are bathed in sunlight; dignitaries in masks fill their socially distanced seats; the sprawling Mall is empty. We remember Obama's inauguration when millions of people thronged the site, thrilled to see the inauguration of America's first Black president, so many people as far as the eye could see. We remember Trump's inauguration, that same Mall half empty, the stark white ground covers open and uncovered, and Trump's pathetic insistence that his crowd was bigger than Obama's despite the side-by-side photographs that made plain the lie. So many lies those four years. Thank God it's over.

The inauguration itself is a triumph of ingenuity: the entry of the Bushes, the Obamas, and the Clintons provide visual testament of the comity of our democracy and the belief in a peaceful transfer of power; after a tradition dating back to the inauguration of President John Adams which was attended by the out-going George Washington, the absence of the out-going President Trump is glaring, he and his wife already touched down in Florida after a pathetic, self-arranged going-away ceremony; the brilliant recitation by Amanda Gorman of her poem, "The Hill We Climb," her canary yellow coat drawing our eyes to the graceful movements of her hands, delicate bird-like punctuation of her words, her entire body poetry in motion; the evening dark lit by virtual performances on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, that white marble temple aglow behind the performers, and the new President and his lady silhouetted on the balcony of the White House, facing out toward a spectacular display of fireworks over the city of Washington. It was a magnificent creation of a new way to welcome a new President, and one has to wonder if inauguration pomp and circumstance will be forever changed by the adaptations that were made in this extraordinary year.

FEBRUARY Americans haven't been able to go anywhere outside the country for months now. The European Union won't accept us. Canada has closed its borders to us. Apparently, one can still travel to Mexico, as we learned when Senator Ted Cruz tried to escape to Cancun while his state of Texas was suffering devastating snow, ice, and freezing temperatures that resulted in a total breakdown of the power grid. Pipes froze flooding houses, people had no running water for weeks, no heat, no way to cook their food – the ideal time for the Senator to take a semi-tropical vacation.

Biden has promised 100,000,000 COVID shots in arms by the end of his first one hundred days. That makes me nervous. If he overpromises and doesn't deliver, the opposition will have a field day. Oh ye of little faith, by his first one hundred days, he has more than doubled his goal. Each state decides its own schedule for administering shots. Massachusetts starts with nursing homes and front line workers, then the elderly. The web site crashes, people can't get appointments, people are going nuts with anxiety and frustration. When the new slots for appointments open up once a week, everyone who is eligible tries to get on-line to grab one and they get snapped up in minutes. The advice to anyone trying is to "get your family members to go on-line for you," or "use multiple devices at the same time," and other similar, extremely off-putting suggestions. So many people aren't computer-savvy or don't even have access to that kind of technology. It's mostly white, middle- and upper-class people who score the shots, no surprise there. I give up after trying to manage the questionnaire and other hoops required by the website, but then I receive a text from Lahey that says they will be contacting me with appointment information. I will sit back and wait for them, and sure enough, my phone buzzes one evening, and the text contains a link to several sites with open slots. The process itself is seamless, arrivals timed so that no one waits, and the little card indicating the administration of the first dose of my Pfizer COVID vaccine sits in the side slot of my wallet. I feel elation of a sort, kind of funny, because nothing really changes: we must still wear masks, socially distance, avoid crowds, and so forth. But I've had the shot. I won't die of COVID. Now we must hope that enough people also get vaccinated to prevent new variants from emerging.

MARCH 2021 A full year has passed since the world shut down. Politics have been at war with science throughout. Democrats wear masks and socially distance. Republicans do not. Democrats line up to bare their arms for shots. Republicans do not. Democrats order take-out. Republicans stand shoulder to shoulder at bars and cram into restaurants in states where Republican governors have said they could stay open at full capacity. The more people continue to mingle unprotected and cheek by jowl, the more new variants evolve, and we fear the emergence of one that will side-step the vaccines. Some people either don't believe or don't care. I don't understand.

People who are fully vaccinated are beginning to emerge from their isolation. Friends call wanting to go out to lunch or start socializing again. Articles appear in the paper discussing the ways we've come to view our new routines: working from home, for example, or immersed in solitary activities. People write about the trepidation they feel, even after vaccination, at being among others. It's uncomfortable getting too close. We've given up the custom of hugging or shaking hands upon greeting one another. We nod, we smile, we do a stupid elbow bump, we stand back at a respectful distance. Entering another's personal space is too much of an intrusion that I'm not yet comfortable doing. Alan is even more reluctant to get back together with others, even his own family.

Every day, the news carries stories about instances of vaccine hesitancy; there's a huge portion of the population that is refusing to get the shot. Unless that changes, we're going to be in this limbo of needing masks in public and tracking variants. Various states toy with the idea of vaccine passports to prove you've had the shot, but a lot of people reject that idea as too much government intrusion. I wonder how they'll feel if it starts up all over again because so many unvaccinated people incubate new variants that defy the vaccines we have.

APRIL A lot of schools are trying to reopen after a year of virtual learning in which so many children have fallen behind. Most have settled on a hybrid model, with half the students staying home on

alternate days while their classmates go to the school for in-person instruction. Matt comes over on Easter for a quick visit and to deliver flowers. The next day he calls to tell us that Mason has tested positive for COVID. Looking back, they think he's been sick since the prior Thursday, so if Matt can be a carrier, he's brought the virus into this house. Who knows if that's connected to the fact that on Tuesday I become desperately ill and can barely move out of the bed for three days, living between bed and bathroom, sleeping almost non-stop for 72 hours, finally able to keep down a half piece of toast, a half of a scrambled egg, and a small bottle of Ginger Ale on day three. After twelve days, Mason emerges from quarantine spent in his bedroom. Lisa has been leaving food outside his door, and anyone making a trip to the bathroom undertakes an industrial strength effort to disinfect everything in sight. Mason and his girlfriend both came down with it, but no one else in Matt's household did. By now, Matt and Lisa have both been vaccinated, but Liam hasn't. The state has just opened up eligibility for those sixteen or older, so he should be soon.

I wore a watch this month. I was going someplace where it actually mattered when I arrived. Putting on my watch is no big deal for a woman who owns about six of them and was accustomed to wearing one every day, right? Except it's been a year since I last did that. Who cares what time it is when every day is exactly like the last – filled with self-selected tasks around the house, interspersed with trips to the grocery store at any time that is convenient. This has been a year without appointments, no doctor, no hairdresser, no art class, no get-togethers planned ahead. There has been no need for a watch. Which brings up another rare event – wearing what have come to be known as “hard pants,” as opposed to soft pants, I guess, those elastic waisted yoga pants and sweats that everyone has been wearing for the last year, as well as real shoes – I've been in my UGG moccasin slippers since a year ago March. They are absolutely molded to the shape of my feet, and even though they are perfectly good slippers, I'm beginning to think about getting a new pair, just to have some variety. Watches, pants, and shoes – who'da think they would begin to feel weird. The Boston Globe runs articles frequently now about how the workplace will be changed as a result of this pandemic, and a central question beside the obvious one about how much will businesses rely on tele-commuting is the question of how will people dress. Has the tie had its day? Will lounging attire suffice in the boardroom? Time will tell.

MAY President Biden announces that we can now go outside without masks, so long as we're not in large crowds. Massachusetts plans to reopen fully in the near future, restaurants at full capacity, theaters open, fans at Foxboro, and so forth. Kids are back in school across the state, although one has to wonder how reconvening with only a few weeks left in the academic year will be of any real benefit. Students are given the option of finishing the year remotely if their health is compromised, so teachers still juggle split classes. Towns float the idea of summer school to make up for lost time, but anyone who has ever been inside a public school building during a heat wave knows that no one is able to function at anyway near capacity in the heat that builds up and is not released overnight. Most schools lack any sort of air conditioning. My classroom would routinely reach the mid-nineties by June, hanging onto that temperature around the clock even when I left the windows open wide, climbing higher as the summer wore on. People are so anxious to get back to life as it was in the Before Time. Yet, ominously, India and Brazil are being devastated by spikes that are killing thousands and thousands of people every day. India itself has produced two new variants not yet circulating elsewhere in the world.

How do you know if someone is vaccinated or not? There are those who advance the idea of some kind of “vaccination certificate,” but many more who reject that idea, and yet, as we move toward reopening the country, we know that about 40+% of people aren't yet vaccinated, and many of them have no

intention of becoming so. So you could be shoulder to shoulder with a person fully loaded with the virus, and your own immunity, even at 90% or a little better, might still open you up to getting sick. At least, we're told the vaccine prevents severe illness and death 100%, and that's a comfort. We've been cautious for so long, paranoid for so long, it's hard to relax into trusting that we're protected. Is it OK to feel resentment towards the recalcitrants who refuse to get vaccinated? Here's an existential exercise in suspending judgement.

Wow. Matt, Lisa, and the boys come over to share a pizza, and we forego masks because we're all vaccinated now. Both boys have had their first shot, at least. How easily we slip back into "normal." It feels so natural to sit around talking and laughing, eating, switching our attention periodically to watch the Kentucky Derby that runs in the background on TV. One of the races leading up to the headline race features a horse called Colonel Liam, so of course, we yell and hoot and pump our fists as he makes a break from the third position to stretch out and cross the finish line in an exact dead heat with another horse. We wait long minutes until the photo comes on the screen showing that fine line marking the finish point, and the two muzzles touching it precisely at the same time. In all the years we've watched all the races of the complete Triple Crown competitions, we have never before seen a dead heat. It's the yelling out loud in a closed room without masks that is so new – in the "Before Time," we never would have given it a second thought but now it seems radical.

Life moves on in spite of everything. Mason has chosen to attend the Commonwealth Honors College at UMass Lowell, in engineering. In the midst of this remarkable year, he has completed his senior year of high school, attending the Early College Program that links Malden High School to Bunker Hill Community College, earning his high school diploma and an associate's degree in the process, and completed the application process to college. There have been no proms, no senior banquets, nothing except a computer at home and hours of solitary work. As of mid-May, there's no word about a graduation ceremony, either at Malden High or Bunker Hill. We wait to hear if anything will happen to mark the accomplishment.

It feels daring to drive to Kristin Hera's house in Lancaster for a visit, an actual visit with someone, a purely social meet-up – she opens the front door mask less, comfortable with our both being vaccinated, so I take my mask off. We sit outside on the deck in the sun this beautiful spring day and catch up over the course of several hours. It's been eight years since I last saw her. Anna was an infant, two or three months old, and now she's an eight year old third grader sitting in the back room zooming with her classmates, the school year completely remote for her. Cristian sits in the other room at his desk, tele-commuting to work. What a strange existence it is to have everyone there all day long, every day, trying to accomplish the ordinary business of living in such an extraordinary way. Kristin has taken the second semester off from teaching at Nashoba Valley Regional High School, where I'm amazed to learn she's been for seventeen years! Where has all that time gone since she was my student teacher in Reading? We had such a comfortable relationship that year, and even with the intervening years since last we were together, our connection is seamless. It's a wonderful visit, a taste of "normal" for a brief moment in time.

The bridge group plays bridge. The writing group meets in person. We wear masks at Market Basket.

May 11: Zero deaths in Massachusetts today. New cases are up slightly, new hospitalizations are up slightly, but today there are no new deaths. This is the first time in months that the nightly tally on the evening news has registered zero deaths. It's almost shocking to see that figure, we've become so used

to seeing numbers that were in the hundreds and even thousands for the daily count. I'm reminded of the Vietnam War years, when every Friday, the national news delivered the body count. At the height of the war, the number would be over 500 a week, and the accompanying dread was like an iron weight in our chests that grew heavier and heavier with each passing week. In this pandemic, that total has been dwarfed. The national weekly body count is in the thousands, week after relentless week. We are approaching 600,000 dead at this point, and still, there are those who don't take the disease seriously, refusing to wear a mask, refusing to keep their distance, refusing to avoid large groups. One of the lead anchormen on FOX news actually exhorts his followers to report parents for child abuse if they send their kids outside wearing a mask.

Make a note for the future: On May 12th the Republican House of Representatives will take a vote to expel Liz Cheney from her position of Conference Chair for the high crime of telling the truth. She insists that Joe Biden won the election, that Trump lost, and that his insistence to the contrary is The Big Lie that led to the January insurrection at the Capitol. Her Republican colleagues have decided that the truth will not do. If you don't stand by Dear Leader and agree with The Big Lie, there is no place for you in the party. Seriously. This is where we are. This is what we've descended to. To be a good Republican, you must stand in public and speak the lie. Period. This is 2021, and I wonder if I will live long enough to see truth restored in our politics. Arizona is currently conducting its fourth recount of the November ballots, the previous three having validated the original Biden victory, this most recent recount being conducted by a private firm headed by a QAnon conspirator with exactly no experience in conducting elections or recounting ballots, so yes, that inspires confidence in their conclusions – NOT.

Other states take a cue from Arizona and challenge the election results. Georgia sues to reopen the ballots and do a recount, ignoring the fact that their ballots have already been recounted. A county in New Hampshire has proposed doing the same. Other states where Biden won are challenging the certified results.

May 13: New mask guidelines – masks will no longer be required outside for fully vaccinated people. Some inside places will retain the mandate, including airplanes and hospitals. Some states stick with their own rules. It's confusing. A lot of people aren't ready to give up the mask even if it's allowed, and most stores still have signs posted on their front doors requiring masks, so we might as well go along as we have been, wearing them when we shop, when we are out among others. But it feels liberating to be able to visit friends without them. This does, however, raise the question of how does one tactfully ask another person if he or she is vaccinated, because I for one don't want to socialize with anyone who hasn't been unless we both wear a mask. Is that paranoid? I'm protected, but only around 90%, and why would I risk contracting COVID at all? Even if I were to get a mild case, I don't care to be sick with it, and we are still discovering the long term effects this virus has on people. They're called "long-haulers," and many suffer serious, long-term symptoms. It's not pretty. Do you trust everyone to tell the truth about their vaccine status? Friends, yes. Strangers? No. We are still chocking up over 30,000 new cases a day nationally, so the disease continues to spread, which continues the risk of a variant developing that will defy the vaccine. It's not over.

Sports venues are beginning to welcome fans, seating them in two distinct sections, one for those fully vaccinated who sit side-by-side just like the Before Times, and another with patrons socially distanced, spaced widely apart, clustered only in groups of people who live together. How do you prove you're vaccinated? Aren't those little cards easy to forge? Think of the trust that is required when you ask

people their vaccination status. When I was young, I took people at their word, but now I know there is so much dishonesty in this world – just look at the last administration, which made lying into an art form. Those of us who actually are vaccinated have to trust that the shot does protect us. Those who don't get it are playing Russian roulette with their health.

Memorial Day, 2021 COVID restrictions are to be lifted. There are still pockets of disease, still daily body counts, still news of variants circulating, yet the powers that be have decided that conditions have improved enough, and enough people have been vaccinated, that we can return to something very close to the Before Times. Yesterday, a week before the official date of our release from restrictions, I ran out to Lucci's for a gallon of milk and when I got back out to my car, I realized I didn't have a mask on. I felt like a scofflaw. I have been getting so used to going outside without one, the automatic habit of grabbing one any time I left the house had evaporated, just like that. I looked around, and sure enough, I was the only patron without one. Did all of them look at me and judge me inconsiderate of them, as I have been doing whenever I saw someone without a mask? A lesson in humility here.

One day years ago on a beautiful sunny day in summer, we dropped anchor at Moon Island on Squam Lake and slid into the water for a swim. As we waded around the rocks at the tip of the island, we spotted a chrysalis clinging to one granite surface. Emerging from it was a new-born dragonfly, still tightly wound in the compressed shape it had taken inside the now discarded shell. Alan gingerly lifted the insect onto his finger where it used its new legs to grip his skin, the sun warming its body, the life flowing slowly, visibly into its wings. The pulse of blood could be seen through the gossamer fabric of its wings, each surge pushing further and further into the structure until the entire wing was filled out, uncurled, pulsing with life. At that point, the dragonfly tried its new-found freedom and flexed its muscles, twitching the length of its tail and gently moving its wings. Eventually, fully engorged with blood and energy, it lifted off from Alan's finger and flew away. I recall this now because it's how I see us, America, the world, emerging from our year of confinement, slowly filling our spaces with life, slowly testing the limits of our new freedom, increment by increment, tentatively, and ready to soar out into the larger world. We seem almost there, but still there is the reality of the variants, the reality of the third world nations which are still being devastated, the fact that even here in America, there are states like Alabama where, to date, only 24% of the population has been vaccinated and among Republicans, still almost 40% who state they will not take the vaccine. We see videos on the news of throngs of people swamping Phil Nicholson at the PGA tournament when he won on Sunday, mask-less and in a crush; we listen to sports casters gleefully project full capacity crowds at Boston's TD Garden or Foxborough's Gillette stadium, and we're thrilled, and yet the virus is still with us. Every day, still people die. Every day tens of thousands of new cases are identified. We're closing in on 600,000 dead.

The pandemic isn't over. If you believe Republicans, the 2020 election isn't over. Twenty-twenty has been a very long year, exhausting in its repression, frustrating in its limitations, depressing in its violence and the exposure of our nation-wide injustices and inequalities. Yet there really is hope for the future: science has rendered a miracle in the speedy production of an effective vaccine against COVID-19, Americans had the good sense to turn the former guy out of office and inaugurate both Joe Biden and a new era of responsible, competent, actual grown-up government. There will be more to write about this time in our history, I'm sure, but maybe that essay will need a new title, "Postcards from the After Times" perhaps.

JANUARY 2022 Addendum? Chapter 2? What shall we label this time? Going on the ending of year two of this disease and certainly nowhere near “the After Times.” That was naïve to think we were nearing the end. When Joe Biden stood at the microphone last Fourth of July and declared us almost at our independence from COVID, he had no idea of the up surging new variant on the horizon. Today is the first day of 2022 and the pandemic is worse than ever. We’ve weathered the Delta variant, although that one is still widely abroad in the land, and we’re in the midst of Omicron.... Blazing our way through the Greek alphabet, much like what we now do with hurricanes. Omicron is supposedly less severe than the earlier variants but it seems to sneak through our defenses more easily. Aleah, triple vaccinated and a survivor of an earlier bout of COVID-19, now has it again. She feels lousy and has what she describes as a heavy head cold.

New Year’s Eve celebrations around the world were canceled last night, or at least scaled down. Boston moved everything outside and offered vaccines on the spot. The now-ended year devolved into fights over mask wearing and school closings, sometimes becoming physical. The number of altercations on airplanes has skyrocketed, with passengers slapping and punching not only other passengers but flight crews. I’m reminded of *Lord of the Flies*, when civilized behavior and common decency took a hike among the boys marooned on that island... we don’t even have to be marooned anywhere to watch our darkest impulses explode into the public square. We are presently at over 825,000 dead from COVID-19, just in this country, a number we wouldn’t have believed if anyone had projected it a year ago. Mask mandates are being reinstated. Sporting contests, both high school and professional, get cancelled every day due to high numbers of infected players. Schools are mostly open, but parents march and yell and shake their fists at those who want the kids to wear masks to keep everyone safe. Politicians who refuse to follow CDC guidelines gain hero status among those who refuse to accept responsibility for their neighbors’ well-being. It’s a mess. It could have been so easily avoided if, at the very beginning, Trump and his administration had acknowledged the seriousness of the situation and impressed upon everyone the need to pitch together to beat this virus. Instead, he poo-pooed it and mocked anyone who warned of dire consequences, the very consequences we now deal with daily. I won’t be around to see it, but I truly hope that the history books will do a thorough analysis of how this catastrophe unfolded and lay blame right where it belongs, right on the shoulders of Donald Trump and his administration.

As if COVID weren’t enough, our politics have gone to a very dark place too. The insurrection that broke out at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, has metastasized into a festering cesspool of anger, distrust, and threats of violence. Talk radio and conservative web sites continue to push the lie of a stolen election and an astonishing number of people continue to buy their propaganda. I fear for the Republic. I hear people talk about staying on top of all the subversive rumblings, but those aren’t the people with the semi-automatic weapons. Those guys are the ones intent on imposing their will on the rest of us and they are frighteningly well armed. If only all we had to worry about were a deadly pandemic! That seems too simplistic these days.

2021 seemed to offer some hope for the future, and while I believe that long term, there will be an end to this horrible situation, right now the reasons to be optimistic are, at best, elusive. Naively, we don silly oversized “2022” glasses and funny party hats and toast the New Year, but I think it would be premature to get too giddy. On a related matter, Christmas Eve this year was noteworthy, if only because we were all together here in Reading. Becky found enough of the increasingly scarce instant COVID test kits to give one to each of us, so we all could relax in the comfort of knowing that we were all

negative. After our Zoom get-together last year, this seemed particularly joyous, to share Matt's Glogg, Karen's baked brie, a table spread with Ally's potatoes, Becky's pineapple salad, Deb's tasty glazed carrots, and of course, meatballs, ham, and deviled eggs. The mood was ebullient. Now, we know, the Omicron variant is spreading like wildfire among even the vaccinated/boosted, so we were in a fool's paradise in one way, but it was grand nonetheless, and no one came down sick as a result.

Things are tightening up, though. More schools closing. Broadway is shut down again after just reopening. People are beginning to beg off meeting friends indoors – shades of 2020. We grow weary.