

## The False Promise of Tidy

I was working on a movie about a girl who wished that her sick mother not die. The wish was so strong that time stopped. The temporal anomaly kept mom alive, but trapped everyone else in a time loop.

The pandemic hit, and the movie's production was shut down.

Then, after living the new pandemic reality for months, I went back to Los Angeles to finish the one scene we hadn't managed to complete before the shutdown: mom finally dying.

Once the scene was completed, the streaming platform had their product, and I was released to fly back home.

Landing in Vancouver, the Canada Border Services Officer explained my responsibilities as outlined in the Quarantine Act. Fourteen days, no travel outside the home unless it was for a medical appointment, maintain distance with anyone I lived with. There was an ArriveCAN App.

The Officer said "We can track." It was possible that there'd be random phone calls to check up on me.

I asked for details about how this all worked, and the officer repeated, "We can track."

Although there were only a few of us at Baggage Claim, a traveler still managed to knock his cart into the back of my legs. The ceiling in the space was low; there were no windows; I saw only two vents. Television, newspapers, internet had been teaching us about viral vectors; stale air was one. I wrote off the annoying knock of the cart into my legs as something to do with this traveler's contagion anxiety.

The carousel light stopped flashing, and the belt stopped moving. A baggage handler was clearing six unclaimed expensive looking moulded-plastic cases. "The bags are all off," he said,

pointing to the Lost Luggage desk where four large men crowded the space. Someone in this group sneezed loudly.

“One hundred and ninety-seven,” the baggage handler said.

“What?”

“Sorry. It’s easier for me to remember if I say it out loud. It’s been so empty here, that I just started talking to myself.”

I didn’t understand, but I smiled politely. Of course, he couldn’t see it behind my mask.

“I’ve been keeping track of sneezes in baggage claim since the beginning of the shutdown. I’m up to 197,” the baggage handler explained.

“How many of them cover up?” I put a hand in front of my masked mouth and nose like we used to when we sneezed, uncovered.

“Twenty-three.”

In the past months, on television or YouTube, there had been animations of germs aerosolizing. When we exhaled, coughed or sneezed, we were all inextricably joined in a cloudy bubble. Was that connection gone? Were we now each carrying our individuated haze behind masks?

While shooting in Los Angeles, there had been points in the day when the crew was allowed to leave the stage for mask breaks outside. This moment to feel air on the face was, we had learned, an urgent need. “Do you ever think about what’s released when we lower our masks?” I asked.

“All the time.” The baggage handler sounded sad. “I googled release of germs from mask, but nothing came up, so my search words must be off.”

“Maybe it’s just that no knows yet,” I said.

“Yeah, maybe the question’s cutting-edge science.” His voice was happier.

The men at Lost Luggage left, and I approached the desk.

The woman in charge gave me a toothbrush and a travel-size tube of toothpaste. I gave her my address. Once found, the bag would be delivered.

I took a very empty ferry home to Vancouver Island.

There were two meters between me in the kitchen doorway and the stove where Felix was using a jar grabber to remove Mason jars from boiling water. The windows were steamed. CBC news was on the radio. I had on a mask, and Felix put on his before turning to me. We were abiding by the Quarantine Act instructions.

On the counter, were a crate of blueberries, three sacks of pears, a large pile of jalapeño peppers and another one of knobby ginger root. “How much are you going to do?” I asked.

“It depends on how many jars I have.”

While I had been in Los Angeles, Felix had started canning.

There were pops from the Mason jars cooling on the windowsill – the signal that the seals were tight. Felix turned back to the counter. Using my grandmother’s spoon – the only thing she had gotten out of Poland when she finally left -- he dished green glop into a jar.

“What’s that?”

“Maple Pickled Jalapeño. Recipe’s on the table.”

There was a recipe printed from the internet, a 23 written in marker at the top of the page.

“What’s the twenty-three?”

“I’m numbering the jars and recipes. There’s a spreadsheet. I got a label maker.”

My quarantine was filled with streaming content, books, exercises targeting core and arms. I was learning Polish. Every night, I made a list for the next day, usually the same routine, but I wrote

the list anyway – satisfying to cross things off. Special events were starred. A Zoom-cocktail call was scheduled.

Felix timed the canning process so that he could clear out of the kitchen to allow me to prepare my meals on a section of counter we mapped out as mine.

Recipe #47. Carrot Jalapeño Relish.

Felix was out of jars. He called Canadian Tire, London Drug, and Oak Bay Home Hardware. Nothing available. The smoke alarm chirped and then sounded. The jar grabber had been left on the hot stove, and its rubber-coated handles were burning. We put out the fire and waved the rotten smell out the door. The kitchen was becoming its own steamy, sticky and now acrid biome.

“We should clean the floor,” I said. My socks were adhering to the tiles’ increasing tack.

“Let’s embrace entropy until I’m done.” Felix was a physicist.

“But you’re out of jars,” I said.

“There are still options.” On Reddit, Felix had found several robust local canning chat sites. “It’s funny how most of them are men,” he said. “I got to believe that someone’s going to know of a jar stash.”

“I thought men on Reddit wanted to blow things up.”

“That’s 8Chan. Some Reddit Pol Boards can be dark, but not the ones I’m on. My guys are into canning. A lot are also really into pit-bull puppies.”

Late that afternoon, Felix texted me: *jars in West Vic.*

I wanted to go with him. Leave my room. A journey across town. West Victoria! But I was a new Canadian Resident. I made a point of using Canadian English as my spell-check

dictionary. I followed national and local news. During some rough trade talks, the Prime Minister had explained that, while Canadians were polite, they wouldn't be pushed around, so it was easy to imagine authorities going all badass if I broke the self-isolation quarantine. The Canada Border Officer's words were present: *We can track*. I stayed home.

A guy in West Vic sold Felix 200 Mason jars. He was giving up canning to devote himself to volunteer work on a Canadian Wildlife research project.

"He collects bird carcasses and puts them in Ziplock bags that he labels with times and GPS coordinates," Felix said. "Humans are responsible for something like 269 million bird deaths a year in Canada. The research is to pinpoint trends."

I had once seen a scruffy, probably very high, woman hunched over the sidewalk, examining something I couldn't see. She looked up at me and said, "Just because you don't see it, doesn't mean it's not there."

I said to Felix, "I'm glad someone's keeping track."

Recipe #61. Blueberry-Ginger Conserve.

On the Zoom-cocktail call, we all had on our cheery game-day faces. *What me worry?* Chill, it seemed, was the new "tough." We commented on our Zoom backgrounds. We joked about how the world was reduced to a Hollywood Squares paradigm.

"So how many more days?" upper right asked me.

"Only another week. It's not horrible," I said.

My good attitude was cheered. We lifted our drink glasses, “To doing well.” And then we got quiet, most us sipping wine, two with artisanal gins.

I told the Zoom screen about the canning and the sticky floor.

Bottom row center said. “Wow, Felix is a prepper! Who knew?” She laughed. “He’s provisioning.” Upper left laughed, too.

After the protracted good-byes, no one wanting to hit the *Leave Meeting* button first, I was ashamed of myself. “Preparation” and “provisioning” weren’t jokey words, but I had allowed the screen to make fun.

Recipe #72. Tikka Masala Sauce

My throat hurt. My eyes were scratchy. I had a cough, and I checked my feet for the COVID-toe thing. The toes were fine. The weather was changing. Maybe allergies. The cough persisted.

I texted my symptoms to Felix, and he texted: *sense of taste?* I still had that.

“Check your flight,” he yelled from the kitchen. “They’re tracing.”

My seat had been 25E. Seat 26F was *Positive*.

Felix came to the door of my room.

“The seat behind me is positive.”

I could tell from his eyes above the mask that Felix wished he could fix this.

Recipe #77. Pear Preserves with Cardamon.

The airline called. They had my bag. Delivery was set. I knew it was impossible, but it would be a great movie moment if the baggage handler counting sneezes wound up delivering my suitcase. How many sneezes was he up to? Had he discovered what happened to the trapped germs when we took breaks to expose our faces?

As I walked past the kitchen on my way outside to go to the COVID-19 test site, Felix was tapping a marmalade-jar lid with my grandmother's spoon. "You hear that?" he asked. It was a dull sound, which meant the seal wasn't tight enough. "Sooner or later, something gets through." Felix wished me luck and then told me to "stay negative."

Outside, I got into my car. The mask was helping against the thick smoke coming from the fires burning in Washington.

Recipe #81. Sage Pear Butter.

Waiting for the test results, Felix and I redoubled our efforts at following Health Canada protocols.

At two meters distance, he held out his arms. I held out mine. For 20 years we had lived on a shifting relationship map: romance, making houses, living abroad, living apart, getting back together. And here we were now in what people were calling the "COVID hug."

I scheduled another Zoom-cocktail call.

Recipe #91. Jalapeño-Confetti Jelly.

On the call, I wanted to say something funny about the passenger in seat 26F, but all I could think of was something my grandmother once told me: *It was strange how we tidied the house before the SS came.* I ended up telling the Zoom screen about the man with the frozen birds.

Top left said, “My God. Two-hundred and sixty-nine million souls.”

*Souls* was, I thought, the most perfect word for the dead birds.

After I hit the *Leave Meeting* button, I made a list for the next day and did my Polish homework.

When we sneeze, mostly we cover our noses and mouths. We trust published rates of transmission as well as baggage claim tickets. We appreciate animations of aerosolized germ clouds. Even when we don't see something, we know something is probably there. A spreadsheet explaining which jar is which is comforting. So is Hollywood Squares. Bird carcasses in freezers are important.

My thoughts were jumpy. What's going to happen next? I breathed in sharply, excited and curious. If brains could sweat, mine was. Gravity, time, and all other measurable forces were up for grabs, and I was grabbing.

The doorbell rang, and there was the sound of roller-bag wheels on the hallway floor. Felix tapped on my door. I waited until I heard him walk away before I got the suitcase. I then unpacked my clothes and tidied the room.