

FICTION SEPTEMBER 28, 2020 ISSUE

FACE TIME

By Lorrie Moore

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Illustration by Ard Su

I asked my father if he knew where he was and he said, "Kind of."

"You are in the hospital. Your hip surgery went well. But there is a virus and you have been found to have it. You are contagious. No one can get near. It's happening all over the world. You caught it in your assisted-living facility. The chef had it."

His blue eyes had a light that appeared to race from the back of his brain to the front. The brightness of them seemed to direct itself, with sudden power, into the screen, then straight through and past me. "The Berrywood chef?"

"Yes."

Now his eyes dulled again. "The food was not that good. I did have a glass of lemonade once that was delicious. Like in the war. Cold lemonade in a jam jar." He licked his lips. There was crust in the corner of his mouth, and he picked at it with one of his long, now thin pianist's fingers. The oxygen tubing dangled on his chest.

The author on bearing witness to suffering.

"Is there something you need now? After we finish FaceTiming, I can phone the nurses' desk."

"I'd like some of that lemonade."

"I'll ask them about that." Why should this patient be so thirsty? Give him a lemonade, for Christ's sake. Give him the lemonade of his memory and his dreams. "We are drying the lungs," a doctor had said last week. "We don't want him to aspirate."

"Isn't this a quality-of-life issue?" I did not say. Doctors all around the country seemed confused about whether hydration or dehydration was better. I feared that dehydration meant they were sending him off the exit ramp. A dry death. A dry death is better, someone had once told me.

"But how does anyone know?" I had protested.

"There is no death rattle. You don't hear the death rattle."

"So you mean it's better for us," I said. "The living."

Who knew what the dying felt at the end? They didn't return calls.

"That would be very kind of you to ask," my father said, delicately trying to moisten his lips with his gray tongue.

He attempted to smile but his whole dry mouth seemed unsplittable and in need of sponging.

His bottom teeth were as dark as teak and twisted in his mouth.

"When the nurse comes back in, I'll tell her."

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked. "I feel like I did something wrong."

"No. Not a thing. The nurse set up the iPad for you but then had to leave. She'll be back later."

Three times daily, visored, hazmatted nurses dressed like beekeepers popped in and out of the room, their faces indiscernible, their voices the high, chipper kind that children and the elderly are supposed to prefer. Birdlike, perhaps. Good to have the song of a bird. Even if they were frightened birds, in a rush to get out of there. Even if they were terrified of their tasks.

"Are you in any pain?" I asked.

"Oh, not really," he said defeatedly.

An exhilarating exchange of ideas was not possible on screens or in this weird dystopia. Still, I decided to make the situation as interesting as possible. "The British Prime Minister has this virus," I said. "So does Prince Charles. Also Tom Hanks."

His face perked up as he searched for a reply. "So I'm in good company."

"Yes, you are. And the poor are getting the virus, too, of course."

"I'm the poor!" he said. "Especially after next month's Berrywood bill."

Later, I would accuse my quite comfortable friends of appropriating the illness from the disadvantaged, of co-opting a fear of the illness that targeted prisoners, front-line workers, meatpackers, and, of course, the elderly. "It's all unfair."

My father's sight came rushing into his eyes again and brightened up the screen. "I just hope I don't have to arm wrestle the meek and the peacemakers for a seat in Heaven. That would be awkward."

I gave him a smile, as if everything were all good, then started in with some more about the virus. I would try to make a bad situation diverting. He would be interested. "It is all over the globe," I told him. "No country was really prepared, except perhaps Finland. The Finns are a nation of doomsday preppers, so they were completely ready. They've been stockpiling for years, out of fear of Russia, so they're in pretty good shape. Also, South Korea did well. They are wary of North Korea, so are somewhat disaster-ready. Same as Taiwan, which fears the mainland."

I could see him considering this. "I guess we just weren't that afraid of Canada," he said, his eyes giving a wobbly little jump. Jokes! The very wattage of life. Performance had always been how he conversed, summoning it up from the depths. Rehearsing the recitation. Looking for the opening. There it still was, beneath the bullshit malaria drugs.

"I guess we weren't! Even though Trudeau's wife came down with this."

"Is that so? Pierre Trudeau's wife?"

"Justin Trudeau. Yup." I could see his focus change and his chest rise with sad and effortful breathing.

"I am supposed to go to the shoe store, but if I get there before the pastor I won't have the key."

I knew the hydroxychloroquine gave people hallucinations. Still, all the doctors seemed to be using it. It had the endorsement of Washington, which had invented the undrained drained swamp, and of France, which had invented pasteurization and had been dining out on that ever since, while still serving small, moldy raw-milk cheeses. "It will be O.K. They are giving you medicine." The last time he'd been on it was in 1945, during the war, when he actually had malaria.

"My mother had the Spanish flu."

"Yes, I know."

"She was pregnant with my older brother and they told her to lie there and not to cough or her lungs would burst."

I wondered if lungs could really burst. I had heard this story from my dad on several occasions in my childhood and wondered about its veracity every time, though never out loud. Now to watch him sending these utterances into the light of the screen was like seeing an old man burn all his poetry in a fire.

"They were all interesting people, my family, my sister and brother and parents," he said, seemingly forgetting about his own three children: Livvy, the eldest, me, in the middle, and Delia, the baby, who had opted out of these scheduled conversations. "No-necrophilia Delia," she'd called herself. She adored our father but could not participate.

Oddly, it seemed that his daughters, at present, were not as interesting as his childhood family. Or perhaps that had always been true. His mind seemed a little rinsed of all of us, even of our mother, who had died eighteen months before, so abruptly that her vividness for me had not been interrupted. There were still things I made mental notes to tell her. She would want to know how Dad was doing.

"Now, you were born on Staten Island, isn't that right?" my father said.

I was slightly startled. "No, that was Mom." I knew I sometimes looked like her.

His head leaned back against the pillow, and then he pulled it up to look again into the iPad that the nurse had set there on a kind of tray. He had grown thinner, and silvery stubble covered his chin. He was trying to be courteous. He did not ask after me, for which I was grateful. Who wanted to share the banalities of this life right now: the low buzz of dread in the head like a broken wire; the endless YouTube links; everyone frantically not socializing; the recently furloughed male friends doing their insane air-guitar concerts on Zoom; the hours of television news interspersed with highly theatrical, mind-boggling insurance ads; the early-morning senior mixer at the supermarket; the neighborhood walks with face masks hanging from one ear like dream catchers. Women created e-mail threads of their readings of the Bible. It was all ghastly, especially the singing "Happy Birthday" twice as you washed your hands, because it might never actually be your birthday again so have at it. Well-to-do white families in large suburban homes tended to their bubbles—bubbles that intersected other bubbles so were not bubbles at all—disinfecting grocery bags and ordering from Amazon and Grubhub, and in general claiming the pandemic for themselves. The shuttered theatres and museums made the gloom of cities everywhere a harrowing one. Photos of empty boulevards and squares flooded the Internet. Pierced ears filled back in, because who wore earrings anymore? Your badly painted toenails you could say were done by a neighbor girl, home from school, on her deck—a neighbor girl who was actually you. French wine had been turned into hand sanitizer. Wisconsin milk had been turned into soap.

But some things had stayed the same, like the arrival of spring and the pastel monotony of the flowering shrubs. Who could feel how large a transformation was really occurring when the earth seemed to be enjoying itself more than ever, and who could speak of such things to a man who was clutching his plastic necklace of oxygen?

"Are you comfortable, Dad? Just lie back away from the iPad if you want. Don't make yourself uncomfortable. We can still talk." The headboard behind him was white pleather and attached to the wall. He had a bedsore and a catheter for a prolapsed bladder. I knew that. His unrehabilitated hip would never be right now, though the surgery, we'd been told, had been a great success.

His gown was slightly open in front, revealing his pink and sunken chest. He threw his head back against the pillow again, then tipped it forward. "I have to go downstairs and get the mail." And then, for a moment, he seemed to know where he was. "Am I going back to my apartment?"

The Berrywood facility would not readmit him until he had tested negative. So far, four positives.

"Not yet. You have to test negative before they can let you go."

"I don't think I got the mail today. I need to get the mail. I have to do that before I meet the pastor."

There were a lot of things he needed to do and places he needed to be. He was always announcing this. He was supposed to meet trains and people and small groups holding meetings. Perhaps, even in normal life, every place a person believed they needed to be

was a kind of hallucination, and that was its power. Berrywood had, some years ago, constructed a fake bus stop for escapees. It was a way of catching a runaway pet with the lure of food. The staff would find residents sitting there, waiting, no bus ever stopping, and talk to them sympathetically, until their plans evaporated into the mist, as so many plans did, even in good times. My father had never got that bad. Before all this, he had seemed fairly with it.

"Is that music playing?" I asked. My laptop had good speakers. It sounded like massage music, a calming electronic flute, the kind of music that played on what one of the nurses called "the classical station." They had two hours' worth of music on each station, she said.

"I was hoping for Brahms," he said.

"We'll see if we can get some Brahms."

"You know, Beethoven had one great symphony, the 'Eroica.' And then there's Mozart's C-Minor. But then Brahms comes in third—he had four symphonies of equal quality."

"That's so interesting," I said. Whenever we spoke of music, he ignored my preference for Tchaikovsky or Duke Ellington. He would sometimes allow for Harold Arlen.

"Only four symphonies, but they were all topnotch."

I didn't always know what to say. "Well, I'm going to call the nurses' station and see if we can get some Brahms for you."

"Any of the symphonies," he added.

An aide suddenly appeared on the screen in her beekeeper's garb. "We are here for his oxygen levels and to change his dressings," she said.

"O.K. Well, Dad? I'll leave you to these proceedings. But I'll hope to reach you later tonight. Livvy's going to call at some point today. Love you."

"O.K., honey, good to talk to you," he said, sounding suddenly as he always had. He would never have said "Love you" back. He had fought in the Philippines. The greatest generation did not do the fey, fake "Love you, too." The greatest generation did not wear lip balm brought by the aide or don compression stockings—too feminine—and hearing aids were a lot like jewelry, and thus a problem, and were sometimes found lost amid the tangled sheets. The greatest generation had taken a lot of orders early in life and did not want to take any more. The aide peeked into the screen and waved with her gloved hand. "Bye-bye," she said.

"Thank you. Is it possible to play some Brahms?" I asked her quickly.

"This isn't Brahms?"

"No."

"Brahms? How do you spell it?" She seemed to be typing it into the iPad.

I told her, hoping I'd put the "h" in the right spot.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Also, do you have lemonade?" I asked.

"Here's this," she said, bringing a plastic cup to my father's lips. He sipped, then grimaced and waved it away. It looked to be a chartreuse-colored, watery drink made from powder.

"Bye-bye," the beekeeper said again, as she grew larger in the screen, and then turned the iPad off entirely, so that on my laptop my connection became just a lit square with my own face in it.

My father was too old to grasp technology, so the nurses were the ones to place his FaceTime calls, according to a schedule that Livvy had given them. But the nurses were frazzled and Livvy could be a pain in the neck, though she didn't know it. Her husband always called her an angel, massaging her shoulders, hoping to get laid. And Delia, of course, had refused to be a part of it. "I can't watch Dad like this," she'd said again that day.

The following afternoon, a FaceTime call came in from Livvy. "I thought I'd patch you in and share my time with you," she said.

"What do you mean? I'm scheduled for a different time." But Livvy was both bossy and retired, a bad combo. She'd retired too young.

"Watch this," she said and spun her phone so that through my screen I saw her screen and in her screen I saw my father.

"Hi, Dad," I said.

"Hey, hi!" my dad croaked uncertainly. Then the screen switched so that I was looking into the black of Livvy's fireplace.

"Why am I looking into your fireplace?" I asked.

"It's so he can see you. The way it's patched in you can't both see each other at the same time. When he sees you, you don't see him —"

"I see the fireplace? This is too strange."

She toggled back and forth between the black hearth and my bewildered father. I didn't want to be patched in in this manner.

"Well, I thought we could sing to him," she said. I knew that one afternoon she had used the iPad as a nanny cam, watching him while she folded her laundry. She had Ferberized her children—a method that was also known as "graduated extinction"—letting them wail themselves to sleep as she watched, and I wondered if there wasn't something similar in what she was doing now.

"I suppose we could sing 'Danny Boy,' " I suggested. "It's a beautiful song and it matches his name."

"Oh, I don't think Dad likes that song. He says they're not the original words."

"What do you mean? It's a beautiful song."

"Yes, but he objects to it somehow. He says the Irish took it from the English."

"The Irish stole 'Danny Boy'? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." Now I had questioned her authority. There was always a crisis of expertise with Livvy.

"How about this?" Livvy said. She sang into the phone, "If you'll be M-I-N-E mine, I'll be T-H-I-N-E thine, and I'll L-O-V-E love you all the T-I-M-E time. You are the B-E-S-T best of all the R-E-S-T rest—"

"What the heck are you singing?"

"Dad used to sing me all his old Army songs." She laughed.

"That's an Army song? And we still won the war? I think I'm going to go and just wait for my own call with him."

Now my father, on the screen, let out a howl of anguish and I could see him grimace with agony and sorrow. He tore at his cannula and his gown.

"Whoa," Livvy said. "What's going on here? I think he doesn't want you to go."

"That's not it. He hardly knows I'm here."

My father's face became a gash of pain. "*Bitte, bitte*," he cried hoarsely. With one hand, he fiercely sliced the signal for "cut" at his throat.

"Speaking German. Still sharp," Livvy said.

"I don't think speaking one's college German right now is a sign of being sharp."

He was clearly hallucinating, agitated, imagining he was a prisoner of war; that was what it must have felt like to him—the cruel isolation, the medicine, the lights, the strange machines all around. Of course, during the war he had been in the Pacific theatre. But hallucinations were not fussy about details like that.

He tugged at the tubes in his arms.

Terror flew from him in a kind of guttural howl like a whale song. "*Nein, nein, nein. Bitte. Nein.*" He thrashed around in the bed.

I texted Livvy: *I can't watch this. It's unbearable.* Did she no longer know what was bearable and what was unbearable? Well, no one knew anymore. *I will speak to him tomorrow. I'm going to give him his privacy.*

I got into bed. I turned off the phone ringer and just watched television. Every now and then, the numbers of telemarketers and scammers appeared in white on the screen. At night, my dreams often featured such alerts, scrolling like ticker tape across them, and I would spend much of the dream trying to figure out whose numbers they were.

The next evening—evening was better, Livvy said—I waited hours for the call from the hospital to come. I sat before my computer, waiting for the FaceTime icon to enliven itself. Livvy sent e-mails and texts: *Tell them to turn the lights down. They are too bright. I keep telling them to turn them down but they don't. Ask for Eileen or Carmen. One of them is usually on duty. Ask them if they got the pizza we ordered for them.* Livvy's patient advocacy, I feared, would get him killed. The overrun hospital would triage him, and the hospice staff would move in and put him down like a dog, thanks to his annoying daughters.

The call came in late. The face that filled the screen was a beekeeper's. Was it Eileen? Was it Carmen? I did not know. She seemed new. "Your very nice father is here, but he is asleep." She stepped away from the screen, and I saw him with his eyes closed, his head hanging off his neck in a tilted fashion, the oxygen cannula taped in place, his mouth a dark crescent. They had shaved him, so his face was now cleared of the patches of miniature birch forest that had sprung up there. His skin had a butterscotch tinge, and his neck was ropy against the blue cotton of his gown. The nurse stroked his forehead with a latex-covered finger. Gingerly, but several times. "He's asleep but he's hanging in there. He's a sweet man."

"Thank you for calling me. I'll try to connect with him tomorrow."

"Yes," she said. "I'll send you some pictures of him sleeping," she added, and began tapping the iPad. Then she looked up. "Good night!" she said brightly, performing the role of saintly nurse, her head filling the screen as she moved in to shut it off. Surely her loving-kindness would vanish as soon as the iPad went dark, and her demeanor would reveal an eagerness to be rid of this COVID-ic old guy with his bedsore and immobile hip, his catheter and oxygen tubing.

I called Delia of the camellias, lying on her chaise longue. "He's stranded there, like someone fallen on a battlefield," I said. "Everyone is just stepping around him. He's in the way." How could I speak the lonely, frantic improvisation of my inadequate self-reliance? She was well versed in her own.

"I told you. I did my crying last week. We had a good long talk just before his surgery. It contained dignity and charity for all. You'll have to call me when it's over." Her voice broke a little.

"Maybe he'll get out. Maybe he'll finally test negative and be released to rehab to get his hip working again." I could not imagine it. Not really. Even that would be hellish. Then I added, sounding still more insane, "Falconers return their old birds to the wild."

"That would be interesting, if Dad could test negative two times in a row," she said. "Perhaps he will take a long time to die, like a courteous Rasputin. That would be Dad's way. Don't get me wrong. Dad's a nice person. Just maybe a little on the spectrum."

"Not the Rasputin spectrum."

"Is that a spectrum?"

"I'm sure the hospital's hospice nurses think so."

"Is that who's tending to him now?"

"I suspect so. I'm not really sure."

"Well, you and I are a thousand miles away. All this is up to Livvy. She's always the boss, anyway."

"She doesn't complain."

"No, she instructs. Which creates rage."

"She's already antagonizing the nurses. I fear she's going to get him killed."

Delia, the baby, was beloved. Much more than Livvy or me. I was probably too mysterious to my father—no husband! no child!—for him to love me in more than an average way: a feeling he had in common with all the men I'd ever known. Still, like them, he seemed to enjoy talking to me. "What do you think of Biden?" he often asked. He was hoping to live until November, to cast his vote for the Democrats, and this was what he enjoyed talking about the most. As well as Brahms.

"Dad arranged to donate his body to the medical school," I said now, changing the subject only slightly, "but they can't possibly take it at this point. He would be like Typhoid Murray."

"Now you have made me laugh," Delia said, not laughing.

The next day, at Livvy's instructions, I waited the entire afternoon. When not watching for the FaceTime icon to jump up off the dashboard of my computer screen, I stared out the window at the haphazard latticework of trees against the sky, intersected with transformers and wires that had squirrels running along them like cursors. A satiny blue-black cowbird sat atop a phone pole, a cut-rate omen. The call was supposed to come in at three in the afternoon, but by 9 P.M. nothing had come through except Livvy's texts: *Don't forget about the lights! Please ask about the music again! They keep playing that Sounds of the Seasons loop. Remind them that that pizza came from us!*

I called the nurses' station. "This is Dan Fordham's daughter—he's a patient on your wing? And I was supposed to get a call this afternoon but I've been waiting for hours and nothing has come through. I just want to make sure you have the right number?"

"Dan Fordham. Yes. Let me get back to you," the nurse said.

"I hope you got our pizza," I mumbled pathetically; she had already put me on hold.

And then we were disconnected and a dial tone buzzed in my ear, like a message from the universe. I called back and got the voice mail and so left my number and my e-mail. I waited several more hours. Even Livvy and her husband went to bed—*We're going to bed*—without waiting any longer for a report from me. And then it was midnight, and shortly thereafter the phone rang and I knew the message it contained. *The pipes, the pipes. . . . From glen to glen.* I could not touch the phone. I would let the voice mail pick it up. My actual ear had not been readied. But then I grabbed the phone and said hello and received the news. I thanked the nurse. I added, "He wanted to make it until November so he could vote. Perhaps that was too much to hope for."

"I am very sorry," came the voice.

I went to bed. I wondered whether in the final moments a dying person said, "So this is death," or did they say, "So that was life"? Or did a nice man who had not planned to die so alone and isolated but in his own bed with family gathered around think anything at all? Perhaps at the end he was simply tired, in a condition of holy yet unenlightened bewilderment, all consciousness as fake as a skit. I missed him already and without comprehension.

I spent the next morning sending e-mails to those who needed them. By the afternoon, the sky had the slurry look it could have before a storm. Outside, things were starting to move and fly, with a heavy hand, a flat foot, and a hard rain: a derecho, four minutes of straight winds at hurricane strength. It tore up jungle gyms, knocked down power lines, uprooted trees.

Even this set was being struck. A transformer blew in the alley, and I cried out in fright.

The ensuing power outage darkened and enfeebled the town for almost a week. Traffic lights went dead in their various eyes. Neighbors in masks and nitrile gloves hauled thawed frozen food to the curb in black trash bags. Every evening, no phone or Wi-Fi, no communication of any sort, my cell uncharged, I ate a few apples with some peanut butter and went to bed at seven, when the sky lost all sun. With a flashlight, I read essays of zigzaggy piety and po-mo chic until I fell asleep. Could a thought become an idea without instruction? Could an emptiness of thought eradicate ideas? With my father gone, his body chilling in a Thermo King truck far away—did the workers, stacking him up in plastic wrap, talk to him, saying, "There you go, sir, there is nothing to worry about now. You are on your way, my man"?—I had lost all interest in myself and all conviction or belief in forms generally.

In the mornings, outside, chainsaws dissected old red oaks, freeing them from tangled wire. After six days, unannounced, the lights came slyly, silently back on, as if a large cloud had discreetly shifted. Motors kicked in. Clocks flashed their incorrect times. All the little mice of my mind returned, found their corners, and began to set up shop. ♦

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Lorrie Moore is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. Her latest book is "Collected Stories."