

Split

By Hanna Saltzman

I hurl my dirty mask onto the floor of my unused passenger seat. Red and white hospital lights cut the darkness. My jaw clamps. COVID. COVID. COVID. This strident word that months ago did not exist and now seems to be our only word.

My stomach cramps, the aftermath of eating only once, eight hours ago in an abandoned corner, when I fed a body that did not want food, when I thrust salad into a throat closed from the fear of someone coming near.

My chest constricts with anger, anger toward *them*, toward *those people* who spew distortion and bigotry through loud, unmasked mouths and then deluge our hospitals with their infected lungs, where we risk our lives to save theirs.

Anger that their bodies and policies mean my pediatric patients can't get what they need. No HIV test for my newborn patient, his mother's arms raked with track marks, because COVID has taken the testing reagent. No food for my preschool patient, t-shirt hanging from her bones, because COVID has gutted her parents' jobs. No visits from siblings or grandparents for my fourth-grade patient, lying in the hospital dying of cancer, because COVID has killed his concept of family.

I rage toward those unmasked people for choosing hate over love. I rage toward myself for choosing the same in response.

Jaw clamps, stomach cramps, chest constricts. COVID.

Then I pull into the driveway and see the warm light of our kitchen glowing in the darkened street. The golden-yellow walls, the windowsill garden of herbs, the cookbooks nestled on their shelves.

Then I see you.

You, wrapped in your gray flannel shirt, standing over our big cast-iron pot, slowly spinning circles with a wooden spoon.

I come inside. You're humming to bluegrass. Butter bubbles with basil and thyme.

I remove my scrubs, shower, root around for my own flannel shirt. I feel flannel touch skin, the same skin that, today, has been bound by countless disposable gloves, three pairs of scrubs,

two showers: rituals of cleanliness transformed overnight from neurotic to necessary. My skin expands into softness.

I step into the kitchen where you stand at the stove, a stove that after years apart, we finally share: our stove. We stand at our stove together and you set down your splattered spatula and your flannel arms wrap me like a gift, like a womb.

And, for a split-second, I release.

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