

The Virus – Lauren Geber *March 2020*

The Virus had declined in number of new cases consistently for the last two weeks exactly. Cassie Hughes knew this because of the hand-crank, solar powered radio she had convinced her husband John to purchase online with *an abundance of caution* a few weeks before everything had gotten really bad. They hadn't had power for almost a month; phones, tablets, and laptops were long dead, and the TV had been reduced to a dark eyesore looming over the living room. Cassie clung to that radio like it was a great ancient treasure; after all it was their only connection to the outside world.

Luckily, there were a handful of radio stations, local and national, that had continued broadcasting throughout everything, even the worst of it. Many of them generic AM channels, what Cassie referred to as the CSPAN of radio. Who knows, maybe it actually was CSPAN, she never really paid attention to that part anyway. She was listening for any good news she could get.

The World Health Organization had begun giving daily updates via television and radio broadcast at 0900 UTC, which Cassie had come to understand was Coordinated Universal Time, or Zulu time, or three-p.m. where they were in Colorado. She always knew it was three-p.m. because (thank goodness) the stations had become extremely diligent at minding folks of the time, even saying it out loud for those who were only able to listen. Cassie and John both had also become more cognizant of the time of day based on how the sun looked in the sky, minding more to its movement across the horizon. Cassie was proud to be able to say that she had essentially trained herself to wake up at the same time each day; she would brag of her "instinct" in noting the sun's placement based on the level of light flooding into her and John's bedroom. "I can't even describe it, but I swear I can just sense it!" She had bragged to John, explaining to him how each morning she somehow managed to wake up just in time for the seven-a.m. news broadcast on the local station.

Cassie liked listening to the local news because sometimes, SOMETIMES, they would talk about things other than The Virus. Sometimes they would run a story on an upcoming event planned for the next year. A few days ago, a baby Rhino was born at the Denver Zoo. They even mentioned something about Christmas yesterday. And every once in a while, the stories wouldn't even mention The Virus once. Typically, even if the actual story wasn't about The Virus it would still be brought into the story somehow; "*Unfortunately, due to the impact of The Virus, animal lovers will have to wait to meet baby rhino until all Restrictions are lifted in the city*", but every once in a while a clean, happy little story would slip through the deep, dark cracks. And Cassie lived for those stories.

John on the other hand, greatly preferred his sleep over hearing irrelevant news stories. If there was one bright side to this absolutely devastating situation it was that he could sleep in every day as late as he wanted. John's company had been one of many formerly successful ventures that had adopted a sort of furlough, a contingent on whatever happens policy; a completely makeshift and futile attempt to conceptualize what the world had become.

John's employer, a popular startup in the construction technology field, told him they "would let him know" when, but mostly *if* there was an opportunity for him to return to work. He had received a formal letter from Johnson and Braxton, the law firm representing the company. It had arrived via certified mail in a large, legal-sized packet. The letter contained pages and pages about the state the company was in and what that meant for John and the other 14,000 employees that had been affected. Construction projects had all but stalled completely in the last few months. Because of the setbacks with postponed projects and uncertainty about when things would go back to normal, nobody was planning future projects either. People had stopped renting and buying construction equipment, just like that. Not a projected dip in the market that they could anticipate. A sudden and complete halt. The company had lost 30 percent of their net worth within a matter of days.

Because they had no money, the company could no longer pay its employees. Therefore, the employees could not continue to work. The company "has positively high hopes" that after things were back to normal, revenue would once again be pouring in and that they could "begin the slow but steady process of reinstating and reintegrating". John wasn't sure how they planned to "reinstatement and reintegrate"; would they work down based on seniority or would they consider your profits for the company? He was in sales after all. There was probably some legal protocol they had to follow and it was probably mentioned somewhere on the page labeled "EHXIBIT C:

RAMIFICATIONS, REINSTATEMENT AND POLICY FOR INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEE POSITION". John hadn't gotten to Exhibit C. He all but skimmed the first few pages explaining that he was no longer going to have any source of income, signed the back page confirming he understood that an offer for reinstatement would only be extended if he didn't accept an outside offer (not even temp work), and put the whole thing back in the prepaid envelope and sent it away. He was told that a fully executed copy, complete with the CEO's signature, would be sent to his company email address. He hadn't bothered to check, in part because he wanted to save his laptop battery and in part because he didn't want to again be reminded how The Virus had ruined his whole life. And now his laptop was dead.

The letter John's company had sent him had come in many different forms for many different people at many different companies. Airlines, on a global scale, had furloughed almost 100 percent of their entire workforce; pilots, flight attendants, gate agents, ramp agents, ticketing agents, customer service representatives, all without jobs. Rumor had it that the only ones still working were facilitating top secret flights for their respective governments. Hotel corporations had "temporarily involuntarily suspended" millions and millions, from the corporate level to the maid and janitorial services. Jobs highly respected six months before had vanished into thin air. Consumers weren't buying anything. Nobody was selling anything. Nobody was going anywhere.

As it was, there were still career fields that were thriving, although perhaps more appropriately, surviving. Doctors and nurses were working as many hours as they could and being asked to pick up extra jobs at other facilities for additional pay. Hospital staff, from nurse assistants to cleaners and IT professionals, were making extra money from working overtime. Sanitation services continued to pick up garbage. How could they not? An abundance of trash would spread more sickness. Some waste management companies were offering employees time and a half for working, and others were hiring drivers by the hundreds – but applicants had to already have a CDL license. All government offices were still closed. One could not simply go to the DMV and get their CDL license. Utilities workers, including cable and internet providers were working around the clock, going by the light of battery-operated headlamps to try and restore power as quickly as possible. As it would appear to Cassie, many in the television and radio industry also still had jobs.

The Great Dilemma facing humanity was the limited amount of the global population that could do the tasks needed to efficiently restore order to the world. What's worse was that a significant number of qualified individuals had contracted The Virus and had to be quarantined, unable to work. Doctors championed for their quick action and successful patient care were reduced to their homes and unable to help anyone else. People were being turned away from the hospital based on their age and temperature. The CDC had even come up with a handy chart that somehow managed to put names to things nobody had thought to name before. A "Mild Wait Delay" meant that anyone who was younger than 45 years old and whose temperature was under 100 degrees F would be turned away from the ER, with exceptions for critical situations, of course. A "Moderate Wait Delay" was the same, but you had to be older than 55 to be admitted. A "Severe Wait Delay" bumped the age up to 65.

Despite great efforts, trash and sanitation had begun to be an issue all across the board. There simply wasn't enough infrastructure to implement entire fleets of garbage trucks at once. All gas stations, including those that serviced commercial vehicles, had a limited amount of staff and resources; it would sometimes take a couple of days before they could fill up the trucks again. Not to mention, many homeowners had defaulted on their payments, and higher-ups were starting to get nervous as revenue plummeted.

The utility workers, the ones that made the Wi-Fi and internet work and who made the water run and lights turn on, were gravely short-staffed. Many of the workers, who had been working longer hours for months, finally saw their immune system catch up to their labor-intensive lifestyle. Each worker that contracted The Virus was like another ripple undulating through the entire organization as it was hard to supplement the lost workers. Running cable and working on power lines required training and certifications that nobody was able to provide at the moment.

In cases where the risk of injury was high, this was especially prevalent, but some facets of the workforce were desperate to bring in as much help as possible. It had actually gotten to a point that, the WHO implored anyone with any documented health-related certifications (even just CPR) should contact their local hospital for volunteer information.

Yet still, as it seemed with fourteen whole days of Virus decline, that the world was getting back to normal. Albeit, slowly back to normal. Very, very slowly. So slowly that, between her library books and her silent keyboard playing, Cassie had really started to look forward to radio news broadcasts. It was a lifting anchor pulling her back towards mankind. Reminding her that life was still happening. That there were actually real, healthy people still out there. *That this too shall pass.*

On this particular morning as the seven-a.m. local broadcast began, the crank radio was cutting out. In a panic, Cassie grabbed a shotgun and car keys and ran outside to her Nissan SUV. She quickly inhaled in and held her breath. The neighborhood had started to smell like sewer and rotten food. She bolted towards the car, unlocking it just before she quickly threw herself in, shotgun pointed outside. She immediately locked herself in but still found herself glancing in the backseat to make sure nobody had been able to slip in with her. “You just never know what kind of crazies are out there,” John had said to her when asking her to not step outside without a firearm, just to be on the safe side. *An abundance of caution.*

Cassie then quickly turned on the car. It was already set to the correct station. She only did this in real emergencies; in the event that the sun didn’t charge the radio like it was supposed to or something. She still had over half a tank of gas left and as far as she knew, she and John were staying put for quite some time.

The truth was that Cassie needed to hear these broadcasts. While John had lost interest after a couple of weeks of nothing but bad news, Cassie had stuck with the broadcasts long enough to begin to hear a redemptive uptick in what they were saying. She clung desperately to even just the possibility of positive news for that day, a phenomenon she herself never thought she was capable of. *Me? Hoping for something? Something that might not happen?* Cassie often let those thoughts entertain her mind and was pleased with the irony of it. Cassie, through all of this, had learned to hope. Because there really wasn’t much more that could be done.

And it was then that Cassie, stomach in its usual nervous knot, said a quick prayer to God as the radio broadcast begun. And like all the days before, she listened with hope.