

COVID Monsters and Fairies



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THE FAIRIES MOVED in the month of the virus; I invite them during the spring thaw. The fairy doors come in the mail, their brown package stamped by customs, the smell of burn and bits of sawdust still lingering around their edges. Quarantine will be crafty, I decide. I glue, paint and gild by night. I leave the newly crafted doors to dry. Perhaps the fairies will protect us.

I tuck in my children, nightlights giving their cheeks a glow, then prepare for work. It is simpler; no need to do my hair under my scrub cap or apply lipstick that will be smeared by my mask. I drive into the night. The pediatric emergency department is eerily still. Quarantine has kept the other sicknesses away too; with children home, Strep, RSV, norovirus are all hiding together somewhere, hostless.

I remember when coronavirus (the old version, that is) was the least worrisome of our pediatric viruses. We would shrug when it came up on our tests. But now it is a different monster. We know it is lurking, but it is busier with adults. We wonder when our surge will come.

I sit at a distanced computer, my masked voice muffled as I discuss care plans with the nurses. We rise to attend to patients, all yellow under the fluorescent lights—our golden gowns as flimsy as spiderwebs, our masks the color of fireflies, and just as tender. A pull too swift and a mask strap detaches. A tug too tense and our thumbs tear holes in our gowns. We get others, our use monitored and recorded.

We don and doff, wipe and spray. We honor the ceremony of this recurrent ritual of sterility. One errant finger from mask to face could seed what kills us. We drop our masks in brown paper sacks to be sterilized, adding our name in marker, and perhaps a few stickers to identify our bag from the many others.

Our face shields prove sturdier. We bedazzle them with sticky jewels. Children point and stare at the rainbows. The colors survive their constant cleansing. Nurses sew caps from bright fabric scraps with candied buttons to affix our mask straps, keeping our ears from becoming rashy and raw. We craft at work to improve, to cope, to distract.

I knock and enter, parents adjusting their handsewn masks, drawing their children closer into their laps. The children recoil; with all my protective equipment, I appear

to be a monster. Yet the real monster is less visible—a cloud of viral particles invisible in the air.

I make my smiles wide enough to show through my eyes. I attempt to transmit comfort in a gloved touch. I try to examine eyes and ears, my depth perception altered by my clouded shield. I sew lacerations with silk thread, tiny stitches temporarily disappearing with each fog of my breath.

This time of year is for falls from scooters, slips on trampolines, water guns sprayed in eyes, sunburns—now viruses that suck away your oxygen and burn your body with fever.

When we have the swabs, we test, yet caution—“the test can be falsely negative early on - please quarantine anyway”—we cannot trust yet. We wonder if they will listen, or simply return to their summer barbeque. We wish we could give them proper masks like ours—that we could test everyone, trace them, isolate them—starve the COVID monster of its blood. But so many still don’t believe.

We have no choice—our belief comes from what we see. The newborn baby we hospitalized is still on oxygen. The girl we put on the heart and lung machine last week, the catheters pumping her virus-laden blood from machine back to body—she just died.

We persist in our rituals. It is tempting to tire of it all. But more sicken and die, so we persist in our masking, sanitizing, distancing, avoiding unnecessary touch. It is harder to clean away the fear, to distance from our grief.

I have the next night off. At home in the backyard, the fairy doors are ready; at dusk, I nail them to our trees, bottoms nestled into the mulch. The evening cools, our aspens rustling, the moon a silver sliver. With the children sleeping, I go inside and create.

I build my daughter a fairy house—painting inch-long shutters, wallpapering tiny bedrooms, cutting miniature lace curtains with suture scissors borrowed from work. I sew miniscule throw pillows from the smallest scraps of fabric. I distract myself with tacky glue and faux plants in thimble pots. I add glitter to attract the fairies. If this plague takes me, will they carry me, a masked martyr, to their fairy realm? Will the fairies stay to protect those I’ve left behind?

The fading moon hovers as the morning sun arrives. I bring my daughter outside to find the magical doors. The yard is all quiet and dew. We are maskless in the cool morning air, quarantined by our yard's fences and gates, protected by our budding foxglove and yarrow, by the thorns of our wild roses and the perfume of our lavender.

My daughter squeals, hunting tree to tree. She examines their barks—the smooth gray of apple tree, rough pathways of locust tree, the sturdy old maple—her eyes catching the glint of a door as she looks groundward. She knows the fairies are there. She knocks on their doors.