

The Lock

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

Early on in the month of March, a strange airborne virus spread throughout the globe. Soon after the outbreak, the World Health Authority (WHA) announced throughout its international media outlets that Novid-21 resulted from a laboratory leak and had spread initially through travel via passenger aircraft and cruise ship. Soon, large and populated countries like Comexica would adopt health protocols like social distancing and masking, while imposing mass testing and lock-downs on its citizens. During lock-downs, the streets and neighbourhoods soon became quite unsafe, with the crime world capitalizing on the dire conditions and the instability of the time.

“Don’t forget your pass, honey. They may stop you at a transit check-point when you head to the hospital.”

“No worries. A lot of front-liners are commuting to work today. How’s Luna doing?”

“She’s still asleep. Class is on pause until further notice. The school messaged and said we need to help her later in the week to get connected online for her Grade 1 lessons.”

“See you tonight!”

Heading outdoors, Luna’s mother closes the small garden gate to their duplex and heads off to buy some grocery essentials up the street. As she walks north toward Vandross, she notices that the main street is mostly vacant with the Broadway-style signage on The Senator, an old independent movie theatre, spelling out in interchangeable letters the words ‘Stay Safe Film Buffs’. Passing by the bolted doors and darkened front windows of several small local businesses, she arrives at the nearby green grocer, noticing a woman picking out apples near the curb with a large military-style gas mask. After picking out a few leafy greens, tomatoes and other items for a garden salad, she puts on her slender ZN-74 mask before entering the stuffy interior of the shop and pays the clerk at the cash register who is standing masked behind a plexiglass barrier. She then walks outside again, noticing almost no vehicular traffic on the usually busy thoroughfare. Before heading back home, she peers off into the eastward distance and notices a pair of maintenance workers by a ladder, putting up a sign on a small abandoned low-rise building that reads, ‘Novid-21 Vaccination Clinic’.

Back at home, Luna’s mother puts away the groceries in the fridge’s vegetable crisper and does her usual chores before preparing for the night ahead with her husband due to return from work at Northwestern Hospital and her nightshift at the front desk of the ritzy Princeton Hotel set to begin.

“Time to get up Luna!”

After hollering at the bottom of the staircase, Luna's mother heads back into the kitchen, hearing the sound of footsteps upstairs and the usual rumbling of her daughter making her way down the familiar wooden steps.

"Luna... The teacher wanted you to practice reading with me today. We're going to head to the library and pick out a book after breakfast..."

"Can we go to the pool when we're at the Centre, mom?"

"The gym and pool are closed, honey. Only the library has reopened. We'll both wear our masks and go in public transit, okay?"

After breakfast, the two head out after locking the front door. After waiting up the street for a streetcar to arrive, they board the middle car, paying by automatic tap. After sitting down, the streetcar rushes west with passengers keeping their 2 meters apart while masking, in accordance with safety and health protocols.

"This is our stop, Luna. Follow mommy, ok?"

"Ok, mom."

After exiting the streetcar, the two head into the Samson Branch, noticing a muted flat screen TV with closed captioning in the media and computer area. Soon the broadcast releases the latest statistics about the global Novid-21 pandemic.

"In Comexica, the cases of infections steeply rose today with 3000 new cases... Latest ICU hospital data shows that the number of fatalities due to the Noronavirus has now climbed to over 45000..."

"Pick out a book ok, Luna... And... Don't forget to keep your mask over your nose and mouth."

After spending about an hour in the library, Luna and her mother leave the branch to return home by streetcar. Passing by the same hospital where her husband worked as a triage nurse, Luna's mother apprehensively eyes the long queue of patients lined up to get tested for the airborne virus. After a short silent prayer, she gathers herself and looks at her daughter affectionately.

"We're getting off soon Luna. Dad will be home in a few hours once we get back. He's going to make pizza tonight, ok?"

"When can we all have dinner together, mom?" Luna asks.

"We'll be able to all sit down together on Saturday night, ok?"

"Ok mommy."

After returning home, Luna and her mother go out into the backyard to sit out in the patio. After a light lunch in the late afternoon, Luna plays with her dollhouse while

her mother catches up on the latest breaking news on her tablet. After about an hour and forty-five minutes, Luna's father comes in through the front door.

"Daddy's home!" Luna says aloud, leaving her dolls and heading into the house through the sliding door left ajar.

"How was work today?" Luna's mother asks.

"The ICU beds were at full capacity. It was a real grind today. The hospital has had to completely reconfigure their ventilation."

"I'm going to leave in thirty minutes. There's frozen pizza in the fridge and enough veggies for a salad."

"Thanks honey."

Approximately twenty minutes later, Luna's mother turns off her tablet and stands up from her patio chair.

"It will be pretty slow at the Princeton tonight. They've started to scale back on shifts until the pandemic slows. I'll be back early tomorrow morning, ok?"

"Have a good shift. Text me when you leave the hotel. I have to be up early anyways."

"Sure thing, sweetie."

After changing into her work uniform, Luna's mother heads out the front door leaving the door unlocked. After walking through the walkway and out via the garden gate, she heads back to Vandross to catch a streetcar to Bayhurst Station. On the streetcar, two transit enforcement agents with heavy protective gloves and facemasks board the car to check for passenger fare compliance. After scanning her transit pass, Luna's mother exits at Bayhurst to catch the eastbound subway train to Spade Station. Waiting on the platform for the train to arrive, an electronic voice speaks through the intercom.

"Masks are now mandatory on all parts of the CTC. Make sure your mask is fastened properly to cover your mouth and nose at all times. Failure to comply may result in a fine of up to 120 dollars."

A few minutes after hearing the automated message, the oncoming train reverberates loudly as it makes its approach along the Bayhurst platform, slowing slightly and grinding to a halt with the metallic wheels screeching loudly. After the chime, Luna's mother enters into the semi-crowded car, trying to keep her distance from other passengers. After about eight stations, she exits the subway car at Spade and follows a line of subway commuters toward the escalators. After snaking through a series of underground passageways, she soon emerges in the busyness of the downtown core. After a five minute walk, she waves at Sam the doorman in his grey suit and top hat and heads into the lobby of the hotel.

“We’ve just installed a glass barrier at the front desk where you’ll be working. We had to have it installed by this afternoon to comply with public health protocols.” The hotel manager says.

“I was at the library earlier today with my daughter Luna. Their check-out desk is now reconfigured that way as well.”

“As soon as there’s a new set of protocols, we will pivot to stay safe and up-to-date.” The manager says.

“Do you need me to wear a face shield? My husband always has to have one on in the hospital where he works.”

“No requirement there as far as I know. Just your regular ZN-74.”

“Great, thanks.”

“I hear there’s a trial run of vaccines coming. Once they’ve been approved, we’ll send you to get immunized at a time you’re away from work.”

“Sure thing. Today, I noticed a Novid-21 vaccination clinic was about to open just up the street from our duplex. My husband will definitely get up-to-date on his vaccine status. Are the same ones safe for my 6 year-old daughter?”

“Apparently they’re trying to develop a safe one for kids. Might take a tad longer to get it approved though.”

After chatting some more with her manager, Luna’s mother takes a seat at the front desk for another slow evening and night shift. Approximately five or so hours later, Luna’s mother suddenly is hit by a wave of anxiety and feels severely on edge. Worrying about her husband and kid at home, she decides to send a quick text message. Strangely, after no reply, she decides to call her husband directly, first on his cellular phone, then on their home’s landline. Worried sick after only getting a dial tone and voicemail prompt, she counts the hours passing by and decides to leave her shift about one hour earlier with permission from her boss. Catching a cab from the front entrance to the hotel, she speeds toward her home with little to no traffic on the late night roads. After the cab pulls up in front of her duplex, she pays the driver and races up the walkway to the front steps of the house. After checking the door knob, she notices the door is unlocked and she turns it counterclockwise to open the door. After opening the door, she rushes into the house and suddenly sees her husband lying unconscious on the floor just at the foot of the staircase. Frantic at his inertness, she notices a wound on the centre of his torso and a pool of blood at the sides of his body.

“HONEY! Wake up honey...” She says sobbing aloud. “Answer me honey... Where is Luna?”

After failing to revive her husband, she goes into the kitchen noticing a pile of dishes with some pizza crust left on one of the smaller plates. Racing upstairs to Luna’s

bedroom, she notices her room door is left ajar without her daughter anywhere inside. Worried that her daughter has gone missing and her husband is unresponsive with a severe trauma wound, she calls for an ambulance and the police. After about fifteen minutes, a team of first responders comprised of two paramedics and two law enforcement officers arrive at front door to the duplex.

“Ma’am, you need to tell us what happened here. Take a deep breath to try and calm your nerves.” One of the paramedic asks.

“We were complying with lock-down conditions... I was at work and decided to leave early... Something wasn’t quite right...”

“Ok, slow down... When did you get back to the house?”

“I left work early because I was worried about something... When I got back half an hour ago, my husband was lying here in a pool of blood... My daughter Luna was nowhere in the house...”

“Looks like there’s something in the husband’s hand.” A police officer says, after examining the inert body.

“Let’s get him in an ambulance fast... It will be hard to open the hand now if rigor mortis is on its way. We’ll quickly bandage the wound on his stomach and try to revive him... He’s lost a lot of blood.”

After picking up the husband and putting him on a stretcher, the paramedics load him into the ambulance while the police study the crime scene by the front door. As the ambulance speeds away to the nearest hospital with its loud sirens, the paramedics use their defibrillators to no avail as the husband’s heart fails to beat again. Thirty minutes after the male trauma victim finally reaches the hospital, a call comes in shortly after to Luna’s mother.

“Ma’am... Sorry to tell you this... Your husband died of a fatal gunshot wound. His heart wasn’t beating when we reached the hospital... After trying to open his right hand, we noticed he was clutching a lock of dark hair... We’ll contact police and tell them it could be hair from your missing daughter.”

After hearing the tragic news, Luna’s mother weeps in the doorway to her daughter’s room. Feeling alone in the world without the two most important parts of her immediate family, she slowly walks down the stairs and out the door to stare at the darkened early morning sky. Hearing the solitary call of a lone nighthawk in the distance, she sobs again wondering where Luna could be under that same amber sky.

The End