

Never Tell a Truth

By Douglas Krohn

Switching in and out of the PPE is the worst part.

First off, all we've got are these disposable plastic gowns that we're supposed to put over our clothes before we see a possibly infected patient. It's this sky blue, thin plastic garment, with a hole to put your head through, and two sleeves for your arms, and it was definitely manufactured by the same outfit that makes disposable tablecloths for a four-year-old's birthday party. Like something from the Dollar Store. Or Party City. So, I stick my head through this hole, and the arms through the sleeves, and it's open in the back but for these thin plastic sashes, so that you can tie it closed. But when you tie it, you don't exactly get a tight fit. And I prefer to see my possibly infected patients out in the parking lot, so that I don't parade a patient and his mother through the hallway, their viral particles suspended in the air of our office for hours, living on our plastic surfaces (they're Formica, actually) for three or four days, infecting all the staff. So it's thin and flimsy and sky blue, this PPE gown, and practically open in the back, and just walking down the stairs to go outside the thing begins to blouse up on me.

Once I'm actually out in our asphalt pasture, and the early spring breeze begins to blow, that thing makes me look like Marilyn Monroe in that white dress, like that giant statue in Palm Springs, the skirt blowing up over a subway grate and all my clothing (which was supposed to be covered by this personal protective equipment) is exposed. I don't think it does a damn thing. And when the breeze finally settles, I'm nothing but lightly draped (*gauzied*, really) in a disposable sky-blue plastic tablecloth, waiting for the clown to show up, smeared in cupcake icing, watching some figment in my mind twist me a balloon animal.

Getting out of it is just as futile. You got to pull the thing over your head, and the flimsy piece-of-shit plastic folds right into your face. It's not too big a deal, because I'm wearing goggles, an N-95 respirator, a hair bonnet and two pairs of gloves, but I definitely get lots of germs on my face—so I slather my face in hand sanitizer, which makes me smell like a

drunk (or my father, when he wore Lectric Shave, back in the Seventies), and then, after removing both sets of gloves, I wash my hands two or three times. In the meantime, whatever was on the outside of that tablecloth and gloves is no doubt aerosolized, so I leave my N-95 on, though I have to admit I do wonder, when I switch out of that suffocating N-95 and into a lighter weight surgical mask – *are those germs that I just aerosolized still suspended in the air, and I just inhaled them when I switched out the mask, and basically rendered the whole exercise useless and futile and fruitless, counter-productive and self-defeating?*

Then I get home.

“Change in the mudroom!” my wife would yell, except she doesn’t yell—she texts me: *Change in the mudroom.* While I’m still at work. So I get home, leave my surgical mask in the car (the car’s already contaminated, there’s no sense bringing it into the house), take off my quarter zip fleece and leave that in the car, too (also contaminated, likely) and walk in through the back door, right into the mudroom. There, I go to the little alcove where we do the laundry, remove my shirt and trousers and place them in the dry cleaning bag, take off my underwear and socks and throw them into the washer directly, and grab a towel from a shelf in the laundry room and march upstairs, straight into the shower (this is *before* I exercise, and hop onto my bike, and then get off and have to shower again).

That’s when I do the nicest thing I’ve done all day. After the second shower. My wife asks me, “Do you think you saw someone *who has it?* Did you have to swab anyone?” Her eyes are wide and the corners of her lips severe. I look back at her and think about the 20-month-old I saw, just a couple hours earlier. He’d had fever for four days. A juicy cough and nasal discharge. He was cranky, but consolable, and brought in by his mother, who’s the head of infection control at one of the busier local hospitals. True story. And when that swab stick tickled the back of his nasopharynx he let out a prolonged silent cry, then embarked upon a prolonged loud one. My eyes look at my wife’s, wide and open and pleading and desperately hopeful, and I turn this all over in my mind. And I had done some pretty nice things that day—called to check in on a patient of mine who had had a heart transplant 14 years ago; called to check up on a former patient of mine, now an adult, who had leukemia six years ago; called to check up on my mother, before she even called to check up on me. But, looking at my wife, the hopeful squint in her eyes now replaced by mournful prayer—that’s when I did the nicest, truly the most thoughtful thing I did all day.

I lied to her.

Then March turned to April, and with it came Passover.

I left the office a little earlier than usual that day because it was the night of the first seder. Had to make it home before sundown. Theoretically. And so I hadn't had time to process the news that had been dropped on me, like a thirty-year-old ringing my doorbell and claiming I'm his dad, arriving by one of those *thought-you-should-know* emails as I shut down my computer and packed away my safety goggles and respirator into the duffel bag (to contain the germs, of course) I kept in the corner of my temporary office. It had been sent to all the physicians in my group—casually, like one of those late afternoon emails that come before a holiday, saying something like “Our Executive Team Wishes All Staff Celebrating Tonight’s Holiday a *Zissen Pesach*”. Except it didn’t: It told us that one of our colleagues had passed away. And where to send donations in lieu of flowers. Cold and casual. Just like that.

Complications of COVID-19, we’re told. Didn’t know her personally, we’re a big group, had to look her up on our website. A pathologist, I learn, and I get to thinking: *She wouldn’t’ve had any face-to-face contact with a patient*, was my first thought, *pathologists work with slides, not people*. (I felt better.) *But her laboratory was housed inside one of our busiest clinical sites*, was my second, *with patients walking in and out of hallways – maybe she got it in an elevator?* (I felt worse.) *Of course, she could’ve gotten it anywhere*, was my third, *perhaps at the grocery store, maybe picking up something at the pharmacy, possibly from an asymptomatic friend just back from Bergamo or Milan. It could’ve been anything, really . . . Who could know?*

Every doctor got the email simultaneously, and someone leaked it to our staff. Maybe it was me. I can’t remember. And so this heavy silence hung in the office pool (*office pool*: even the term sounds, now, like a germy mire). The tragedy of her death would’ve been easy to articulate: *What a shame . . . Her poor family . . .* distant platitudes like that. But the silence came from the sentiment, harder to verbalize and, in its own morbid way, kind of indulgent, that it’s getting closer and closer, that it is more and more starting to feel like a personal threat. The massive tragedy of the whole thing, the national and international scale of it, the unmistakable revelations about inequality and power and how they can exacerbate (or ameliorate) illness—it’s

all *abstract*. It's real, I know, but for a small-town doctor not working in one of those overloaded emergency rooms in the city, it's somewhere else, it's some other world, it seems all theory and philosophy. But then it's a partner, a colleague, a peer—and that abstraction begins to dissolve.

So I walk to my car with this news heavy on my conscience, worrying about how I'm going to tell my wife, or even if I should. The news would just upset her, I think, get her into one of those spirals, perseverating about what might happen to me, that I might unwittingly visit it upon her, upon our children, infect her mother, maim her niece, mutate our dog, *catastrophe, catastrophe, catastrophe*. She'd treat me like a leper, for sure, but I was selfish enough to not let that enter into the calculation. There was even a part of me that thought that *telling her* was selfish, that in doing so I really was just unburdening my own neurosis by laying some of it on her, seeking solace, reassurance, sympathy, relief—like a spiritual cleanse. Or a guilty one. Indeed there was a part of me that wanted to tell her for these very reasons: to unload the compulsive thoughts, to ritually confess, to induce her to the point where she wraps her arms around my back and kisses the sides of my face and summons her inner momma and she feels *bad for me*. *Maybe I was the selfish bastard!*

So I wouldn't tell her, I decided. *But how's that going to go when she finds out that my colleague died and I didn't have enough regard to inform her about it?* And you know that's how it would've gone down—the county's not that big, newspapers still run obituaries, everything's a post on Facebook. *How could she not find out about it?* I imagined her angry, *incensed*, learning that someone within my organization had died, and that I (a *doctor*, of all people!) hadn't provided her with the information to equip herself, to protect her children, to cocoon her mother . . . when she learns I was concealing information convenient to me, protecting myself from the suspicion that I might carry the plague, that would help me avoid spending a night on the couch—or sleeping down in the basement, next to the furnace, along with the dead mice on the floor.

And so I got home and I told her. She was just out of the shower, sitting on the edge of her bed, in a bathrobe, her hair still wet. And when I walked into our bedroom (she had left the shower running for me, so I could jump right in and decontaminate —it was thoughtful of her), she asked me how my day was, and I said, “Not so good” and I told her. The shower kept running. She sat silent on the edge of the bed and stared out into the room at nothing,

her gaze severe and pensive, her neck muscles drawn tight, which is a pose I don't recall seeing all that much in the last 30 years but one that I'd observed more frequently of late. Then she asked me all the predictable questions: *How old was she? Did she have any underlying health problems? When was the last time you saw her? Do you know how she got it?* The only answer I knew was her age (which, frankly, I guessed, based on the year she had graduated college, which I got from the bio posted on our practice website), and my wife remained silent, staring out at the wall, contemplating some kind of angry response that never came. I quickly showered, we both got dressed, and we went downstairs to attend the virtual seder we were having with family through Zoom.

The dinner my wife had prepared was exquisite: light, fluffy matzoh balls with fresh herbs and ginger, some chopped capers floating in the chicken broth; a citrusy brisket with spring lettuces; a sweet potato puree; macaroons and flourless chocolate cake. And the wine was flowing, as it always does—but usually she drinks that little bit that gets her to that happy place, and not much further, where every joke is funny and you can feel her skin glow. But this night was different from all other nights: She drank with purpose, with determination, retreating from the table, drawing away from the propped up computer screen with inset videos of her siblings and mother, each in a different ZIP code, and my sister in Hawaii and my parents in New Jersey, and our brother-in-law's family in Rhode Island and New Hampshire. She wasn't really laughing. And she was complaining about the jokes one of our family members cracked, and contributions others either did or didn't make from their remote locations, beamed onto our kitchen table.

And then she told us to *shush*—all of us, at the table beside her (not the virtual table, the real one). *Shushing* and *shushing*, whenever we spoke, whenever we had a little social aside (Zoom was not built for sidebar commentary). *Shushing* when we addressed the computer, saying our voices were too loud, quieting us when we laughed right along with our relatives, saying she couldn't hear. And then she told us to just be quiet, *nobody can hear*, and we were all offended, and asked her to stop policing us, and stop being a hypocrite (*you're making side comments, too!*), and within minutes she had gulped down a glass of wine and left the table, and her brother kept asking us through the computer, "Where'd Kirsten go?"

I shouldn't have told her.

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