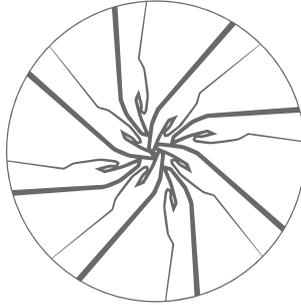




# Viral

By Jason M. Rubin



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## INTRODUCTION: COVID-19, CATCH-22

Forgive me for writing this introduction on April 1, as no one right now feels like joking. This is a time of suffering. One can't even say that the toll of this coronavirus pandemic is being measured on daily basis. Every hour, it seems, there are new tallies, new press conferences, new reports of rising cases and dwindling supplies, of a health system overwhelmed, of a world overmatched by a highly contagious bug.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. It was supposed to be a nuclear bomb, or an asteroid, or the poisoning of our water supply. In a world that had seen the eradication of a host of once-deadly diseases, we are being felled by a relative of the common cold.

Like so many others, I have been in self-quarantine for weeks now, working from home, venturing out only for essential supplies and fresh air. As of this writing, I am perfectly healthy, so far as I know. Yet I am keenly aware of what I have lost. As a divorced dad whose daughters live with their mother, I have very restricted access to them. I worry that the paychecks will not continue. My band can't get together to jam. The only person outside my apartment I remain physically close to on a regular basis is my significant other. Self-sacrifice goes only so far.

I began to think of how this virus has radically changed the lives of people who do not actually have it. One expects direct victims and their loved ones to absorb the lion's share of the impact of a deadly event. But this pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for the sick and the healthy alike. Without trying to minimize the suffering of those who have died and the families and friends who mourn them, or to equate death and mere inconvenience, I started to write a couple of short vignettes about people affected by the current social lockdown in ways other than their clinical status.

As I wrote, this idea morphed into five interlocking scenes of flash fiction that together comprise a short story of how a few families have endured this insistently ill-fitting "new normal." I offer it to readers as a palate cleanser to consume between the more substantial books so many are now finding the time to read these days, with the hope that it leaves them with, well, hope for the future.

*JMR*

*April 1, 2020*

*Malden, Massachusetts*

# ONE

He couldn't remember when his drinking became a problem, only when it became a thing. His thing. He never intended to become an alcoholic. (No one does, he supposed.) Though a bit of a troublemaker in high school, he liked to think of himself as a happy-go-lucky, good-times kind of person. Dan the Man. His only real vice was gambling but no one thought of it as rising to the level of an addiction. He'd smoked pot in college, of course, and occasionally after that, but he'd never even been a tobacco user. Becoming addicted to anything was the last thing he'd thought possible for himself.

And yet it happened. It was innocent enough at first. He and his roommate Jake were planning their second annual St. Patrick's Day blowout. They were expecting between thirty and fifty people and because Dan worked in a restaurant he knew who to call to get food and booze at a discount. So they stocked up. Cases of beer, liters upon liters of Jameson, gin, vodka, vermouth, and bourbon. It was going to be some party.

But then the virus came to America and, slowly but surely, things started to shut down. First the party was canceled: even before gatherings were limited to ten people, invitees had bought into the social distancing idea and backed out. Jake and Dan had no option but to cancel it outright. Look at the bright side, they told each other, we're stocked for months.

Before they could put a dent in their inventory, however, Jake's mother got very sick, so he left town to be closer to her. He took a couple of bottles with him, assuming he'd be back before too long. In fact, though, his mother, who'd contracted pneumonia on top of her chronic emphysema, didn't last too long herself. Because there were things to take care of, and family to attend to, Jake decided to stay, leaving Dan on his own.

Soon the restaurant shut down, except for takeout and delivery. Dan was laid off. With time on his hands, no work to be done, no friends to socialize with, he began to tackle his store of alcohol. Out of pure boredom, he drank. Because there were too many hours in a day, he drank. He was alone, so he drank. Before long, the bottles standing in the corner of the living room became a challenge to him, as if he were a bowler and they were pins to knock down. So came his new routine: gin and tonics for breakfast, whiskey sours for lunch, martinis for dinner. When the mixers ran out, he didn't replace them. He could still go to the grocery store and he did (once the party food ran out), but to conserve his money he decided it was more cost-effective to drink his alcohol neat.

As the quarantine went on, so did his drinking. Eventually, he needed more just to get buzzed. He had trouble sleeping and thought a belt before bed would help. It simply became another of many drinking rituals for him, ways to mark different times of the day, ways to achieve a different reality from the hopeless, monotonous one into which he'd been thrown. He didn't have energy to clean the apartment, nor the will to clean himself. While a "new normal" settled on the world outside, Dan's new normal was simply being drunk all the time.

It was a warm day in mid-April when he decided that, just as a change of pace, he wouldn't drink for a day. And he found he couldn't. He didn't make much out of his failure, just told himself he would try again the next day. He couldn't do it then, either. That's when he first started to think he had a problem. That, and the fact that their months' worth of alcohol inventory was just about gone in fewer than four weeks. And it was consumed mostly by him.

By him alone.

# TWO

With all the hysteria around the virus, Simon had practically forgotten that he'd bought a lottery ticket. No one was talking about the Powerball jackpot anymore, although those who were habitual numbers players had noticed the total going up and up. It was now at \$175 million. Simon bought his ticket at the convenience store down the street while picking up a half-gallon of milk. He wasn't eager to join the panicked mobs at the supermarket. Living alone, he didn't need all that much. It was the morning after the drawing that Simon looked through his wallet to see if he had enough cash for the cheapest possible gas when he noticed the ticket folded in half within the billfold.

He went to his phone and looked up the numbers.

**3 19 34 36 43 50 8**

He couldn't believe it. A perfect match! He'd always wondered what it would feel like to hit the lottery. He figured he'd be screaming for days. But he had no oxygen in his lungs. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't make a sound, couldn't do anything but stare at his ticket, then the phone, then the ticket, then the phone. Then he dropped both and raced into the bathroom to throw up. He wondered if he would survive the sheer excitement. Somehow he got himself into the shower and tried to calm himself. *Who do I call? What do I do? And what do I do with the money?*

Yes, that last question really was the kicker. As it turned out,

because of the virus, there would be no press conference, no photo opportunity with a giant rectangular check, just some digital forms to process and the money was wired into his bank account. That was great. But at the same time, there were no vacations to go on, no trips, no airplane flights, no cruises. No restaurants to eat in, to treat people in, no rounds at the bar to buy for everyone. No big shopping excursions. There were no houses or cars he particularly wanted to buy at this time.

So he mostly stayed at home. Stayed in his apartment, paid the rent without any worries, had takeout every single night (like before, but this time leaving big tips), and wondered when winning the lottery would be as exciting as it had been that moment he learned he had won.

*How can a millionaire be bored?* he asked himself. He wondered if all millionaires are bored. *Maybe that's why they buy so much ridiculous stuff. Because what else are they going to do? That's probably why millionaires hang out with other millionaires, because who else understands the struggle of having more money than you know what to do with?*

As for Simon's newfound wealth, taxes consumed about half of the \$175 million but there was still plenty left. He didn't worry about that. When he could, he reasoned, he would meet with a financial advisor and invest a good chunk of that money so he'd be set up for life. But not now, not with the stock market tanking day after day. Yes, he'd wait. He'd sit in his apartment and wait.

*This would certainly be a good time to be dating,* he thought. Not that he was actively looking for someone, but he imagined that lottery winners who are single have a somewhat easier time meeting people than those living, as he had for many years, paycheck to paycheck. He certainly didn't want to be anyone's sugar daddy, but imagine being able to offer a weekend in Aruba as a second date! And yet social distancing was putting the kibosh on social meetups. That was an activity for another day. For now, Simon's big expenditure was buying the most expensive cable package for his television. At least now he could watch everything he'd always wanted to see.

But all the same, with all his millions in the bank, it was just he himself sitting on the couch watching the tube. Just him alone.

# THREE

Jake's mother, Agnes, was seventy-eight years old when she died. She was in the hospital and while her diagnosis was pneumonia, universal precautions required she be isolated and treated as if she had COVID-19.

As a result, Jake and the rest of his family were not allowed so much as to visit her in the hospital. The sadness and tension were a heavy blanket around them, though providing no warmth. His father, Ted, four years his wife's senior, was tested and found, like Agnes, not to have the coronavirus. Relief. Still, because of his age and Agnes' condition, he was required to stay home and because Jake had been out and about the last few weeks, he was prohibited from being in physical proximity with his father as well.

This only added to Jake's anxiety, but the important thing was to keep his father from becoming a statistic. Ted was not even allowed to attend his wife's funeral, which, by the governor's order, was limited to ten mourners. Fewer overall tears were shed at the small service, but they flowed freely all the same.

If his mother hadn't been so seriously ill, Jake likely would have returned to the apartment he shared with Dan. But now there were things to be done. His father would need meals and medications delivered to him. Agnes died within a week of being admitted to the hospital and though Jake was not permitted to visit her, he called her every day and served as the family's liaison with friends, neighbors, and other relatives. Jake felt useful. But alone.

He didn't call Dan; they weren't really close friends after all. It was Dan's apartment originally and when his first roommate left, he posted a flyer in the local laundromat. Jake tore off the phone number and became Dan's second roommate.

They bonded over sports and partying but in the fourteen months they lived together, they never really got to know each other well. Jake was more active, more inclined to bike a few miles or go camping with friends. Dan was more of a homebody, preferring to Uber to a destination only a mile down the road rather than walk it. They got along fine but in the midst of a family crisis, Jake didn't feel like it would be productive or essential to be in close contact with him.

When rent came due, however, he showed up at the apartment to drop off a check and get more clothes. He couldn't believe how bad the place looked and smelled – or how bad Dan looked and smelled. He didn't stay to ask questions, just got his stuff and went back to be with his family. He had his own worries to deal with. Dan's issues would have to stay Dan's issues.

The trip back and forth was forty-five minutes with no traffic. It usually took that plus half as much longer but with so many people staying home, the ride was a breeze. It gave Jake time and space to think about what to do. He was currently staying with his sister, Betsy, who lived just about a mile and a half from their father. She made up a space in their finished basement for him, telling her two young children that it would be their uncle's private room for a while. It was a good place for him to be when their mother died. Near family, as it should be.

But now that Agnes was gone, Jake and Betsy worried about their father being alone. They had been married for fifty-three years. The space on the bed next to where Ted had lain for so long would always be cold. It was decided that they would wait two weeks and if everybody was healthy and asymptomatic, Jake would move in and help to take care of him.

It was a good plan. The family would be together with reasonable precautions taken, and while they rode out the crisis no one would have to be alone.

# FOUR

Sylvia called her son, ostensibly to check on how he was doing with “all this crap going on,” as she was wont to say. But she also had an important request, one she would have preferred to make in person. Of course, that was no longer possible because of the aforementioned crap. It was a sensitive matter and she didn’t want to upset him, but sometimes family is the only solution to a family problem.

Especially with all of this crap going on.

“Hello?”

“Hi Simon. How are you?”

“I’m fine, mom. How are you holding up?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Just a little bored, ha ha.”

“I know what you mean. It’s hard to just sit around doing nothing day after day. Do you need anything?”

“Well...yes, I do. Not for myself, dear. But...”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“I need to ask you a favor.”

“Sure, mom. What do you want?”

“Well, like I said, it’s not for me.”

“Mom, just tell me.”

She sighed before continuing.

“OK. So, you know your cousin Danny...”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Now just hear me out, please. I know you two have had your

issues in the past.”

“He still owes me \$500 from that stupid Super Bowl bet four years ago.”

“Maybe so, but do you really need \$500 now?”

“No, of course not, mom, but it’s the principle of the thing.”

“Well, I don’t care. His mother called me and she’s absolutely frantic.”

Frantic was Aunt Bev’s typical response to any kind of bad news.

“Why, what’s he done now?”

Another sigh, and an elongated pause.

“Mom?”

“Danny has a drinking problem.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Simon, this is serious!”

“OK, fine, he has a drinking problem. That’s a shame. It’s just that he has nothing else going on, he never shows any initiative, I’m sure he just parties all the time so I’m not surprised, that’s all. But what does this have to do with me?”

“He needs to be in rehab but he has no health insurance and they’re being careful who they admit these days because of all this virus crap going on. He needs to be able to show he can pay out of pocket.”

“So he needs my money. Again.”

“We need your money, Simon! This is your family! This is what we do in times of trouble.”

Simon’s turn to sigh and pause.

“OK. OK, fine, I’ll finance his rehab. What do I have to do?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll tell Bev. You probably have to fill out some forms and maybe make a payment in advance.”

“OK.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“I said I would, mom. Anything else?”

“No, sweetheart. Thank you so much. This is a mitzvah.”

“Yeah, no problem. OK, mom, I’ll talk to you later. Love you.”

“I love you, too, Simon. Stay safe.”

“You, too. Bye.”

*That stupid son of a bitch!* Simon fumed. He and Dan had been close when they were younger, but around the age of twelve they took different paths: Simon the more studious and serious, Dan the more misdirected and mischievous. Now that they were in their late twenties, it seemed not at all surprising that Simon was a millionaire and Dan an alcoholic. Yet in spite of his personal feelings, Simon was intelligent enough to know it wasn't that simple. He didn't earn that lottery jackpot, it was just dumb luck. And as for Dan, well, his father (Sylvia's brother) had been an alcoholic as well. He died when Dan was only three.

Ultimately, he guessed his mother was right. This is what families do. And since there wasn't much else he could do with his new-found wealth right now, maybe this was the reason he won it in the first place. He could actually save a life while sitting in his apartment. All he had to do was call his bank and wire the money to the hospital. Hardly any effort at all. And so he did it. With the phone in one hand and the cable remote in the other, he wired the money. Then he went back to bingeing programs, just him alone.

# FIVE

It was four months later. A whole season had pretty much come and gone. People were told they could go out again, go back to work. Gatherings were allowed. People could visit the sick. People could even get sick without a whole lot of worry. Seasonal allergies. Colds. Minor ailments never seemed so minor before. People were kinder. No longer was a stranger assumed to be an infected, contagious carrier of serious illness. The virus hadn't been defeated, but it was in check. Tests were plentiful. Treatments were available. Within a year, a vaccine was expected that would make it rarer and far less deadly.

Dan came home (Simon having paid the rent in his absence). His mother was thrilled. Jake came back. His father was well and not in so much danger. Together, they cleaned up the apartment and got back to their lives. Dan was offered his job back at the restaurant but he didn't want to work in a place that served alcohol. He decided to take a job at a clothing store in the mall, one with a management trainee program that he planned to opt into. Jake understood that the apartment would be dry. He had no trouble with that. He decided to enroll in an evening program to earn teaching credentials, while working at an afterschool program in which he could tutor young students.

Sylvia and Bev wanted to throw a welcome home party for Dan but Dan didn't want one. He wanted to take a low-key approach to his life and it didn't seem proper to celebrate his getting back to it. He was lucky, he knew that. He just wanted to move forward. Part of that was thanking Simon. He wasn't sure the best way. A phone call? A letter? He decided on a letter. It was easier and he could say what he wanted to say without fear that Simon might hang up on him at any time. So he took paper and pen, and went at it.

*Simon:*

*I know I still owe you money from that old bet. Don't think I never remem-*

*a big score for both of us. Regardless, I'm working again and I promise I will pay you back.*

*But there's no way I could ever pay you back—not monetarily or otherwise—for paying for my recovery. That was unbelievable. I don't care that you won the lottery, it's still a big deal, and an even bigger deal knowing that you did it for me. I'll never forget that and I'll never be able to thank you enough.*

*This has been a fucked-up time for the world and unlike other people's problems, mine were man-made. But now that I'm on the other side of my situation, I really appreciate having a second chance. I'm not cured like some people with the virus have been cured. I'll always be fighting this addiction, but knowing that my family—including and especially you—are in my corner, I don't have any fear for the future.*

*So thank you. Though those words don't say anything close to what I feel, please accept them. I will get you that \$500 as soon as I can. Hope you're doing well.*

*Love,*

*Dan*

When the letter arrived, Simon read it reservedly. It certainly sounded sincere. *Maybe Dan has turned a corner*, he thought. *Maybe I did make a difference. And maybe, just maybe, if Dan ever does send me the \$500, maybe I'll just send it back. Say we're even.*

Simon could do anything now. He could date. He could meet with a financial advisor. He could start his own business. *Maybe all three*, he thought. But first, Simon picked up the phone and called the Development department of the local hospital where Dan had been treated. He asked to speak to a major gifts officer. When one got on the line, he asked, "What could you do with a \$500,000 donation?"

Because when a crisis hits, no one should be alone.

