



Annette Leavy  
COVID Dreaming

*March 10*

The ball-in-hand knocker on my front door bangs and bangs. A patient has arrived at her appointed time.

I have opened my door to patients for twenty years. They go first; we walk the length of the hall and climb the stairs to my office off the second-floor landing.

The patient in question has returned from a trip feverish and coughing. When she calls before her session, I think she means to warn me. Instead, she's at my door screaming, "Let me in!" She must believe I have magic powers.

I am exhausted by pity for the woman outside my door. Shaking, I don't budge.

This could be a dream, but it isn't.

*March 17, which would have been my mother's 103rd birthday*

Dare I say I like it? Every day, I walk the river walk with Dashiell. Sometimes Jack comes along. Yesterday, a forsythia bush bloomed yellow—submarine yellow—taking up the space people and dogs have left.

I see one patient's kitchen on Zoom, another's loft. I've turned my chair around so the blinds don't cast shadows on my face. I like how patients see my books behind my chair. I look

better on Zoom than on FaceTime.

Vanity: By the time this is over, the color will wash out of my hair. I didn't like my last haircut—too short. Now it has no choice but to grow. No manicures, no new spring clothes, no *The White Lama*, no Gerhard Richter at the Met Breuer, and I don't mind.

I tell friends that Jack and I are old hands at this—cancer as prequel to COVID-19; maybe it's true.

An old couple from Bergamo is found lying together sick in bed. He dies. She survives but can't bury him, not properly. Either she can be at his funeral, or her son can. That is too terrible a thought.

Did they kiss, the Italian couple? Hold feverish hands that medics pried apart? Jack and I have stopped kissing. "I could kiss you on the neck," he says, and then thinks better of it.

The thing I miss most is shopping for my own food. We ordered blueberries and Whole Foods sent kiwis.

A patient is terrified of running out of food. What, he asks, if there is no one at his Seder? I have fifteen meals in my freezer.

What a strange mix of dread and contentment.

### *March 18*

At Whole Foods we move, we old ones, in the hour that is ours alone, like we are learning tai chi. We halt deliberate and find unexpected grace as we reach for an orange.

At eight sharp, millennials in their Saturday morning best stampede through my reverie. They are magnetized to touch each other. "Six feet," I squawk at a pair of beautiful boys batting eyes over the radishes. They laugh at the old biddy, and I flee to the barren shelves at the other side of the store.

### *March 24*

How valiant we've become. I'm doing well, we say, and you? Other people's worries are easier than my own until the two become one.

Last week, there were fine small gestures. The patient who sent arugula seeds to plant on my deck. Another told me about florists who'd decorated the urns and fountains in Rittenhouse Square with flowers from weddings that would not take place. "Go before the flowers fade," he urged, as though I should leave him waiting while I hopped over to the square.

A reproduction from a fresco found in an Etruscan tomb hangs behind a third patient's head. Bent like willow, a man dives from a platform into what? Water, the beyond? Caught between one state of being and another, he is terrifying and beautiful. A dead soul, my patient teaches me, would have gazed up at the fresco on the tomb's ceiling.

I'll take that, I think.

### *March 24*

I Zoom with my patients, talk on the phone, Zoom with friends and talk on the phone. Zip upstairs, flitting the Swiffer, swiping doorknobs. Zoom Pilates, Zoom meditation. Zoom, Zoom, Zoom. My heart is zooming.

The melody emerges from my auditory cortex. Mazda used it to sell the Miata, the lyrics extolling capoeira, the martial art of Afro-Brazilian slaves.

### *March 27*

David and Jo still call while fixing dinner, but more often. It's like before they became vegans and Jack got cancer, when we took them out to dinner and basked in their newlywed glow, when (was it only four years ago?) we marched and cheered Susan Rice in her pink hoodie on the Mall.

They need us too. I feel it through the airwaves—this gift of the plague.

She starts her new firm in their basement. His clients, the meatpackers of Missouri, are dying.

'We're fine,' Jack and I reassure them.

They start calling once a week, like they used to. On Mother's Day they appear on Zoom, but David gets restless and plays with their dog.

I find my favorite picture from his baby album. He kicks his feet and claps his hands while I shake the red plastic apple that plays "New York, New York." As long as I rattle that apple, my son's feet will kick, his hands will clap, and his eyes will shine for me.

### *March 31*

On good days we live as if in a nursery, like Christopher Robin or the Darlings. I make an excellent nursemaid, kind but firm. Porridge for breakfast; fresh air rain or shine. We swaddle against the chill and pretend the dog keeps us safe.

Friday was a bad day that stretched through Sunday night. I thought I'd mastered Whole Foods. I rose at six, arrived at seven, and was in the checkout line before the old folks' hour ran out. Clever, maneuvering my cart to the shortest line, I'd just about finished unloading my haul when I saw the checkout guy wore no gloves.

I froze. What to do? "No gloves?" I spoke sternly.

"I'm not afraid of getting sick," the clerk scoffed. Defiant, he rubbed the smallest possible dollop of sanitizer onto his hands.

"I am," I said. And there it was. I was. Afraid.

My heart knocked against my chest like a madwoman banging at my door.

"I don't want to die," my father said the day he died. It took me two years to realize he knew he was dying.

Years later, I stood in the checkout line, my father's daughter.

### *April 7*

Yesterday I cleaned my house top to bottom. By lunchtime I was famished. I ate tuna salad, bread, cheese, and an orange. I thought I'd sleep well, but I didn't. Before I fell asleep, I remembered it was the week Jews are commanded to rid their homes of crumbs.

"I hate cleaning my house," my neighbor Wendy confides when we meet in the backyard six feet apart for a drink. A month earlier, Lynne cleaned her house, and mine.

Wendy had bought a new vacuum cleaner. So had I. Cordless, it slid easily under beds and sofas gobbling dirt. At the end of the day even the old kilim gleamed. The house shone differently than when Lynne finished her labor, not because I found corners she had missed, but because I had cleaned it, and this seemed right, that in the plague I should keep my own space clean.

*April 8*

It takes me all of Friday evening and Saturday afternoon to sew my mask. I can't get the fabric to pleat.

My grandfather, the tailor, sewed the red skirt I was graded on in seventh-grade Home Ec. He was six feet tall; a Galitzianer whose paw-like hands flew, thimble forefinger flashing. We never learned to sew, his daughters and granddaughters. Even when his brother bankrupted him, and after my grandma died when he sat in a corner davening, "*Oi vey Oi vey*," until the doctors shocked the demons out of him, we'd save our mending for him.

My grandpa sewed and saved until his parents and all eleven sisters and brothers arrived on Ellis Island. When I got my ears pierced, he shook his head, you're going back to the Lower East Side, then bought me coral earrings.

I give my broadcloth to Anna, who is sewing masks for hospital workers. If I get sick, maybe an orderly wearing a blue-and-green checked mask will wheel my gurney.

*April 14*

On the deck, delirious birds drown out my meditation. So many twitters and trills I lose count. Call and response so bright it hurts.

Indoors I listen to jazz, *WRTI Pub Jazz with Chuck Leavens*. I know nothing about jazz. I don't listen to learn. The uncertainty makes the music right, the losing of melody and fear it might not return.

I may be made for social distancing. I was one of those lonely, awkward girls who saved herself with books. Except now I can't read. I am happiest when most animal: cat, cow, cobra, downward-facing dog.

*April 21*

Everybody's dreaming, the newspaper says.

Not me.

My dreams have abandoned me. Me, who cherishes my dreams, repeats them to myself like

favorite bedtime stories: The dream where I heard the call to prayer; the preschool age dream where I walked on a tightrope wearing a pink tutu.

Since the lockdown, I can't count on my dreams to show me what I need to know.

Last Thursday I walked my usual route from the house up the parkway past the art museum and azalea garden until the sidewalk ends at the Abraham Lincoln statue, frayed memorial wreaths at its base. A chill in the air offered solitude, and the budding trees had special delicacy against the gray sky. The museum was a temple rising off moss and rocks.

As I reached Smedley Drive, a silver hearse and stretch limo glided up the hill. Who rates a funeral? I wondered. Who's in that limo? I imagined a lone widow, elegant in black, cloche on her head, steered like Cleopatra on her barge.

Sunday was sunny, my path crooked as I swerved to avoid folks on their afternoon outings. Down the hill past the art museum roared an army of bikers, helmeted gladiators of endangering freedom. I turned back before I reached Smedley Drive.

That night I dreamt I was in a long tunnel, its sides white and rough like a cave. Someone was showing me the way. On my right at intervals were wide benches. Dreaming, I did not think they were mausoleums. On some of the benches, women in white togas or nightgowns were reclining, except one with unnatural red hair. Not on all the benches, I told myself. Dressed in street clothes, I kept on, not sure where I was going.

*April 24*

My sister and I send e-cards signed love. To pretend we're not estranged.

"If not now, when?" I write two weeks into the shutdown.

"You beat me," she says over the phone.

"It's not a race," I reply, glad I won.

"Do you remember the dumbwaiter in Grandma's apartment on Walton Avenue?" she calls back.

"Who could forget?"

"And the baby grand with a broken leg?"

*Out of tune, with a bum middle C.*

"Did the kitchen face 157th Street?"

"No, the courtyard."

How could she forget? I could draw her a diagram to scale.

I remember the chifforobe and the dressing table with its three-way mirror, bobby pins, Shocking by Schiaparelli in a tufted pink box, the pop and smell of percolated coffee, vials of insulin and needles on a metal tray, my grandma's nightgown hiked up as she plunged a needle into her thigh. I was shooed away. This was not for children's eyes.

My sister always wants something I cannot give her: an inch in height, three years in age. Now she wants my memories.

My memories, mine, I protest. I want to keep them safe.

*May 5*

Three things that I've never done before:

1. Make pizza from scratch.
2. Cut Jack's hair.
3. Take pictures of the pizza and the haircut and text them to friends—me, who took no photos of the Taj Mahal or Hagia Sofia or pink flamingos in Cuba.

Shot one: Jack holds a slice toward the camera. Shot two: He bites down.

A few days later I follow a stylist on YouTube, cutting my husband's gray curls, thinner since chemo, less springy, but still a full head of hair. What a luxury to run my fingers through his hair.

A cowlick sticks up at the back. He smiles for the camera. Not like him to grin when someone asks, smile for the camera.

"What a handsome guy," Wendy texts me back.

Next week I will drive him to the hospital. He will make sure to wear a mask and gloves. I will leave him at the door. He'll take the elevator by himself to the fifth floor, where a nurse will draw blood from his arm and inject Lupron into his butt cheek. I will wait in the car, windows drawn, and pretend to read. No matter how long it takes will be too long.

When he gets home, a plastic bag will be waiting for his clothes. He will make sure to leave his shoes by the door. He will strip and climb upstairs to take a shower. I will wipe the car down with Lysol before I leave the garage, wipe the door handles, and dispose of my gloves. This doesn't really make sense, but my friend Al, the interventional radiologist who is at the hospital most days, has instructed me in the protocol. I cling to his advice while Jack smiles for the camera and I keep a record. There he is at our dining room table, my handsome guy.

*May 17*

When the pandemic hit, I decided it was time to sell my mother's old "Louis'." Samantha from *The RealReal* promised curbside pickup. In a crisis where no one can travel anywhere, handbags and luggage with LVs stamped into the cloth still turn a hefty profit.

"Get yourself something special," Jack urges.

*The Third Reich of Dreams* is out of print. A sole used copy sells for \$1,999.98 on Amazon. That's my treat—a book of dreams from a time when people saved their truth for dreams, and only dreams could speak the truth.

Nowadays dreams echo across the Internet and reverberate through telephone cable. Dream truths boomerang from my patients to me and back again.

A patient dreams she gets lost driving a red car uphill. Headlights blind her. The GPS gives out. From the back seat a man says, I'll show you the way, but when they arrive, no such address can be found, and the man disappears.

The next night I am driving a small red car, surprised how easy it is to maneuver although I can't see the road through the schmutzy windshield. I drive straight into a house and get lost in its many rooms.

In another dream, another patient's face hangs outside my window—a woman in the moon. I open the door to let her in. She has no shoes. Oh honey, I say.

In the weeks that follow, from the safety of her car, this woman tells me dreams like she never could before. She was afraid to bring these dreams to my office where they might contaminate me. We talk on the phone because she's not ready for me to see her dreamer's face.

No matter. I've seen her in my dreams, and the Vuitton luggage, so light I can carry it up Broadway; a friend I miss, and another; and my old analyst in a champagne-colored dress with a long circle skirt. We share a bathroom, which makes me blush, but then I think, oh well, that's how things are now.

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