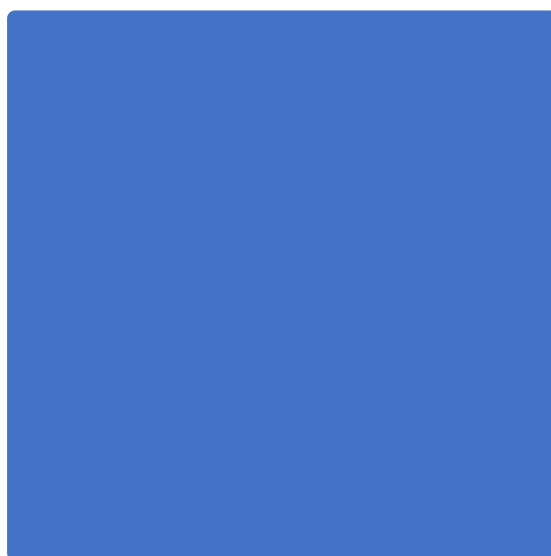


Fiction

Issue #5: Heroes

COVID Section

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Bare

by Lorelei Laird

Arabella's face is in the window when I get home. She has a smear of something on her cheek, and I cringe a little, thinking about how frazzled Jennie must be.

She disappears, undoubtedly to tell Jennie I'm home. I'll have text messages waiting after the Great Sanitizing.

This starts at the side door to the garage, the human-sized door, which Jennie has left open so I don't have to touch it. First, I take off my shoes and badge and spray them with the disinfectant we keep by the door for this purpose. Then I go inside, open the washing machine with my elbow, take off my scrubs and dump them inside. After sanitizing my hands, I start the laundry, close the garage door, cross the backyard, and unlock the door to the studio. Without touching anything unnecessarily, I go straight into the shower, where I try not to think about my day.

After I get clothes on, I have two text messages. Both say they're from Jennie, but the first one is clearly from Arabella: ♥♥♥DADI→***AR

The second takes a more adult tone: Welcome home! Want me to make you a plate?

I shoot back: Oh god yes please

Dinner is served in the backyard these days. I lurk in the front room of the studio, which is still full of Jennie's office stuff, until I see her put a plate on the glass-topped patio table. I get to use the patio furniture because Jennie's rectus abdominis has split and she can no longer climb out of anything that reclines.

Then she walks all the way across the back lawn, past abandoned toys and a raised bed with a dead squash vine in it, to a straight-backed kitchen chair. It's 12 feet; we measured it.

Arabella lounges next to her on a *Moana* beach towel, eating only the pasta part of her salad.

Both of us are too tired to care.

"How was it?" Jennie calls over after we're a few bites in.

"Grim," I tell her, thinking of the woman who died hours after I intubated her.

Anesthesiologists give out the painkillers; we are not supposed to witness this much suffering. "You?"

"Oh, same," Jennie jokes. "Arabella didn't nap today. I had to cancel my meeting with Steve."

I listen closely, thrilled by these little bits of domestic news that I no longer get to live. It's like sinking into a feather bed. Four weeks ago, it would have given me no pleasure to learn that Arabella was being a bear. But now that I can't have my family, any scrap of news is exciting.

I apologize to Jennie for not being there, but she demurs, because we both know why we're doing this. I will not put my wife and unborn son at risk. Or Arabella.

The hardest part is not kissing Jennie goodnight.

"I'll soak the dishes in alcohol and put them out for you," I promise her when we get up to leave.

She nods, looks at me while our daughter swirls around her feet.

"I miss you so much," I say.

“I miss you too,” she says. “And so does Sylvester.”

“I thought we decided on Vernon.”

She smiles. He’s been David Howard for a couple of months now, after his grandfathers.

“Good night, Milton,” I tell her belly. “Good night, my beautiful girls.”

I sleep quickly, but unfamiliar noises keep waking me up, my heart pounding in my ears. Is the sound really so different across the property, or is my job just giving me psychiatric problems?

I give up this debate around 5:30, when the black crack in the blinds starts turning blue. If I’m up this early, I decide, I might as well get some exercise.

Twenty minutes later, I’m figuring out how to do triceps exercises with a resistance band when a light goes on in our bedroom. Jennie must be up early too. As I watch, she pulls back the curtains in the sliding glass door.

I can’t resist approaching—but when I get to the door, I discover, to my surprise, that Jennie is naked, the curve of her hip bare as she stretches to hook the curtains open. I feel a flash of shame before I realize I am not a peeping Tom; I’m just her temporarily exiled husband.

Still, it feels strange, so I tap lightly on the glass. She’s surprised to see me too, her gaze sharpening under a towel wrapped around her head. Her gloriously round belly hits the glass before the rest of her. I want to touch her.

This is when I realize I actually could, sort of. The glass negates quarantine rules. As long as it stays closed.

I step closer and hold my palm up to the glass. Soon she understands, and holds her hand up to meet mine.

It's as close as we've gotten in weeks, and it's not enough. It hurts to feel the cold, hard glass between us.

But I can't go inside, so I start stripping off my nasty old T-shirt. Then the basketball shorts, and then the sweaty underwear. It's not about sex (well, not much). I want her to see my body, even all the dad flab and stray hairs. Especially those. Because I wouldn't show them to anyone else.

Naked, I step back from the glass and put my hand back up. Jennie doesn't say anything, even though I could hear her through the glass if she did. She just stands there, looking, and then slowly puts her hand back up to mine. We look at each other. And for a moment, it's enough.



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