

“Wartime with Dick and Jane”

By C. Taub

Are we at war?

It’s a good question. In a way we are.

When are you coming to get me?

I can’t, Mom, S says yet again. We’re under quarantine.

This exchange happens at least three times a day. His mom calls from the rehab facility where she has been since early March with a broken back. She can walk now with a walker, but she tested positive for the coronavirus in early April, so she can’t go back to her assisted living facility until she retests and is clean. Thing is, she has dementia so she has no idea anything is amiss with her health.

***We dress like students, we dress like housewives,
Or in a suit and a tie
I changed my hairstyle, so many times now,
I don't know what I look like!***

I thought it was “We dress like students, we dress like hustlers.” I think dressing like a hustler sounds more stylish. Mostly I dress like I’ve given up on dressing like anything at all. During the day, I’m in my pink microfiber bathrobe with pockets that Goat’s mother got for free with a make-up order from Ulta. It may be the best free thing Goat’s mother ever got. I wear bright yellow Crocs. I

try for real clothes, at least on my top half, until three p.m. when I am done interacting with my students and their families from afar. Then that bathrobe (that I should wash more often than I do) goes right back on. When I go walking and it's cold—it's always cold—I wear my hooded Grover sweatshirt with its pouch in front for my hands and my grey sweatpants with Asics. Sometimes I wear a blue hat and gloves. These are my two quarantine uniforms.

Whether I am in my inside or outside clothes, my hair is getting long and scraggly with some black roots and white hairs among the fading red dye—but no one notices from far away. If I am not careful, I get toothpaste in it. Then it gets a bit sticky. I feel like I am constantly brushing my teeth. There are many chances for toothpaste to serve as hair gel.

When are you coming to get me?

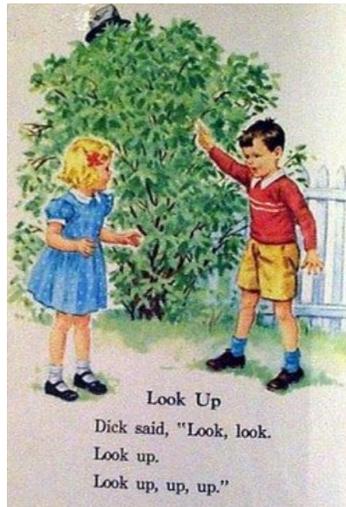
I can't, Mom, S says yet again. We're under quarantine.



S and I start the walk down the block. Even with variations, the route has some things we know we'll see. See the two rusted green cars that look like they've traded car doors and hoods in a game of dress-up. Sometimes they have flat tires. See the sign on the telephone pole: YOSHI, A CAT IS MISSING! We surmise Yoshi has changed his name to Moshie and has been busy preparing for and then celebrating Passover. See Audrey's house—Audrey who has a blue Mustang and a motorcycle and works at the aftercare program in my school and plays the organ at her church and plays tennis in S's summer league. She has a loud dog we try not to disturb as we walk by. See the apartments we had watched them build two years ago that S's ex-wife Cheryl thought about moving into and we say, *The Cheryl Apartments*. See the cow statue outside Lakeview Farms if it is still business hours. See the stray cats down by the tracks. Maybe that's where Moshie lives now. If we don't see the cats, maybe they are under stricter quarantine. S thinks maybe they've divided into factions: The Lakeside Gang and the Scully Boys. See the tattoo shop and S tells the same story about how he traded them advertising space for a piercing. He still has the mark from the hole by his belly. See the library, the liquor store, the falafel joint. Look, look, look. See, see, see. See the signs on the doors on the two main drags: *Closed temporarily*

due to coronavirus restrictions. The signs are on the salons, the karate school, the bars. The signs add to the quiet.

Same, same, same.



Step after step after step. Day after day after day. I think of Kurt Vile songs.

***But it was a Monday, no, a Tuesday
No, a Wednesday, Thursday, Friday***

Our feet step. The phone rings.

When are you coming to get me?

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A variation for our walk: It has gotten dark. S yelps and smacks me in the chest. He has seen something move out of the corner of his eye and he is startled.

It was a bunny rabbit.

We laugh about that for a long time.

Another variation: I have become aware of someone with dreadlocks who skateboards around town totally barefoot. He was first spotted skating down one of the big hills towards the park when I was driving around trying to figure out a route that would constitute a 5k. Today as I stand in front of the liquor store that has stayed open in town while I wait for S—I bribed him to walk by bribing him with a trip to get beer—I see Skateboard Dude pull up to the liquor store on his board.

I like your shirt, he tells me.

I've seen you around town, I tell him. Be careful with your feet.

He takes out a bandana so he can put on a mask to enter the liquor store. *Welcome to America*, he comments. He enters the store, still barefoot, but agreeing to abide by the current social contract not to breathe on anyone. I wonder about his political affiliations.

S comes out. Did you see that guy?! he asks.

He liked my shirt, I tell him.



A variation: We get ice cream for dinner at Sprinkles. We walk back past what was R's old store on Utter Ave. I used to score marzipan there. S used to score something else.

There are two cars in the lot across the street with a man in each. The music is techno. It sounds like we walked into someone's Big Moment. We try not to look interested, but shit there is getting LOUD.

You and me are done! We're finished! You're not my friend anymore! You know what? Lose my number!

Car number one tears ass out of that lot and zooms towards 208 South. Car number two follows, tailing it in hot pursuit all the way. S and I look at each other and shrug. I go back to my ice cream. Strawberry lemonade is a refreshing flavor.

Yet another variation: It is Easter. It is warmer than it has been. We walk on Cornell Avenue, where the homes are larger but not ostentatious. I look at them and think about how I'd like to live here someday so we would have room for me

to have a kitchen that's just a kitchen and not S's office and room not to feel on top of each other all the time and multiple bedrooms with actual closets. Maybe we could have a real guest room so people could sleep in a real bed and not push together parts of a sectional couch in the basement. I size up the lots large enough to muffle sounds so the neighbors don't feel part of every conversation we have indoors.

S's phone rings. This time it is not his mom. It's mine. After a year of holding off colon cancer, being in and out of hospitals, converting to Catholicism, and slowly seeming to recover as she cursed at the tv, my Aunt Zilla has died. It is April 12. The funeral homes are so backed up in New York that there will be no services until May 8.

Are you sad? S asks.

I guess so, I answer.

I mentally place the phone call with my mom into a file labeled *Phone Calls in Awkward Times*.

We walk, walk, walk. We go, go, go.

I don't cry until S is asleep and he can't see me.

Sometimes I walk alone. I walk past the local funeral home. I smell burning and hope it's not bodies. A refrigerated trailer in their parking lot is there to

handle extra business. A sign on their front door instructs families to call before coming by.

Sometimes I walk into Wyckoff or Ridgewood. I walk up, up, up the hills to go. I stare into the yards of large homes with swimming pools. I wonder if their pools will open for the summer. I wonder how long it takes the mailman to walk up each loooong path from front door to front door of each house to deliver the mail. I see the happy little families—always with three children—biking by me. Even the ducks in these towns seem happier. Two dart right over my head on Ravine Avenue. I know things are not better here, though. The daily stats for the current black plague tell me so. When I feel done, I go down, down, down the hill back into Hawthorne.

Sometimes when I walk alone it is at night. I stay in town because it's hard to see. I can walk right in the middle of the main streets and there are no cars to hit me. I hear no traffic. I hear no laughter. In the absence of more typical noise, I feel like every sound I do hear is... magnified. I can hear every... sound... in... the... world.

I hear the trickle of water flow into the sewer.

I hear every leaf move.

I hear the static in the air.

I hear into every house.

I hear an Italian opera come from a TV on Forest Avenue. I stop until I think the tv watchers feel my presence.

I hear someone play piano music for *The Phantom of the Opera*. I try to sing along until I realize I can't hit the high notes anymore.

I hear the teenager across the street curse at her parents. I hear them yell back.

I hear into every house.

I hear into every house.

I hear into every house.

I know what they hear come from mine.

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