

Part the Third

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A bead of sweat dripped down Georgia's face as she raced up the final steps to the third floor of the stifling stairwell. In lower class apartment buildings, proper airflow was never high on the landlord's to-do list, despite the recommendation of health experts to keep air filtered to lower infections. The result was a stairway with no windows that hovered around 86°F in the summer, making her family's apartment with the one fan in the window feel like an oasis when she burst in the door.

"Mom, I'm back!" she yelled, looking at the clock. It was 6:47 pm. Her mom needed to be across town for the night shift helping to disinfect hospital equipment by 7:30. It wasn't much time, but she hoped it would be enough. With many jobs having become obsolete in the most recent years of the pandemic, employers had applicants lined up around the block to take the place of anyone who was more than a minute late.

"Georgia, I'm over here. Please hurry, I have to go," her mother called from down the narrow which led to the room where her younger sister Fiona had been trapped in quarantine for the

past four and a half weeks. Four and a half weeks of not knowing if Fiona was sick or not. Even that morning when Georgia left for work, there had been no news. With the new strain of the virus, symptoms could appear anytime up to two months after exposure, and tests for the new version would only be positive the day before the symptoms appeared.

"How is she doing?" asked Georgia, bracing herself for the answer.

"She spiked a fever today. 102°," replied her mother. Georgia's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Also her most recent test results came back today. She has it. The new one."

Georgia bit her lip to hold in a scream. The most recent iteration of the coronavirus now had a mortality rate of about 10%, indiscriminate of age or preexisting conditions. She didn't feel like she could speak at all without a sob coming out.

"Georgia, is that you?" called Fiona a few seconds later, her voice distorted by both the glass door between them and the raspy cough that had appeared the day before.

"Yeah...yeah, it's me. Sorry I'm late. This job definitely

doesn't have a guaranteed end time." The apology she choked out as she composed herself to be hopeful for her sister's sake was addressed to both her sister and her mother. "How are you feeling?"

"I mean, I have the 'rona eight-point-oh, so...pretty much like shit." The chuckle that followed her dry-humored comment was quickly cut off by another burst of coughing. One thing that hadn't changed through this ordeal was her sister's brand of humor; it had been dark and sarcastic before, so her diagnosis really just added fuel to the fire.

"Fiona! Don't think that just because you're on the other side of that door I can't still wash your mouth out with soap," scolded her mother.

"You're right, you're right. I'm being dramatic. I'm actually doing just fine! That's me! Good ol' 'rona Fiona!"

"Just keep an eye on her," Georgia's mother whispered to her, sounding slightly exasperated, "you know she hates asking for help." All Georgia could do was nod. "I love you both. I'll see you in the morning," her mother said, loud enough for Fiona to hear this time. Georgia felt the blast of heat from the stairwell and heard the door click shut as her mother rushed to make it to work in time.

Georgia slid down until she was sitting with her back against the glass door that separated her from her sister. These doors, a recent invention via necessity to keep the virus

contained at home when all the hospitals were full, had become almost universal over the past few months, with nearly every house having a room with one. Specially designed with gaskets along the edges that inflate when the door closes to create a virus-proof seal around the perimeter, the door was marketed as "Keeping the virus inside and your family outside™". What they failed to advertise is that the virus always takes someone inside with it. In addition to the sealing sides, another selling point was the cubby at the bottom corner of the door, which functions as a one square foot version of the pods Georgia saw in Sophie's gated community. Georgia loaded some candy and gum into the mini pod and closed it to begin disinfecting. It seemed to Georgia that bringing snacks and trinkets from the outside world back to her quarantined sister seemed a bit cliché, but Fiona insisted.

As the disinfectant hissed, Georgia began to think about the invention of the door. With it prevalent in every household now, it seemed like such a simple solution. *If only I'd thought of it first, been the one to pitch it to Galtech, maybe we'd be in that gated community now. Maybe my sister...*

"So what's the outside world like?" The serious tone of her sister's sudden question snapping her out of her downward spiral of self-criticism, "I can't express how little I know about the outside by staring at the building on the other side of the alley."

“It’s pretty much the same as five weeks ago. Everything basically sucks, no one goes outside who doesn’t have to, and people still treat each other just as horribly,” Sophie’s comments when she saw Sam for some reason lingering in the back of Georgia’s mind, “but I got to go into one of those gated communities.”

“No way! What was it like? Did they make you wear hazmat suits? Did they march you through at gunpoint to make sure you didn’t walk on any of their pampered lawns with your ‘rona covered feet?”

“I mean, it was surprisingly lax on the security. It kinda felt like ‘none of these peasants would dare try to do anything we don’t want them to, so we don’t need a guard on high alert.” This earned a chuckle from her sister. “But I did run into Sophie Blake. She lives in that community. *That* was an encounter I could have done without.”

Georgia proceeded to describe her run-in with Sophie. Throughout the story, Fiona sat on her bed staring at her sister’s back through the glass door, with the look on her face growing more sour with each word. When the brief story ended, Fiona sat in silence for a couple seconds, then burst into a coughing fit.

“That bitch!” Fiona said when she finally recovered.

“Hey! You know mom doesn’t like it when you swear.” For a kid who had been through so

much, it was easy to forget that she was only twelve years old.

“I mean, am I wrong though?” Georgia sat silently, fully agreeing with Fiona’s sentiment despite not being able to say so. “You’re bringing her food so she doesn’t have to leave the safety of her private little gated and virus-free compound, and she has the nerve to make jokes about you not being in school?”

“Maybe that’s just how she talks to people?” Georgia replied, trying to give her a half-hearted benefit of the doubt.

“Oh so she got to ignore you for two years, but now she’s gonna be friendly? You know you haven’t even gotten a single text from her since you left school. And not to mention she and her family sound pretty racist. Not all that shocking, but still.” Throughout her tirade, the coughs that forced her to stop and catch her breath had become more and more frequent.

Georgia shifted focus onto the other places she had been that day, until Fiona began to yawn and her eyelids began to droop.

“You should get some sleep.” Fiona simply nodded and shifted from sitting on the edge of her bed to laying down. Her sister capitulating to sleep at 9:00 pm was a sign of just how drained she was trying to fight off the virus.

After looking to make sure Fiona had placed the portable breathing monitor under her nose, Georgia gathered up some pillows and a blanket and camped out in

the hall outside Fiona’s door, just in case.

As she prepared to go to sleep, Georgia scrolled through the virus headlines on her phone, trying to find some good news. She was sorely disappointed. “COVID-19.8 Death Rate Rises to 12%”, “Galtech Treatment and Vaccine Combo for COVID-19.8 Released at \$10,355 per dose”, “Vaccine Deliveries to Close Roads, Check Local Information”.

Georgia locked her phone and slammed it down beside her as tears began to well up in her eyes. *It was just a goddamn fluke*, she thought to herself. Georgia had hung out with a couple of her friends, all of whom had tested negative the day before. But the morning after, Fiona’s phone rang with the fateful news: the lab had called and told her friend that the tests had been mixed up in the computer and she had actually tested positive. Although not unheard of, given that the entire population gets tested every few days and mistakes are bound to happen, it was still a rare enough occurrence that it prompted near constant thoughts of “why her? Why not anyone else?” Fiona had been in quarantine since that phone call.

The breathing monitor woke Georgia up three times during the night, its beeping indicating that Fiona was only breathing eight times per minute, well below the healthy twelve. After a few seconds, the beeping would subside, and Georgia knew her sister would be okay for the

time being. But each time the monitor went on and then off, as she drifted back to sleep: *It was just a goddamn fluke*.

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Sliding into the passenger seat of the van the next morning, Georgia sat silently as she waited for Sam to leave the parking lot. Once they were on the road, Georgia took a deep breath, knowing the magnitude of what she was about to ask.

“Sam,” she said quietly, almost a whisper, as if she expected others to be listening in, “those other ways you were talking about yesterday...what are they?”

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