

Who's underneath?

I stood still, as people in yellow medical gowns ran around me. Half their heads covered in sky blue. Their eyes, dispirited, peered at me for a second then darted away. Emotional numbness seeped its way into my cells. Only the sound of my shallow breathing into what looked like a white cardboard bra cup with a minuscule vent was familiar and comforting to me. My breath was all I had. It now identified me. As without it, I, Janet Bloom would cease to exist.

I didn't need to see their lips move to know what they were saying to each other. I could see how the exhaustion in their already tired eyes stole the last bit of sparkle when they looked my way.

"Another one," I was sure that's what they were broadcasting to each other with their looks. No words necessary. I was just another number to add to the statistics, another risk factor for them, for the city, for the world.

I bent my knees slowly allowing my bottom to kiss and slowly melt onto the navy blue plastic chair. It had been a really long time I had done anything myself, this had become my me-time. Awkwardly, it felt good. For a minute, I forgot I had three elementary school-aged kids. I was now forced to relinquish any mom or wife duties. It felt good to not feel guilty over it. I started to remember me.

"Huh, the silver linings of COVID," I thought to myself.

Normally, I would have called Carl, my husband, to check on the kids and read a tutorial of when and how to handle the kids' daily activities, however, today I wouldn't. He called on my drive down to NYC Presbyterian Hospital and I didn't pick up. I read his text when I parked, asking if we had extra batteries for our bedroom T.V. remote. And here I was thinking he was calling to check up on me.

"Figure it out yourself, you little pompous self-righteous son of a... *bat!*" I whispered assertively to my phone as I threw it in my messy black pouch I call a purse. I knew he was pissed because his mother Shirley, with her burgundy helmet hair and her red lipstick was not allowed to leave her house for the safety of her old ass, so he was on his own.

"Bloom!" called the nurse draped in baby hues of yellow and blue holding a clipboard.

I stood up quickly. Maybe too quickly as my head throbbed and the waiting room spun around. I grabbed the back of the chair for support, pinching my fingers between the wall and the ridge of the chair.

"Dammit!" I dropped right back into the seat.

The nurse, stiff as a statue just stared at me. I took as deep a breath as possible and slowly came to standing. I took another breath and followed the nurse into a busy hallway.

“Sit there,” she said pointing her finger wrapped in blue latex at a rolling desk chair they had obviously confiscated from one of the offices, due to the overwhelm of patients.

She held the thermometer and stared at me for a few seconds as if she was waiting on something. I stared back into her tired large brown exotic eyes. It was the only part of her that wasn't covered. “Philippine? Indian?” I asked myself, trying to find some type of humanness about her. Had she not spoken, she could have literally been a short man for all I knew. I felt sad not seeing the rest of the person, the physical attributes which make them different than the rest.

“The eyes are the windows to the soul. What if we could only see people's eyes and connect only with their souls,” I started imagining. She suddenly spoke loudly past the face mask.

“Your hair. Move you hair!”

Quickly, I swam out of the depth of this existential ocean I had fallen into.

“Sorry,” I said, as I pulled my brown dirty strands behind my right ear. She adjusted a giant clip softly squeezing my left thumb, and simultaneously prodded the tip of the thermometer in my ear. It quickly beeped. She discarded the disposable tip announcing my temperature, “101.9.”

She stood stoic, entering information into the laptop that sat on a rolling cart. I tried to scan her employee badge for a name and a picture, still searching for a human under all that medical apparel.

My body suddenly became chilled. I shivered and tried to stop myself from coughing several times for fear of infecting her.

“Can I please have a blanket, I'm freezing.”

She walked away, quickly returning with a blanket and handing it to me. She looked at me and took back the blanket, opening it up and draping it around my back. She patted my back. I had not felt someone care for me in a long time. My eyes watered as sorrow woke in my heart. The chatter of life had not let me hear the sadness that had become me.

She prodded my ear again. “102.6. O2 decreasing 74,” she called out to the heavy-set male nurse across her.

I wasn't afraid of death, and right now it felt more enticing than going back home. I had never contemplated suicide. It was never an option. I had been a good Christian. This wouldn't be suicide. This would be death by COVID.

"May I please use the bathroom?" I asked the nurse.

She pointed to a door halfway down the hall.

I grabbed my black pouch and slowly headed down the hall and outside the hospital to my car. I reclined my seat and found a comfortable position, imagining the peace I would finally find when my lungs, like me, gave up.

I heard a tap on the window.

"Mrs. Bloom, you gotta come back."

I sat up. "No! Please walk away."

Silently she stared into my soul and I at hers.