



The Playground

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It started in the fogged hush of an empty playground. Normally overflowing with kids' high-pitched squealing and an abundance of laughter, the entire park sat vacant, drenched in silence, coated in fog, haunted by what was to come.

The news was the news. At first, a simple line distantly placed deep in the program: "The first known case of the Wuhan Coronavirus has infected a man in Washington State." It didn't cause panic or set off alarms. It was simply one man, far way, with a distantly named illness. The park still echoed with children's joy. Masks were not a thing.

In those early days, my wife would return home from her shift in the emergency room with her ever-present smile and grab the glass of Chardonnay I poured. "Nothing yet," she laughed as another day passed without a Covid patient.

One day, my wife came home absent the omnipresent smile, replaced with a vacant stare. One glass of wine turned into three. Words stuck to her lips as she tried to convey what she saw. Tears replaced words and spoke all I needed to know.

The stare grew deeper with each passing day, along with the drinking. Her skin lost the California kiss of the sun. In the shower, the drain revealed a patchwork of hair, holding back the water, plastered solid with anxiety. And then, unceremoniously, the cough came home. At first, we joked "Oh, no, Covid Cough." We chuckled. By morning she couldn't smell the coffee. It wasn't time to panic. She was young, exceedingly fit, with access to a kaleidoscope of medications. She expressed no worry, no fear, business as usual. She drove on. The masks made their debut.

I took the girls to the park. The laughter hadn't disappeared but came in muffled tones. "Why do we have to wear masks?" asked my Abby, as the other kids hadn't yet adopted them. "Because, we don't want to catch the virus." "What's a virus?" followed Mia her younger sister. The questions came quickly, the answers not as fast. But the questions never came up again as if the answers triggered something deep rooted in them. They didn't complain about masks, or when their school closed.

My wife tested positive three days later. She moved into the study and shut the curtains. "Leave the food outside," she whisper-yelled through the door. I would return hours later to the food cold and untouched. The cough echoed out the door and into our family room. The girls spent time in their rooms in pretend worlds where the virus was crushed with ease by superhero doctors. Over and over again, they cured stuffies and dolls of Coronavirus.

Four days later, she emerged exalted—weakened, but with her smile returned to its rightful place. “How do you feel?” I asked. “I feel amazing. I’m ready to go back to work.” She said with a strength I hadn’t heard in weeks. The next day, she went in aglow in an energy that was mystifying. At five PM I got the call. “Hey Andy, It’s Pete, I don’t want to alarm you, it’s probably nothing, but” He described her decent from superhero to unable to breathe in the course of the day. “Can I talk to her?” I asked expecting a no. “Sure,” he said. “You want to Facetime?” The shaky video bobbed up and down, a garbled exchange, beeps and voices, before she finally came into focus. Her face under oxygen revealed an expression that I had never seen on her: fear. “Hon?” “Go now.” She said sounding underwater. “Go now. Take the girls and go now. Promise me you will go?” Her eyes held crazy in them. “Babe, you are just exhausted.” But she insisted. With her bleeding lungs she begged, “Please, God, Paul, take the girls and go this moment. Promise me.” And before I could respond she erupted into a storm of coughing sucking the breath from her lips. “Babe?” Silence cut the call like an ax. By morning she would be dead.

The girls knew before I told them. I wanted more than anything to see her face one last time. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t feel. All I knew was that I had to take care of these girls. I wanted to go. I thought so hard. Sleepless nights and gathering goods but I hesitated. It’s getting better, I thought. And it was. A week turned into a month, turned into six—still we stayed. The tide rolled out and the masks came off. We went back to the playground with a nervous excitement. A laugh emerged from the girls, a scream, and then the sounds of joy popped off all over the park like fireworks. As we slipped back into normalcy, the tide crept back in soaking everything in its path.

I heard it down the hall—that unmistakable sound of lungs setting off a warning flare. It was Mia, and I didn’t wake her up to check. I knew. Two days later, Abbey. I buried them behind the swing set. I was the first to do it. I walked into the hospital, went directly to the morgue and took my daughter’s body from a parking lot of gurneys full of the dead. I came back for Abbey three days later. The guard tried to stop me but when he saw my eyes, he knew there was nothing he could do. He even helped me with Abbey. In November, almost overnight, the cemeteries became full. I had nothing to fear, for I had nothing to live for. I dug through the grass in broad daylight. No one stopped me. No one could even watch.

I sit here at the park helping people dig. At first, they don’t want my help but when they see my eyes mirror theirs, they relent. We dig in silence. I leave them in silence. I sit back down and wait for the next one. I don’t wait long.

