



Essential

Natasja Rose

The morning dawns, grey and cold, as I pry myself out of the warm blankets. A few months ago, there would have been a pair of warm arms, as well, sleepily encouraging five more minutes. But this was 2020, and I worked in healthcare. We hadn't slept in the same room since the Pandemic became official in March.

Nearly naked, I stumble to the small laundry, where my clothes go as soon as I get home. My uniform is warm from the dryer, a contrast to the cold tiles beneath my feet. I dress in the hallway and head for the kitchen.

Kettle on—my partner will have dragged themselves into the land of the living by the time it's boiled and cooled enough for Earl Gray—bread in the toaster; I'll eat mine on the way. Two large water bottles with built-in filters, and a Ziploc bag of homemade trail mix. I didn't used to need to worry about things like that, but deliveries have been reduced, and patients clear out the vending machines faster than I can get to them, when they are stocked at all.

At least COVID-19 has put a stop to whoever had been nicking other people's food out of the staff fridge.

Staff ID and proof of my work location; there have been restrictions on how far you can travel from home without a very short list of Essential Reasons (and the list is short enough to deserve the capitalization.) I'd rather not get a fine for going to work. One of the admin staff copped that last week, having left her ID in her locker the previous day. Poor thing; it's not as though we're paid what we're worth in the first place, and the fines for breaching restrictions are steep.

I check the supply of spare masks in my bag; there are shortages of every kind of PPE these days, and I'd had to get my sister to buy them and send via International Express, because the hospital could only allot one or two per eight-hour shift. My box of food-handling gloves—not medical-grade, but infinitely easier to get a hold of—is running low, too. I add it to the shopping list.

Hand sanitizer is next, the medium bottle I'd grabbed off the supermarket shelf, thanks to the combination of arriving at the ass-crack of dawn, and other shoppers being distracted by two women brawling in the aisle over a 30-pack of toilet paper. Years of raiding every motel room I stayed in has finally paid-off; single-use tubes of body wash and tiny, individually-packaged soaps share another Ziploc bag for emergencies. The cleaners do their best, but it's a big workplace, and getting a cleaning cart between floors when you're limited to one or two people per elevator isn't easy.

Refilling the hand wash dispensers in the bathroom came a distant second to cleaning up potentially-infectious bodily fluids, after all. Like, ‘Usain Bolt vs. Middle-School science nerd’ distant second. It was understandable, but deeply inconvenient.

At least I was off the ICU this month. They tried not to keep anyone on the COVID-19 patients for too long, but there had been a higher rate of sick-day absences since the Pandemic started, and sometimes the rostering staff didn’t have a choice.

I updated and filed my will last month, as did many of my co-workers. All of the underpaid “Essential Workers” are being encouraged to do this now, accompanied by thoughts and prayers and the occasional thanks for our semi-willing martyrdom for the sake of the Almighty Economy. I was ahead of the rush, using my day off to get it done just after we discovered that the minimal PPE that wasn’t being hoarded was less effective under high exposure.

There have been no deaths among the staff, yet, but we all know that it’s only a matter of time.

