

IS THIS MY LAST DAY?

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I had a fantastic life right out of high school. I was a young, vibrant 18-year-old working for American Airlines. I lived carefree in my parent's basement, rent free, traveling the world on complimentary airline tickets. What a life! I wandered throughout Europe and the Caribbean when the urge struck. Full of a lust for life, I had an insatiable thirst for adventure with ample friends to enjoy this expansive planet with all it had to offer. Backpack at the ready, I checked the departure boards at the airport to decide which destination I wanted to explore at that moment. I had a knack for learning languages and sincere interest in other cultures. I, like others in their prime, could not image anything going amiss.

But it did when I was a gate agent with American Airlines during the attacks of September 11, 2001. A profound sense of loss, both economic and for my physical security darkened my bright outlook. The O'Hare airport where I had loved working for seven years felt ominous. Not knowing when a potential terrorist hiding a bomb might strike distressed me as I mingled among enormous Boeing 767 aircrafts. These very planes were used as missiles, reducing the twin towers to a pile of rubble, stealing over 2,600 lives in their wake. As I walked on the tarmac and looked up at them, I was overwhelmed with sadness.

Because of the massive layoffs in the airline industry post 9/11, my full-time employee status was reduced to 20 hours a week. No longer feeling secure I wondered how I was going to survive financially. For that reason, I returned to school to study Respiratory Therapy. This choice seemed to promise safety. Who could have predicted that only a few years later I would be on the frontline of an invisible and highly contagious threat?

Now, those years of fun and a carefree life I enjoyed are long gone. Sadness prevails as we cannot seem to find a way to end to this suffering. My knees shake as I drive to the hospital. Seven of my co-workers are COVID-19 positive, struggling to breathe. How ironic. A Respiratory Therapist who cannot breathe, go figure. I project that I will be next. Is this virus sneaking into my body at the hospital or grocery store?

Currently, this is my personal war; it's far different from the terrorist attack in America 19 years ago. The door swings open to my battlefield: a cold dark Intensive Care Unit. I am a type of soldier, but instead of a human enemy using airplanes as missiles, I confront an invisible and unpredictable pathogen. My body armor is PPE. Covered from head to toe to care for the most critically ill and dying people. Daily safety checks on my patients breathing through ventilators, I sense their sorrow and desperate need for attention. Today, I am caring for a rather large, lovely man from a nursing home with COVID-19. He has a tracheostomy and is ventilator dependent. His eyes follow our moves intently through the glass window of his room. Clearly, he craves human contact. Desperation and loneliness prevail as he fights off a fever.

The nurse and I spend some time with him. We ask him questions about his life, but he is non-verbal and just gazes at us lovingly, appreciative of our brief companionship. The nurse talks to him about her children and shows him pictures saved on her cell phone, while I talk about Chico, my Chihuahua. I hold his hand and reassure him that we will not stop fighting for him. I will not let him die today, aware that I am also facing my grandmother's worsening health. We occupy his time as best we can, not knowing if viral droplets penetrate our masks. No family or visitors are admitted into his room. Vivid memories of my days at O'Hare dominate my mind.

Despite understanding my patient's hunger for contact, I moved on to the next patient. I exited his room and went about my tasks. From the corner of my eye, I glanced back on that lonely soul. Suddenly, he grabbed his ventilator tubing and tracheostomy and ripped them out. His ventilator was detached, spraying mucoid secretions around the room like an angry snake spewing its venom, potentially infecting everything in its path. His vitals were deteriorating rapidly. I struggled to put my PPE back on, yelled for help to save this confused and possibly suicidal man. At the same time, I was overcome with fear that I will become the next ICU patient. If that were the case, would I be as impatient for my end? With the desperate man's vital signs quickly deteriorating, the team worked at a steadfast pace to stabilize him. Luckily two weeks later, he returned to the nursing home where he resides but others who were not as fortunate. The eighteen-wheel refrigerated semi-tractor trailer parked at the loading dock buries their stories.

This is the life I have chosen; it is a vocation devoted to those who cannot care for themselves. It is my duty. Once home, I remain on high alert because my grandmother is dying from leukemia. I spend my days at the hospital caring for patients and my nights and weekends caring for her. Driving her to and from chemotherapy treatments and helping to feed and toilet her is my overtime occupation. She is a strong Italian immigrant who came to America with my grandfather while pregnant with my mother. She arrived in New York after a twelve-day voyage across the Atlantic traveling in the most barren of accommodations in

the bowels of the ship while the vacationers enjoyed a more luxurious travel experience. They had fourteen dollars in their pockets and a vision for a better life. But she is no longer full of vigor as she slowly fades away. Being the only healthcare worker in the family, other than a cousin doing a medical residency in another state, I am the one who took responsibility for both my elderly grandparents' medical care.

I am the eldest of my two siblings, with many years in between us. When I lost my grandfather, it was overwhelming. He was such a significant part of my life. In my youth we spent time traveling and visiting relatives in New Jersey, New York, California, and Italy. Just the three of us. My fondest memory was a month in Italy with them, visiting his childhood home and his brother on the family farm. We picked vegetables together, fed the pigs and chickens, and made pizza in the brick oven. In Rome, we marveled at the ceilings of St. Peter's Basilica and threw pennies in the Trevi fountain. I had all their attention and was by far the favorite grandchild. Yet, loss has entered my life with a vengeance over the past three years; my grandfather, my first dog, and now my grandmother.

I feel like my world is closing in on me. I eat my meals thinking it may be one of my last, so I make sure it is a good one. I called the cemetery and picked out and paid for my plot, as if I were buying real estate. I wanted to ensure it would be close to my grandparents' graves. I cleaned out all my extra clothes and old toiletries because I do not want anyone else to be burdened with my belongings, should this be my last day. I have not spent time with any friends or family because I worry about infecting them. I recently visited my parents by standing under my childhood home window and waiving to them.

I see the sorrow in my father's eyes while my mother just cries. I would not dare walk into their home or get too close because my mother is a breast cancer survivor. I am worried that if I unknowingly infect her, that it may cause her demise, I could never forgive myself if that happened. Presently, my only comfort is my loving companion, Chico, who I rescued two years ago from a shelter. I drive home every day feeling an isolation like no other, alone with my thoughts and no one to share them with, ruminating about my last day here on Earth. ■