

# Plague Diary

Margaret Porter Troupe, Graham Court Apartments, Harlem, New York City

## April 4, 2020

By the time I start this diary, I've been sheltering in since March 20<sup>th</sup>. The last person who's visited us inside the apartment was Monique Clesca. She came to lunch here. We sat apart and neither of us wore facemasks. We elbow bumped and didn't shake hands or kiss. I waited 14 days to see if I had symptoms of Covid-19.

The police arrived yesterday and made the people who hang out in A. Phillip Randolph Square Park, (formerly Dewey Square), drinking, loitering, littering, and just being an eyesore and nuisance, leave the park. This little triangular park is directly across the street from Graham Court and where Miles Davis and other beboppers playing at Minton's during the 1940s used to come to shoot up or do whatever they did there in-between sets. Minton's is around the corner on 118<sup>th</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and St. Nicholas. The police or parks people removed the benches too and put up a chicken-wire fence at the entrances to keep people out. Now those people come across the street and congregate under the scaffolding in front of Graham Court. There's a lot of drug dealing going on too. It feels quite a bit more unsafe around here lately. Must keep antenna raised for trouble.

Woke up today thinking about my friend Cynthia, who was sounding scary to me yesterday as we discussed how we're both feeling. I've been having congestion the last eight days and she has been having symptoms too but don't know whether to attribute them to her blood pressure medication, pollen (it's Spring now and everything's bursting in bloom) or the novel coronavirus, Covid-19. She said yesterday she had a terrific headache, cough, and I was sure she said a fever. She hadn't been able to sleep the night before and she sounded weak. I told her about the hair dryer treatment that's been circulating on Facebook and which I admitted I'd tried even though I knew the woman in the video was lying. But I am scared and desperate to get this congestion out of my head and chest and practically willing to

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do anything, and her treatment kind of sounded reasonable, since they said that heat kills the virus. So I tried it and honestly I felt better afterwards, but I can't be certain the hairdryer had anything to do with it, since I've been taking ampicillin for the last week, and doing all the rest of the advisories like drinking hot teas, gargling with warm salted water, having Quincy give me the chest therapy procedures demonstrated on another video that someone else had sent me on Messenger. Even though I don't have a fever, or a cough, shortness of breath, or any of the scary symptoms I've read about, all I keep thinking about is the fact that no one knows what or how or whatever about this virus and so I figured why not.

Yesterday, when I heard about Patricia Bosworth, after having heard about David Driskell dying the day before and then Bill Withers, and the day before that Ellis Marsalis, and the day before that Wallace Roney and the week before that my niece Tammy in Detroit who dropped dead in one day, without knowing she'd had any symptoms whatsoever, it was just too much, and I yelled out my pain in a Facebook post. I hate posting intimate details of my life on Facebook but somehow I couldn't resist the urge. It just felt like the best way to express my fear and grief. I've had so many family members and friends, people I love, die recently that I just gave in to the impulse and bared my feelings on fucking Facebook. Oh my god. Not that I knew Patty that well. Honestly, I've only known her just a few months, having met her at the marriage celebration of a mutual friend in Upstate New York last summer. Patty and I sat next to each other at his wedding celebration, and she regaled me with stories about her ex-husband the photographer, Tom Palumbo, who'd had a session with Miles Davis and shot one of the most beautiful pictures of Miles Davis I'd ever seen. Clear-eyed and healthy, Miles was standing behind a plastic sheet, staring directly into the camera, so young and innocent, so vulnerable. Patty told me the photo had been taken in Miles' home while he was building himself an indoor gym so he could do his boxing. He was off drugs and totally clean, which is why he looked so healthy. I think she said Miles must've been in his late 20s or early 30s.

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Patty was such a great storyteller and she had me spellbound the entire luncheon telling me about herself and the people she'd known and written about during her lifetime, including Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, and Diane Arbus. So I asked her if she'd do a salon. I told her that she was so interesting I'd love to have her as a guest at my Harlem Arts Salon, and to my surprise she readily accepted. "I'd be happy to," she'd said brightly. I don't know what it is, but I have the best luck meeting the most wonderfully engaging people. After the luncheon, I started to have doubts that it was such a great idea to have Patty because as ignorant as I was about her and her life story, I figured everybody else was too and doubted that I could attract enough of an audience to justify the expense of having her solo as the special guest even though I realized she was an important historical figure that would bring cache to my program. Also, I couldn't find any of her books anywhere, which was really weird. They were all out of print. So I procrastinated and ruminated about how to deal with the invitation. Then it hit me, *Of course! Miles Davis is the connection, so center the invite around a discussion about him.* Miles was a subject that always brought in a good crowd. People were endlessly fascinated about Miles and any and everything to do with him.

A few weeks later after the luncheon at Stanley Cohen's, I learned that Stanley Nelson's film *Birth of the Cool* was finally being shown in New York at the Film Forum and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. And I thought, *Aha! Maybe Patty and Stanley Nelson* would be a good pairing since Patty's husband's photo of Miles was included in that documentary. I called Patty to see if she'd object to being on a program with Stanley and true to form, she was gracious and open to the idea. I checked with Stanley Nelson's team to see if they were open to the idea and bingo! I had my program set.

I don't know why Patty's death brought me to tears yesterday. I had been unable to cry over Joe Overstreet, or Steve Cannon. No tears for Tammy or Wallace

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or Driskell, which wasn't surprising since I had no real emotional connection to Wallace or David Driskell, nor Bill Withers and Ellis Marsalis. But Tammy was my niece and she'd died so young and tragically, having just lost both her father, my brother Wash to whom I was deeply connected, and her mother Dorothy with whom I had no particular connection. But somehow Patty, an eighty-five year old white woman I'd met a little over a year before (was it that long?) brought my composure, my grief, all crashing down.

Maybe it also had to do with the times we're in. This modern day plague and the incessant sounds of ambulance sirens, the half-deserted streets, the closed shops and mask-covered faces, the discarded rubber white, purple, blue gloves strewn about the streets, the lines of grocery shoppers standing six-feet apart now made to wait outside the supermarkets until allowed entry by a store sentry when it's deemed permissible to allow another few inside to preserve the social distancing now mandated by Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio. Maybe it's also the pent up rage, frustrated anger at Donald Trump and his agency of nincompoops, his confederacy of incompetents who mismanage this health crisis at every opportunity in their craven desire to benefit politically, financially, and the impotence it lays on my soul that caused me to cry out on Facebook.

## **April 5, 2020**

Warnings today to cease and desist going to the supermarket and the pharmacy at least for the next two weeks. What is abundantly clear is that those in authority issuing these directives haven't a clue what's happening with this plague. Read a tweet from Charles Blow that a relative of his who's in the health care industry advised to wear glasses, goggles, or some kind of eye protection, because the virus can enter the system through the eyes. Decided to call close friends and neighbors today in addition to taking a stab at housecleaning. Kali called from DC to say that Louise Meriwether has been hospitalized. Annoyed that I didn't know this

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already; the person I know who knows Louise closest didn't call to tell me. So I started calling friends and finally reached Cheryl to ask about Louise, who I learned has Covid-19 and was taken to St Luke's last Thursday (April 2<sup>nd</sup>). I really wanted to yell at Cheryl since she'd been avoiding me anyway but I didn't. Decided to call other people instead of waiting for people to call me. Don't know why I feel like people should call me. But I do. So I started with my neighbor Sidney who had also posted a photo on FB with several of her closest friends that included Gayle. Sidney told me that Gayle has been hospitalized with Covid-19, but her family wants to keep the news private; then she told me about another friend's mastectomy. Shocked I called my friend. She sounded cheerful but didn't share the news about her own health. I figured she didn't want me to know.

### **April 6, 2020**

Scanned Facebook today looking for the names of friends and loved ones and discovered that Patty's male friend whom I didn't know died the day after she did. I wrote Patty's assistant, Jaime, to express condolences. She replied that she was heartbroken at Patty's death and so I'm sure she's feeling a double whammy right now. Like Davis, Tammy's brother and my nephew. I see he's posting a lot of his thoughts on Facebook and pouring out his grief there. I comment sometimes but often don't because I don't want to put my feelings out like that so publicly. My niece, Kendra, called yesterday to ask if Tammy had died. I felt terrible because I realized I hadn't thought to let her know beforehand. Another indication of how disconnected we are as a family, in spite of the fact we always thought we were so close. Our family is like a forsaken garden, no tending, no nurturing, no replanting. Everything going to seed. As the older generation passes away, we younger ones are dying one by one alone and out of touch with one another, which is brought into high relief by this plague. Especially for me. I really am feeling it.

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Sometimes I wonder if it's because I am one of the youngest of my mother's fifteen children, so that at soon-to-be seventy-one years old, I still feel like a child. Growing up I've always felt emotionally isolated. By the time my mother gave birth to me, she was so overwhelmed with all those other children she depended on them to help raise the rest of us and they themselves needed mothering. I was thinking also that my mother gave birth to nine boys and six girls and the girls, with the exception of her firstborn Dorothy, the rest of us girls came in-between all those males, Betty had four boys ahead of her, Barbara only had one, I had three boys ahead of me and Jackie had none. Dorothy never had an older brother. I think my mother really liked her girls who were almost like firstborns in a way.

The call came in just about the time I'd decided to check. Louise Meriwether is holding on. She's been moved to a rehab center on the East Side, a very good place according to Cheryl, and she's breathing well. Her fever has gone down, but she's very tired and weak. She's only eating pureed foods, no solids. Sleeping a lot. Trying to regain her strength. But Joan Sandler died today. Joan and Louise were very close friends. When I met them, they were a circle: Joan Sandler, Louise Meriwether, Maya Angelou, Vertamae Grosvenor, Jayne Cortez and Rosa Guy. Joan was an absolutely stunningly beautiful woman to me, made more so because she was extremely cultured and sophisticated. I remember Quincy in his attempt to get me to start writing told me to interview Joan. I did, but nothing ever came of it. I never felt confident about writing and I was hopelessly shy and underexposed. I was just a country girl in the big city and didn't have a clue about all these people I was meeting at the time. I think I wrote something about Joan and gave it to Thomas Johnson who was one of my mentors at *The New York Times*. He was very critical of my writing. I'd always been told I could write well, but I never believed it. Nor did I have any ambitions to become a writer. Come to think of it, I've never had a real passion for any one thing it seems. I am so easily distracted and flit from one thing to the next, never really dedicated to just one goal, one mission. No in-depth

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attention to any one thing. Flit like a butterfly. Always a quick learner, new ideas attract me, like a bee to honeysuckle.

Those women – Louise, Rosa, Joan, Vertamae – were so strong and powerful. They were quite a bit older than I; I was just a fly on the wall. Nobody cared what I thought and my whole job was to stay out of their way, blend in, don't bring too much attention to myself. Their egos were enormous almost as large and overwhelming as their accomplishments. They were always kind to me, or shall I say tolerant, and I was with a most domineering and dominant personality who was jealous of his position. So I stayed on the sidelines as much as possible. What did I have to offer? A nice smile. But nothing threatening that would cause me to be unwelcome in their presence. Then again there was so much going on, it was hard to retain everything. It was hard to find a niche when I didn't know who I was or what I wanted. Just being there among them was enough. They all lived in Dark West Village (the apartments on Central Park West from 96<sup>th</sup> Street to 100<sup>th</sup> Street, between Central Park and Columbus Avenue). Those were kind of luxury apartment buildings, probably the first upscale apartment buildings on the park where a lot of professional blacks lived and many had terraces.

I listened today for the sirens and I can't really tell if they're more frequent now than before this plague. But they tell me on the television that the calls to 911 have doubled or tripled since the plague. Living in Harlem, close to two major hospitals, actually three if you count Harlem Hospital, I'm used to hearing ambulance sirens, so I can't really distinguish whether there's been an uptick. St. Luke's is just across Morningside Park and Mt. Sinai is half a mile down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Harlem Hospital is about a mile or so north on Lenox (Malcolm X Blvd) Avenue at 135<sup>th</sup> Street. Louise Meriwether is at St Luke's I've been told, I think I ought to call but I don't really want to since I imagine they're overwhelmed there with all the

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Covid-19 patients. Also imagine Louise doesn't have a room with a telephone and that she's probably unable to talk anyway if she has difficulty breathing.

## April 7, 2020

Today I took a quick look on Facebook for the dead but I didn't find any people I know and love. Neither did I receive a call or news of a death. I was kept busy all day typing up a list of poems Quincy wants to include in *Duende*, his new book of poems to be published by Seven Stories Press in Spring of 2021. Despite doing the work in front of the television, I didn't pay attention to the news about the most recent developments during this day of the plague. It seems the number of deaths are subsiding, but the warnings to stay inside were being repeated by almost everyone. Not only stay inside, but if one does go out, one is cautioned to wear eye goggles, a face mask, and gloves. To cover completely in other words. Received an email from Karole offering to bring me turkey soup and homemade bread. I turn her down, despite wanting to ask her to bring me some fresh garlic. Then Chandra calls later in the day. I was sure she'd tell me about Joan Sandler's death. Turns out she didn't know about it herself, so I'm the bearer of that bad news. Chandra was about to make her last trip to the grocery store before sheltering in for the next week or so. I desperately want to ask Chandra to bring me some fresh vegetables, peppers, garlic, and a few other produce items, but I resist the urge.

I spent the day in the bedroom, which is in the rear of the apartment and therefore was unable to hear the sirens. Oh, Julie Park died. She was in the fashion industry and lived in House 3 of the Graham Court. Julie was Korean, and I found out about her death on the Graham Court Tenants Association's Facebook page. I met Julie in the 1980s through Lester Hyatt, a fashion designer with whom Julie worked. Lester gave me three of his designs because he wanted me to model them at work. I worked at that time at *The New York Times*. I never had much contact with Julie, not one that I can recall. Lost touch with Lester when we moved to La Jolla. I think he

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died of the AIDS virus. When I try to conjure his face, it is a blur, a blank. I will Google him to see if there's a photo. I can't remember how I met Lester. So after doing the Google search I see that he was a native of Panama who moved to NYC at age eighteen and enrolled at Parsons, where he won the Butterick Vogue Young Designer Award during his first year. He interned with Giorgio di Sant'Angelo, and designed for Lady Madonna (a maternity label) for years prior to opening his namesake boutique in NYC. He lived in House 3, so perhaps I met him through Terry Williams, who also lives in Graham Court's House 3 or Jan Williams, Terry's sister, who's since died. We all used to be very friendly back in the 1980s. Harlem was in the middle of the crack wars and all of us bonded together as a kind of wall of protection, I guess, against the dealers and the junkies and the young violent gangs. Harlem was a wasteland; we had no services and there were a lot of vacant lots, abandoned buildings, filthy supermarkets, methadone clinics, junkies lined the streets, and only the bravest shopkeepers kept decent hours. Every shopkeeper hid behind bulletproof glass, and there was lots of crack on the streets and lots of storefronts that sold drug paraphernalia. Everyone did lots of cocaine in the 80s and Harlem was no exception. In those days we were newcomers to the neighborhood so we were regarded with a great deal of suspicion. The building underwent many dark days of no elevator service, no heat, no hot water. Lots of break-ins. At the same time, there was lots of camaraderie; we helped each other. We also had our own storage bins in the basement; we had a Laundromat in the basement. We had our share of hardships too.

I never knew what Julie's job was. I'll have to pry the fog from my memory. I was an activist in the tenant's association; I was the secretary. It was so difficult getting the older, more longtime tenants to work cooperatively. I'm not sure whether Julie died of the plague; it seems she may have had another ailment. Does it matter? It's still during the time of the plague.

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Tenants are complaining about the theft of packages delivered by UPS and FedEx, which are left in the entry foyers of each building. So far I've not had a problem but residents in Houses 1 and 2 are really bitching about it. Our building has had scaffolding around it for at least two years now. It's mandated by the city and is supposed to be there so that buildings can be inspected for loose bricks but nothing has happened and it encourages people to hang out there. It feels less safe and I had an incident not too long ago where I felt menaced by a pair of young passersby as I was returning home loaded down with groceries and fumbling for my keys as I was trying to enter the gated entry to our courtyard. Luckily, I had the presence of mind to keep my fears suppressed while at the same time projecting an aggressive attitude like, "I'm not the one you want to be messing with." Fortunately, nothing happened but the incident left me a bit shaken when I thought about it afterwards. Made a mental note to stay alert and to not put myself into a vulnerable position like that again, i.e. to have my keys readily available by the time I reach the gate.

Sidetracked today by Anne Moody, the late civil rights activist and author from Gloster, Mississippi, my hometown. Learned so much about her and her work. Didn't know anything about her really and so sad that when I was told that her sister, Adeline Moody, wanted me to introduce her to Danny Glover in 2014, I didn't have enough curiosity to follow up. I did go by their spread though, but everything was gated and awfully unwelcoming. I listened to rumors, no gossip, instead, i.e. that Anne had dementia and the family was secretive and private. It was Dave at the Afro-American History Museum in Natchez who came to see me to tell me Adeline Moody wanted me to introduce her to Danny Glover because she wanted to approach him about doing a movie about Anne's life. If I recall correctly he said that

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Adeline wanted to be assured though that she'd maintain total artistic control....  
That turned me off. I was also so focused on my own shit I didn't bother.

It was my first visit for the summer arts camp and I was absorbed trying to get all of that together. I have to revisit my notes to see if I can recall exactly what unfolded. We did go up to the museum though, but I now wonder what would've been the result of that had I taken the time. At the same time, I'd met Austin Straus, who'd spent a couple of days with us in Harlem, after he left Bob Holman's. Austin was such a pain in the ass. OMG. A fantastic artist, he was so self-absorbed and he filled my head with negative ideas about Anne, to whom he'd been married for 10 years and about her sister. Austin claimed he'd been the one to encourage Anne to write her book and that he was in a fight to get co-ownership of her papers, which in my reading today, I learned were sold to Emory University in 2013, which would've been around the time I met Austin. He also told me that his son Sasha was living in Gloster with Anne, and that Anne and her family had turned his son against him. He indicated that Sasha had some kind of mental health issue as did Anne, according to him, so perhaps those things influenced me in a way they shouldn't have. Now six years later I'm reading all this stuff about Anne's life and that E.L. Doctorow had been the editor of her first book, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. I don't know whether I'd inquired whether Austin and Anne had lived in New York City. I don't think I did nor did I inquire about any of their history I don't think. Learned in my reading today that indeed they'd met in New York at NYU and that Austin was a poet (he may've also told me he was a poet, since he subsequently married Wanda Coleman). I think too Austin was so bedraggled and smelly as if he hadn't had a bath or shower in ages that it was hard for me to focus on what he was telling me for the funk emanating from his body. Quincy made him take a shower. Just came right out and said it, "Austin, you need to take a shower." Once he washed up, he turned out to be quite a good-looking man who I imagined must have been killer-looking in his youth. Certainly charming.

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He was on a tour selling his art books and sold three to us at an astronomical rate which I ended up not paying for altogether as it turns out because I realized that they were not done on archival paper and were beginning to fade. He stopped bugging me about the payments after a while once I told him that he'd overcharged me. He donated one to my nonprofit and the others I paid for, about \$1,000 I think. Must check my records.

I'm beginning to lose interest in the daily briefings from Andrew Cuomo and the nonstop coverage of the coronavirus. It was said that perhaps the number of deaths and the extent to which the plague will kill people may have been overblown. That would not be surprising given how the press is so quick to hype disasters for the ratings I'm sure. Yet, my confidence and everyone else's has been so undermined to the extent that I don't even feel comfortable venturing out. We're still being advised that the worst is yet to come, but we (I) don't really know what the worst is, as far as I'm concerned we are in the worst right now!

### **April 9, 2020**

The first time I've been outside in about two weeks or so. I am wearing my army issue pilots jumpsuit, a lightweight raincoat, my Andrew Yang MATH cap, a 3M mask that Lisa and Roddey sent me and a pair of purple rubber gloves they also sent. It's warm about 52 degrees, and the trees are blooming. There has been a light rain today and a more serious storm is forecast. I have to go to the pharmacy and decide to do a bit of grocery shopping. I also intend to run the engine of my car, a 2006 Pontiac Grand Prix. It's been sitting on 117<sup>th</sup> Street one car in from St Nicholas Avenue for two weeks. I think I need to run the engine for at least half an hour to avoid it losing any functionality.

Almost everyone I see on the street is wearing a facemask and or gloves, except for what appears to be two couples, both apparently millennials, and both

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have young children. One couple is white the other couple is black. The white couple has a toddler and an infant, a newborn, in a stroller, neither husband nor wife is wearing any protective coverings, neither mask nor gloves; neither is the toddler nor the newborn. My mouth drops open but I hold my tongue. They are walking in front of my building. There's a light rain this morning, so perhaps they think the rain has cleaned the air of any potential virus threat. The toddler has a scooter.

I stopped in Fine Fare Supermarket on my way to the CVS Pharmacy between 116<sup>th</sup> & 117<sup>th</sup> Street on Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox Avenue to us old timers). The last time I was at Fine Fare, they'd begun to control the number of shoppers they allowed entry and so we had to wait in a line outside in order to enter. Today they've a sign that explains why we're waiting outside and how far we need to stand apart in consideration of the social distancing directives. The line is short today, only three of us when I first get in line. The person ahead of me is a young Latino, perhaps, male wearing a DKNY black puff jacket and a surgeon's mask. He's talking on his cellphone. Ahead of him and at the front of the line is an elderly black man with a red shopping cart. He's fully decked with a mask that looks like the white N95 that I'm wearing but it's not the 3M brand I'm wearing. He's wearing a hat and also regular black faux leather gloves. The young man is telling the person, I think it's his woman, that he's talking on the phone with that he doesn't believe the dangers of the virus are real. And the black man interrupts him and says, "If you don't believe it's real, why are you wearing a mask?" The Latino guy mumbles something I can't quite hear. But the young guy doesn't take off the mask. The elderly black man says, "That don't make no sense. If you don't believe it's real, why would you wear a mask?" The Latino man ignores this and continues to talk on his cellphone, mostly about how annoyed he is that we're standing outside the store for what seems like an eternity while several shoppers exit the store, about six or so shoppers, and several deliverymen enter the store by manually opening the automatic sliding

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doors. I too am annoyed and so is the elderly black man at the head of the line but we keep quiet.

Then I see a single black young woman exit the store. She's wearing a gold-colored puff jacket, no hat, no gloves, no eye covering and she walks down the street. She returns after about ten or fifteen minutes and re-enters the store through the exit door so I assume perhaps she works inside although by her clothing I can't imagine she does and also because she's not wearing any protective clothing. Five minutes later or so, she exits with a small child about three years old and a young man who may be her husband or partner; none of them are wearing any protective clothing.

Inside the store they've put up a transparent shield at all the cash registers and all the cashiers are wearing face masks and gloves. Stock boys are wearing masks too; I don't pay attention whether they're wearing gloves. No more than about 20 shoppers are inside the store, which is fairly well stocked. I find everything I need without too much difficulty. The only items that seem to be scarce are the dish washing liquids, hand soap although I find three, and my brand of floor detergent (lavender Fabuloso) is sold out, so I buy a small bottle of concentrated Pine Sol. I don't know when I'll start cleaning the house. The very thought of it is depressing. The apartment is huge and at this point in my life, the very last chore I want is to clean it.

Two doors down from Fine Fare is a CVS Pharmacy. I go there to pick up prescriptions for Quincy and me. CVS has a self-checkout counter at the front and the pharmacy is in the rear of the store. In fact I visit CVS first before I go to Fine Fare because I know they're not going to have the prescriptions ready and I was right. When I enter, there are two greeters at the entry, they also have sanitation wipes at the entry and the greeters are wearing masks and gloves. I bypass them and head for the pharmacy section. It's now all tricked out with red masking tape

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markers on the floor six feet apart and the counter has been marked off as well. It's ten o'clock in the morning or so and there are very few shoppers. Counting me there are no more than five shoppers inside. There's one person ahead of me. She's wearing the mask and gloves. They've hung clear shower curtains at all the counters and behind the counters the workers are wearing masks. The cashier is wearing gloves but no mask. He beckons the woman ahead of me to come forward and she stands behind the six-foot marker. He can hardly hear what she says so he beckons her to approach closer. I don't know why they have the six foot marker at the counter since they have the transparent plastic shower curtain there hung from the ceiling with a cutout opening near the debit card reader and an opening to pass the items through. They are well protected. I'm impressed with the changes they've made and stunned that it's taken so long – at least a month or two – to get this done.

Perhaps it's because according to news reports more people of color and in particular African Americans have died of this plague. Perhaps it has taken the general public this long to figure out this novel coronavirus is really real. After picking up my prescriptions and completing my shopping, I walk back to Seventh Avenue to my apartment and decide I'll stop by the deli on the corner of my block to see if they have *The New York Times* and *Daily News*. I also want to buy a lottery ticket. At the deli, they've taken the door off the entryway altogether and they've put down the masking tape six foot markers. The cashiers are not wearing masks but they are elevated behind a counter, perhaps standing two feet or so above the ground floor. They are wearing gloves and I notice they are constantly cleaning off the card readers. Most of the people in the store, about six or so including me, stand in line behind the six foot markers and wait to play the numbers or buy our lottery tickets. I bought the last copy of *The New York Times* and *Daily News*. The rain has stopped. And I cross the street, which I can do even though the light is green because there's hardly any traffic. I feel lucky today and hope I win something. I also hope I haven't picked up the virus.

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**April 10, 2020**

A kind of stasis sets in, days fade into each other and the news not any clearer about where we are. I suppose what I figured out today was that the reason they want us to stay inside is because they don't have any way to test who has the virus and who doesn't and the social distancing is a containment strategy to reduce the possibility of becoming infected so that the hospitals are not overrun. Haven't watched Governor Cuomo's daily briefings for a few days now just have glimpsed a bit of it, snippets from snippets of other cable news talking heads. The graphs are showing the numbers of new cases falling steeply while the number of deaths rise every day. That's because the deaths are of those patients hospitalized and put on ventilators. The longer a patient is on a ventilator the more likely that person is going to die.

There was an image today of a gigantic grave that's been dug on one of the islands around Manhattan where the unclaimed bodies of the dead are being buried. These are the bodies that were stored in 18 wheel refrigerator trucks outside the local hospitals here. They are saying that the bodies are being buried temporarily until next of kin are located and can claim the bodies. I doubt this will ever happen since the numbers of dead is over 18,000. Mass graves for unclaimed bodies. Many of the cable talking heads are showing clips of hospital workers who are decrying the horrific working conditions they are being forced to contend with despite the Trump administration's bald-faced lying about how great everything is and what a great job his administration is doing. Meanwhile, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and all the other reputable news organizations are reporting otherwise. Rachel Maddow aired a video from an Ohio nurse who came to New York City to help with the crisis. His testimony brought me to tears. He talked about being the person who has to move the dead bodies out of the wards, tag their toes, and call their relatives to announce their deaths. He was obviously exhausted mentally and

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emotionally, as well as physically. He was begging, begging the public to please, please stay home because all the medical people are completely exhausted and on the verge of collapse. I think his message more than anything brought the message home to me in a way none of anything I'd heard so far did. At the same time, I'd seen another clip from a patient in Tennessee, a nurse who'd been stricken and who made a video of herself trying to breathe. It was surreal and so absolutely scary to watch her as she struggled to breathe and as she described her pain. Her message too was "This ain't no joke. Please, please stay home."

I called Brandon on FaceTime. He's been working from home (finally) and he picked up the call. It was completely gratifying to speak with him and to see his face. It felt so good. I was surprised at how much I loved it. I called during the time I was preparing dinner so I didn't stay on too long. I just wanted to make sure I got to him before his birthday on Sunday and I wanted to alert him to the book I ordered as a gift for him. He lives in Montclair NJ and is a senior vice-president at Boston Brewery in charge of their supply chain in North America, I think, maybe it's just the northeast region that is his territory. I'll have to double check. But he told me that Boston Brewery had ordered one million masks two weeks prior to the public announcement that masks were to be worn. They had their supply within two days I think he said. He's terribly smart and such a hard worker. He hates not being on the road and having to be cooped up at home with wife and kids whom he loves madly but he's spent most of his adult life working away from home and being on the road and he loves the solitude of it, I think.

Cynthia texted to say she was okay and I got a call from Carole in La Jolla. I promised to FaceTime with her over the weekend. It'll be a chance to see how things are going over there, although it's been almost 20 years since we left and our connections aren't as strong as they once were. I'd spoken to Lucy yesterday but that was an unsatisfactory exchange since Lucy has dementia and all the entire

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dialogue with her is of her asking me how I am and whether I've been traveling. I answer patiently only to be asked the same questions once I give her a response. I did not search Facebook for any more deaths nor have I called anyone to find out what's what. I did receive an email from Eve Sandler about Joan's death as an afterthought it seemed. She primarily was informing everyone that Louise Meriwether was stable and approaching her 97<sup>th</sup> birthday (May 8<sup>th</sup>). It's all so wearying that I'm discouraged to call people.

Most of today was spent searching for cover art for Quincy's new book of poems to be published by Seven Stories Press. And, of course, cooking. I have quite low energy and little incentive to use all this wonderful time to catch up on the millions of chores I could be doing in the apartment, especially in my office, with my taxes and general organizational stuff that is so tedious.

Beginning to feel my muscles atrophy. Yesterday I felt the blood fluttering in my head and eardrums. Thought I was having arrhythmia or perhaps it was high blood pressure or something else.

The weather was overcast and there was a high wind. It felt rather cold as if winter was coming back; normally, we have a last roar of the winter lion and a final dump of snow before spring really arrives.

This from Yahoo News "WASHINGTON — Russian spies are likely using the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to collect intelligence on U.S. supply lines, which have struggled to provide adequate medical equipment, according to an intelligence report issued earlier this week by the Department of Homeland Security and obtained by Yahoo News.

The Russian intelligence services "likely are watching the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic," says an April 6 intelligence bulletin produced by the DHS Counterintelligence Mission Center.

"Intelligence collection on medical supply chain vulnerabilities could inform future operations aimed at weakening key logistical elements in preparation for a wartime attack, or opportunistically during an emergency," the document says.

A billboard in St. Petersburg, Russia, reads: "Avoid crowded places, it will save a life." (Dmitri Lovetsky/AP)

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The unclassified DHS report notes that Russia has since January conducted a disinformation campaign related to the coronavirus epidemic. DHS also expects that Russia will use the current crisis as a way to improve its future information operations.

“We expect the Kremlin analyzes American public reaction to disinformation and adjusts techniques to maximize the impact both during the current COVID-19 situation and in the future, such as Russia’s ongoing 2020 election interference,” the report says.

Daniel Hoffman, a retired CIA senior Intelligence Officer, said that Russia is using its propaganda to send a not so cryptic message to the U.S. government. "The Russians are well aware that we know what our vulnerabilities are," he said. "Implicitly threatening us, the Kremlin wants us to know they also know our vulnerabilities."

I really do think Cuomo and De Blasio were quite late in enforcing the containment measures and their efforts, especially de Blasio’s were half-hearted at best. I understood de Blasio’s reluctance to close the public schools because they’re filled with black and brown children, over a million of them, and the prospect of all these kids at home would cause any right thinking person to pause. At the same time, it had to be done and was done two weeks after the public announcement and because de Blasio got a lot of public pressure to close the schools. But this has been instrumental in the number of people affected. New York has more cases than any country in the world. There will be a reckoning down the road over this I’m sure but right now the focus is on the health of the first medical responders and the lack of an antibody or any tests as the major challenges facing everybody. Without widespread testing and an antidote it’s inconceivable that the containment measure will be lifted, despite Trump’s pushing to ignore those concerns in favor of getting the business of business open. It’s rumored that Trump is bankrupt according to a headline I read about Deutsche Bank saying this was the case. Trump hasn’t a clue and if the rumblings we’re hearing about his supporters losing faith in him are true, there’s no telling how he’ll respond or what he’ll do.

**April 11, 2020**

Very long conversation with Matthew today; he says he’s going broke and that he’s putting one of his homes up for sale. He talked a lot about the virus and

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seems to be taking it more seriously than when I'd spoken to him in the past weeks where he often referred to it as no more than the flu. After I got off the phone I realized I didn't ask him how he felt. To me he sounded somber but I didn't detect any other signs that his health may be compromised. Quincy thought he sounded different. We'll see. He did telephone me, which is kind of rare but not altogether unusual. Normally, we text. I thought he sounded lonely although he keeps in touch with his friends and colleagues, and with his family.

Discovered another relative's husband has been battling the virus for over a week. He was quarantined in their home and his wife posted the information on Instagram, which is how I learned about it. She mentioned she'd debated whether or not to post but decided she would, I assumed because she was seeing improvement in his health. She talked about the fear and anxiety she's had since he became ill, the treatments they were administering to help him recover, and the effects it's had and having on their toddler. She also talked about her exhaustion because she's been unable to sleep during this time and her worry about their child who's too young to understand why he can't see his father who's shut up in a room in the house. Her husband doesn't have any underlying health issues to my knowledge. He's in his 40s and works in law enforcement. What got me was the photo her mom posted of the child. Apparently, he's been removed from his home and in the photo that was taken in her mom's apartment the child is standing in the doorway looking out onto the patio. It's taken from behind him and you can imagine the child's demeanor through his posture: forlorn.

## **April 12, 2020**

What is really beginning to be hard is the inability to tell one day from the next, how the days are fading into each other. A malaise starts to set in; it drains the energy out of you, the energy that optimism imparts. Nothing is ever going to be the same again. That realization also deadens the psyche. I mean I find I don't even want

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to risk taking a walk in the park for fear that the virus maybe in the air and if you're walking along the street, the possibility of passing through a cloud of virus that someone just ahead of you has coughed into the air, a runner perhaps or another stroller in the street, or that one might step into the spit someone has carelessly expelled onto the sidewalk.

Even though we're beginning to see a marked decline in the number of new cases of hospitalizations, intubations, etc., according to Cuomo's daily briefings, the numbers of deaths continue to rise. Still no substantial testing is happening so while the social distancing and other maintenance efforts are reducing the number of new cases, it's not going to be reasonable to lift the containment until tests, a system of tracking, and a vaccine are available, which will take who knows how long. So we're still confined.

Today I got a call from Rachel who says her father is in hospital with coronavirus; he has dementia and was in a nursing home. She's taken in her mother-in-law who just had two heart operations and is recuperating. Got a message yesterday from Eve who reported that Louise Meriwether remains stable at the rehab center she's been transported to but no visits (naturally) or calls are possible. The anguish of not being able to see or comfort a loved one who's suffering has got to be a living hell.

Cooped up at home I have an insatiable desire to eat. What does that mean? I am not hungry. Decided to start using the exercise bike again, since my muscles seem to be atrophying, also to drink a gallon of water a day that keeps me running to the toilet every five minutes it seems, and am reading a fantastic instruction book on yoga, because I want to stretch and tone. When I was a young woman, Margaret, a friend I met at *The New York Times*, introduced me to yoga. I'd gotten good enough at it to do a headstand. Eventually I laid all that training by the roadside when my

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attention was switched to living with Quincy. I have lost all flexibility in my joints and muscles. I wonder if I'll ever be able to regain any of it through yoga.

Staying up late at night keeps me drowsy during the day.

### **April 13, 2020**

Sent out an eblast to all my supporters today and got a terrific response from so many people. I was reluctant to send it because I felt that people would see it as an attempt to raise money and not a genuine concern for their wellbeing, which it was. Both. Hearing from so many people though was quite a lift to the spirit and I'm looking forward to getting more replies. People respond to outreach when you make it about them. Simple marketing. But at the end of the day, people need people and I needed that uplift. To know people cared and appreciated the outreach whatever the motivation was a good sign.

Saw on Facebook poet Shirley Campbell died. I've known her for god knows how many years, but never really knew her at all. I think she was once a professional tennis player, at least that's what I remember someone telling me. In the post today, it was mentioned that she had been hospitalized for quite a while with Parkinson's so this death from coronavirus complications isn't quite unexpected I'd imagine.

Had a nice chat with Cynthia. She's feeling better. Felt a kind of sore throat myself tonight. Will have to keep vigilant, especially since I read tonight that some people in South Korea who'd recovered from Covid-19 have been diagnosed with the disease again. Seems there's some question as to whether they were ever fully recovered in the first place, have re-contracted the illness or the illness reactivated itself inside their bodies. That is some totally scary news. Seems like doomsday is really approaching.

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Cheered Matthew up today. Hope he can stay positive. He's worried to death about being crushed by debt. I don't believe he will be; he always seems to end up on his feet. Let's hope my instincts prove right.

## **April 14, 2020**

The eblast message to all my supporters and my subscribers is yielding lovely responses from friends I haven't spoken to in years. What an unexpected and rewarding surprise.

## **April 15, 2020**

Finding it harder to write each day. Continue to receive responses to eblasts. Tapered off quite a bit. News announces 700+ people died today from the Covid-19. Spoke to Mary Russ in Mississippi about the summer arts camp and how to deliver remotely; she promised to look into how the school system communicates with the children and said there has been no investment in online learning and broadband in general. Called Mary Gallagher at the Mississippi Regional Housing Authority No. 7 to find out how they communicate with their residents in the rural projects. Learned the federal government will give smart phones to families receiving assistance with so many minutes allotted but there are no controls on how those minutes are used nor any penalties for misuse of them. No enforcement in other words. Did not listen to Gov. Cuomo today; in general he says that NYC has passed its peak and less people are being hospitalized. It seems that we're all exhausted with the situation and are all trying to figure out how to manage being restricted in our movements. I hope to really focus on all the little thorny chores that I keep putting off until tomorrow because a reckoning is coming and I won't have any excuses. Even social media isn't holding my attention the way it used to; so numbed by everything. Must check on Louise Meriwether and Gayle. Must focus. Must write things down, carry a

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notepad around so I can jot down ideas as they come instead of waiting for a time to sit at the computer at the end of the night.

## April 16, 2020

At 7:00pm instead of the fireworks that have been set off to celebrate all the medical people and first responders at St Luke's Hospital, tonight there was the sound of Frank Sinatra singing "New York, New York." St. Luke's is straight across Morningside Park at 116<sup>th</sup> Street about five or six blocks away and the song was blaring so loudly I could hear it clearly. I wondered to myself if these kinds of things boost the morale of the workers. At that volume and imagining how dog tired they must be, I wondered if it would be more annoying, nerve wrecking than energizing? Everyone is so very exhausted by this whole pandemic and the lies that come from the Oval Office that I'd imagine nerves are frayed. I haven't been out of my building since I went for groceries and the pharmacy two weeks ago? I'm losing track of time. It's hard to know what's going on. My entire confidence in intermingling with anyone or even passing anyone on the street has been undermined. I don't know if I'll ever feel safe again.

Two days ago I felt as if I had a sore throat coming on. That was upsetting. I worry about not only catching the virus but bringing it indoors. That's not good. We are being told that we're on the other side of the curve but I don't know what that means for someone like me who may or may not be a carrier or healthy or vulnerable. The longer I stay inside the worse my fears become and That's Not Good. The longer I'm inside the worse it is too in terms of remembering words. I'm finding I can't remember simple words as I'm writing. Scary. Doing crossword puzzles doesn't seem to be a problem though.

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## **April 17, 2020**

Have fallen into a stupor, a kind of malaise. Binge watching *Ozark*. Going to bed at 2:30 am or so every night. Occasional trips to the supermarket and the pharmacy, but as the information comes out about what is known and unknown about the virus, I stay inside for as long as possible and avoid all human contact for as long as possible. Gov. Cuomo makes daily briefings that give us a sense of the number of deaths and hospitalizations; the trend is definitely going down. Unless there's adequate, easily accessible testing and an antidote, going out and comingling is still at the same risk level as before. Also, the longer I stay inside the more my confidence about it being safe to go out and about without proper self-protective gear (gloves, mask & whatever else may be appropriate), the less secure I feel. That is not a good thing. Besides, wearing gloves and a mask aren't so user-friendly; I can barely breathe wearing a mask. The gloves don't really offer so much protection by themselves because if you're touching infected surfaces wearing gloves you can still transmit the virus. Ohlala, so, it seems to me the best thing is to keep distancing and keep yourself at home!

## **April 18, 2020**

Checked in with Porter on WhatsApp. He stayed in Romania with his girlfriend after his basketball season was suspended. She lives in Satu Mare in the northeast above Cluj Napoca, a city he took me to last time I visited him. Really hip place with lots of universities and therefore lots of young people, terrific restaurants, and a real cool vibe. Says he's going to stay until June when he hopes to be able to get a Romanian passport. I hope he's right. Romania has been so strict about the virus, he says he's unable to go out without a permit. No deaths so far there.

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## **April 19, 2020**

It's getting pretty tiresome to stay inside all the time. Even though I have plenty of space and books and all kinds of things to self-entertain, I miss people! And honestly, I was not that outgoing in the first place, but having restrictions placed on my movements makes me think about what I cannot do and increases my desire to do it. Isn't that always the way? Then I think about all the people who are incarcerated in prisons or confined due to physical disabilities or illness and I say to myself, "Shut the fuck up! Relax. Get busy with all the shit you can be doing to get these closets cleaned, the apartment reorganized, the artwork catalogued, my taxes done!" You know all that stuff you put off because it's so tedious and boring. But I'm talking to my mind and, hopefully, before this is all over, I'll have convinced myself to get busy and get it all done!

## **April 20, 2020**

Until the state/city/federal government can assure us they have proper methods to accurately test and contain this deadly disease, which does not seem like that is coming anytime soon, I'll work from home and go out only as necessary to get food and refill our medical prescriptions. Ah ya ya. We watch television a lot and listen to news reports. Yell at the TV whenever Donald Trump comes on talking shit. I search Facebook to see who else among friends have died. There have been many deaths of musicians and others we know and love. I cross my fingers and hope that we will not be among them. I hunger for some fresh air and a trip to the movie theater, a trip out of the country or just the ability to go to a great restaurant. Meanwhile, I am cooking every day and try to find interesting ideas to make cooking less of a chore.

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I saw that musician Henry Grimes died and got an update from Cheryl about Louise Meriwether, who is still holding on although she is very weak and her memory is quite poor. Her birthday is May 8<sup>th</sup> and she'll be 97 years old if she's able to survive through this health crisis. The numbers of deaths and hospitalizations continue to decline. My groceries are dwindling so I'll have to go shopping soon. I'm considering driving to Brooklyn to Wegmans, at the same time I'm considering to order groceries online, something I've never done and don't quite trust. Can't imagine anyone getting the order precise and the prospect of having that happen is dissuasive. Honestly, I wish at the same time that this containment lasts forever just because I like not having the pressures of day to day obligations I tend to get myself into and the overcommitting and piling on I can't seem to stop doing.

When the weather turns warm, gangs of black teenagers (I'm assuming they are teenagers) in Harlem ride their off-road three-wheelers and take to the streets, speeding up and down 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue revving their engines; they are excruciatingly noisy and a gigantic ear sore. Really a pain in the neck. The noise is deafening. I don't know how the cops are reacting to them these days, whether they're getting tickets for breaking the distancing codes or whether the cops are ignoring them as they normally do during the summer months, when they proliferate.

Thinking of my brother Harry who died ten years ago? Today is his birthday. His death was the first death among my siblings that I felt incredibly profoundly. His death was the first time I actually touched a person who was dying and felt the coldness of death as it crept up his body from his feet to his hands which I held onto until the doctors made me leave his bedside. I had refused to leave him to die alone after my sisters and brothers and I went to the hospital to hear the doctors deliver his death sentence. I have always imagined I could never witness such a scene in person and yet at the moment it happened I was completely unafraid. All I kept thinking was, "I can't let him die alone." He had no wife or children. He and I shared

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many things growing up in Mississippi. I am number fourteen in a family of 15 children; he was number 12. He was always coddled by my aunt and my mother asked my brother Paul (number 13) to go to Vietnam in place of Harry because she thought Harry wouldn't have survived Vietnam. At the time he was dying I realized how very little I knew about Harry and that realization drove me to profound sadness that I couldn't shake for years and years, still haven't. Even today as I'm writing this I'm tearing up. I learned after he died that Harry loved poetry and even had written a poem; that in fact literature was something quite special to him. After he died I had such an attack of grief I went to the emergency room at Harlem Hospital thinking I was having a heart attack.

### **9:38pm**

Just attended a Zoom meeting with the tenants in my building. It was chaotic as usual but I learned that my neighbor Linda in the apartment across the hall has pneumonia. My neighbor and I are friendly but we don't socialize. We have different lifestyles and interest and the most that we do is ask each other to pick up our mail if we are traveling. Sometimes we chat about an incident in the building but we rarely have any other kinds of interactions. I don't really know why that is. I had more of a relationship with Linda's mother when she was living than I do with Linda. A tenant in the meeting asked if anyone in the building had Covid-19. Nobody knew, but Marcella said she'd called Linda and her son and neither had gotten back to her. I volunteered to call Linda since I have her cellphone and in so doing, Linda picked up the phone. She sounded very weak but said she is "much better." She said, "I had pneumonia, but I'm much better. Thanks for checking in on me." I found it hard to ask her whether she had Covid-19. I fumbled around the question. She kept repeating that she had "pneumonia" and that she appreciated the call and she appreciated the rest of the building asking after her. I told her I'd make her some soup. That's the only thing I could think of. She said "Thank you." So now I am going to be put to the test! I have to plan carefully how to deliver the food. I worry that she

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may not trust that I'm not infected as well. I worry about getting close to her apartment. I will wear proper protection. I will leave the soup at the door and call her. I will check that her son is okay. I am annoyed that neither let me know the situation. But then again, we rarely talk. But this is the year of the plague.

### **April 21, 2020**

Made gnocchi for dinner from scratch today and shared pictures on WhatsApp with Porter. It's his favorite dish. I hope he tries it and am so happy he's now taking an interest in cooking. Wrote me yesterday that he's interested in investing in the stock market. That raised my hopes. I worry about his financial well-being and desperately wish he'd stop playing basketball and settle down and get married. If only.... Sent him lots of links about investing and trading. Can't wait to see if he's serious.

Otherwise, threw the day away. Spent 3 1/2 hours on Facebook!

### **April 22, 2020**

José Bedia sent me the craziest videos on WhatsApp. He's got the wackiest sense of humor and always makes me laugh. Besides being a prolific artist, he's also got the greatest collection of indigenous artifacts from Africa and native tribes in the Americas of anyone I've ever known. Feels good to laugh.

### **April 24, 2020**

Teresa sent tons of memes with Trump drinking Clorox and disinfectants. Hilarious. We share the same feelings about that disastrous nincompoop and his confederacy of dunces & grifters. Please, please, please, virus do something so Nancy can assume the POTUS!

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**April 26, 2020**

It's been a minute since I've really written anything in this diary. Somehow, the daily entries stopped one day as I found myself distracted by something or other and let the day end without putting any words down. For the last several days whenever I've sat at the computer it's been to edit Quincy's poems or to answer emails from people I sent the eblast to. That was a wonderful distraction as I heard from people I'd never expected to hear from, some of whom I hadn't heard from in more than 15 years. Wonderful surprise to catch up with them. On last Thursday I went shopping for groceries and everything else we thought we needed. I'd not been out since the last time I'd gone grocery shopping on ?? I'd forgotten about the lines outside the supermarkets, especially in Harlem. Decided to drive to the Upper West Side to do the shopping because it would be easier to go from store to store and a good opportunity to run the car since it's been sitting dormant for almost a month. Wore my gloves and the mask Roddey & Lisa sent me and had a container of sanitation wipes in the car already. It's a good thing I made a shopping list because it kept me focused. First stop was the deli across the street to get *The New York Times* and the *New York Daily News*; bought the last copy. At 10:30 in the morning they were already sold out. There was a long line in the deli with all the people playing the numbers. With New York being bankrupt, I wonder how people will be paid if they hit the numbers or buy a winning lottery ticket. I stood in the lottery ticket line too, just in case I was lucky. I wasn't. They didn't have the ticket I wanted to buy and I couldn't remember what it was called anyway. The deli has fashioned a make-shift plastic sheet kind of like a window shade at the counter. This is new. Last time I was in the store, the cashiers were not wearing masks or gloves, although one of them kept wiping down the counter and the other one at the lottery station did have on gloves. Now they both wore gloves and masks behind the makeshift plastic sheet suspended from the ceiling and held together by clothespins. Looks like the owner

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has returned and there are three people behind the counter, one of whom has a difficult time understanding my English. I think they're from Yemen.

Left there and walked to the post office to mail a check to Ike. Since it was pre-stamped I avoid waiting in line, although there are only about two or three people inside the post office. Outside the post office, which is next door to C-Town supermarket, there's a line of about 10 or so people and another line for the community food bank, which is another two or three doors down from C-Town. The food bank line is quite long, perhaps 30 or 40 people, it seems. I'm a little surprised to find a line at C-Town; they're very late in establishing a distancing policy. It's quite small compared to the two other grocery stores in the neighborhood and is never really that crowded. I continue towards Eighth Avenue on my way to Rite-Aid, a block and a half north of the post office at the corner of 117<sup>th</sup> and Eighth Avenue. Rite-Aid has a sentry at the door but there's no line waiting outside; I'm only getting one small item and happily the store is not crowded. From here I can see Best Yet Market, one of my favorite grocery stores. They sell Tom Cat baguettes and Quincy's beloved Hazelnut oil for popcorn. Best Yet is the newest grocery store in the neighborhood and mimics a gourmet shop, though not quite. It caters to the more "upscale" shopper, the new, recently moved to the neighborhood gentrifiers. The line waiting outside is too long and I figure I'll keep moving and stop back by after going further uptown to the health food store on 136<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Besides my car is parked on 117<sup>th</sup>. It starts without a hitch, after having sat dormant for so long,

### **April 28, 2020**

Going to the dentist today to get my bridge readjusted; the bite's off and I'm having terrible pain in my jaw. Really dreading this, as I don't feel secure about being in a doctor's office. Yet, curious to see what it'll be like. Taking my car. Don't want to risk getting on the subway. Mask up and wear gloves and take some Clorox wipes too. It's a rainy and dreary day. Don't know if street parking's allowed. Send a

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message by Twitter to Gridlock Sam, the *Daily News* columnist who reports on traffic conditions in the city. He doesn't have that many followers so maybe he'll respond. Meanwhile, look on Park Whiz app to see what's what. Bingo! Locate a garage space for \$30 for the whole day two and a half blocks from the dentist's office.

**10:30am** In the dentist's office. There're two people here already. The reception area has been cordoned off so that patients have to sit at least three seats away from each other; they've made this possible by putting masking tape on every other two seats. The reception area is enclosed with protective sheeting from ceiling to the tops of the reception counter. Everyone behind the counter is wearing a mask. Looks like the same number of people are on duty but I really don't know if that's true. It's a busy office normally. They're on 35<sup>th</sup> Street near Macy's and get a lot of traffic. They advertise regularly in the *Daily News* offering emergency repairs for broken crowns and dentures, as well as cosmetic surgery and other more costly dental work.

**11:30am:** Stop by my favorite Chinese takeout, Potstickers, near the dentist's office. Surprised to be let in. A sandwich sign out front announces that they're open for pick-up service but the guy inside sees me and waves me inside. There's no one else waiting to pick up or come inside. I make my order. I love this place not only because they make terrific wontons but the guy, Dave, is so friendly and generous, not the typical brusque service I'm used to in Chinatown. This guy is young, friendly, patient, talkative, and always adds extra stuff, even as he's giving you discounts. I ask him where he's from and he says Shanghai. Make a mental note to go to Shanghai whenever I ever go to China.

Decide to see if I can make a deposit at TD Bank, which is just a couple of blocks away. But they are closed. So was my branch at 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Will try the one on 94<sup>th</sup> & Broadway where I'd seen a line outside when I went shopping the other week. Notice there's a marijuana store with lots of caps, tee-shirts, mugs & other paraphernalia in the window. Didn't know that these stores exist in New York. A sign in the window says, call and we'll deliver. Hmmm.

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Very few people on the street. Mostly black guys, one white woman, one white man. Both have masks. The black guys yell out at me but I don't respond. They're not wearing masks and I don't understand why they'd think anyone would stop to chat. Ordinarily, I'd speak but not now; don't even slow down or acknowledge that I've heard them.

Macy's has a huge sign that says they're open for curbside pickups. Had read that Macy's was laying off thousands. Can't tell whether they're getting a lot of business from the number of people on the street. There aren't many. In fact can cross the street back and forth against the light, as there's very little traffic. There's a cop car parked on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 35<sup>th</sup> Street; the cop honks (three quick shots on the horn, *blip blip blip*) at three black guys walking close together down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue; they're not wearing masks. I keep moving; no time to see how that's going down. Stop by Duane Reade on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue & 34<sup>th</sup> Street to pick up some hand soap, sanitizer and hopefully disposable facemasks. No luck. Will stop on the Upper West Side at TD Bank.

**1:01pm:** TD Bank has just closed. The guard or sentry or whatever won't let me in to see the tellers. "Sorry miss, they're closed. They not going to see you. We close at One." "Are you serious??!!" I protest. He's adamant. Someone comes in behind me. He tells them the same thing. They're annoyed like I am. They protest. The guard raises his voice and starts yelling at us that the bank is closed. "You have to get here before 1:00 o'clock! It's not my fault!" he says. I say, "I just want to make a deposit. Can't I make a deposit it's only 1:02pm. There are no other branches open. This is ridiculous." He lets out an exasperated breath. I tell him I have a cash deposit. He tells me I can make a deposit in the ATM (I didn't know that you can deposit cash in an ATM) and closes the door in my face and locks it, muttering, "I don't know what's fucking wrong with these people. Man!"

Gridlock Sam has answered my tweet.

# Plague Diary

Margaret Porter Troupe, Graham Court Apartments, Harlem, New York City

**April 29, 2020**

Long awaited article on Graham Court appears in *New York Magazine*. The reporter, Matthew Sedacca, didn't bother to let me know it was out, despite the fact I turned him on to a lot of the people he interviewed, made brunch for him, and was as cooperative as I could be. They also have used one of the least attractive photos ever taken of me in the story. I guess I pissed them off because I wouldn't give them details about when Quincy and I moved into Graham Court or the number of bathrooms, fireplaces, bedrooms we had in that first apartment across the hall or in this one nor the dates of our move from across the hall to here or the amount of rent we were charged over there nor all other intrusive details that I didn't think relevant since I was led to believe that the story was to be a "biographical sketch" of the building and older residents and not a piece for the real estate section, which it turns out to be! Just as I suspected. Because of the size and history of this building, I was curious about who was behind getting this story done in the first place, thinking it might be a real estate developer or the landlord/owner of the building who may be putting it on the market. But the reporter and all the folks at *New York Mag* that I talked to demurred whenever I asked about the angle of the story. Real estate developers, landlords and such, are some of the most ruthless people on earth. Since the neighborhood has been undergoing a rapid and voracious gentrification, people like us, i.e. long time black residents, have to hold on for dear life to remain in this neighborhood. The changes since 1979 when we first moved to Harlem have steadily forced out black families as more and more downtown, upper middle class whites and black millennials have moved to Harlem. It's really a precarious situation. Fortunately, we are among the rent controlled and rent stabilized crowd, which the real estate interests are adamant to uproot by changing the rent laws that favor affordable housing which doesn't just affect black New Yorkers but all of us old enough to benefit from them.

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## **April 30, 2020**

Buckled down and began to focus on CARES grant for NEA for The Gloster Arts Project.

## **May 3, 2020**

It's Sunday. Got a funny message from Stanley: a picture of himself lazing in the sun with the caption: "Waiting for trump's sun to kill the virus." Start rewriting the application for the NEA CARES grant; it's due tomorrow. Have been buried deep in it for the last several days. Still unclear about how to present my case. Though unfinished am submitting it anyway, so I don't get caught up in the logjam that's sure to happen deadline time. Will be able to make corrections till then, thank god.

My brother Paul, who's a deacon at his church in New Rochelle, has been sheltering in. I'm kind of surprised that he's obeying the directive because he usually is at the church all the time. He says he's not going to compromise his health and that someone in the church had just come back from overseas and he'd told his pastor not to hold any services, so now they're having some kind of online services or massive conference calls with parishioners. Paul's my best friend. He's a Vietnam vet and we have been very close since he came back from the 'Nam. He has told me all about the horrors he suffered there, over and over and over again. He should've gotten a Bronze star for his service. Imagine that he left home at age 19, and when he first arrived in Vietnam, they put him on a helicopter drenched in blood and took him to the battlefields. That was just the beginning of his horror show. But he survived, as my mother knew he would.

In Harlem on Sundays normally, the streets in my neighborhood are lined with double-parked cars of the people who come in for services, despite the three parking garages now available. There are at least six or seven, maybe eight, churches within the 4 square block area of 116<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Most of them have a sizeable, apparently devoted congregation. If residents haven't parked their

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cars on Saturday night, they're in trouble because it's impossible to find a spot on Sunday.

## **May 4, 2020**

Rewrote CARES grant. Bit more satisfied with final narrative but not sure still whether it'll make the cut. Yep, there's a logjam on the NEA website. Glad I submitted early.

## **May 5, 2020**

Another throw-away day. Need mental rest & physical exercise. Pulitzer's announced.

## **May 6, 2020**

Unable to stay inside another day. Incredibly brilliant morning, sunshine, clear skies, though high winds. Must see the tulips in Central Park at the Conservancy. Mask up and out. More and more people are wearing full protections, masks, gloves, and distancing. It's now more common to see people geared up properly than not; it only took three months for this kind of compliance.

## **May 12, 2020**

In between editing Quincy's book, *Duende*, cooking, I got engrossed binge watching *Game of Thrones* and after that *My Brilliant Friend*, staying up so late every night. Often get to bed hours after midnight. Even after turning off my bedside lamp, I read news or do *The New York Times* crosswords puzzle on my iPhone, before falling off to sleep. Exercising intermittently too. Once I fall out of a routine, it takes me forever to get back to it.

The street traffic also remains down. I have not driven the car again for two weeks. Alternate side parking has been suspended for the last three months.

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Everybody talks about how clean the city streets are. It's remarkable. I keep promising to write to Mayor de Blasio about having some kind of public service campaign to urge New Yorkers to stop littering. I think now's the time to do that letter, since people are feeling like we belong to a community. Gov. Cuomo has been pressing that message every day since he's been giving his daily broadcasts, and I think that his messaging is working. Funny how herd-like people really are.

**May 13, 2020**

Plague Diary due.