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The Opposite of Coronavirus

The first time I heard about the Opposite Virus I was in our kitchen leaning against the butcher block island, which held the Instant Pot we hadn't gotten around to using. My husband Lenny and I were having a fake debate over whether meat salad could really be called a salad. Lenny was showing me pictures on his phone. "Meatballs on a bed of salami leaves and ground beef 'rice.' It's got all the food groups."

He reached for our serving dish, the one with the green edging and the word "pasta" written in cursive along the bottom.

"Should anybody who needs their dishes labeled be allowed to cook?" I asked.

Lenny shrugged and explained to me in disgusting detail how he might use the dish to prepare a meat-only baked Alaska.

I loved how Lenny was so fun to debate with. As usual I took an opposing position. "Lard isn't technically meat. So it can't take the place of the meringue. And nothing takes the place of ice cream, ever."

Lenny began to search on his phone for evidence to the contrary. "Lisa, you know that where there's meat there's...whoa, there's a new deadly virus out."

My stomach twisted. I was still a bit PTSD from the coronavirus pandemic. That had been pre-Lenny and pre-decent job, and I'd been sick alone in a scuzzy apartment. I got through it without being hospitalized, but I never wanted to see another package of ramen again, and I never wanted to spend days wondering whether to call 911 or not.

Lenny scrolled on his phone, dirt under his fingernail from weeding without gloves. "It's the opposite of the coronavirus. Once you have the virus, if you're not refreshed with new virus every twenty-four hours you die. You have to find somebody else who's infected and make contact with their saliva."

He called the virus by a number, which I immediately forgot because I didn't believe him. "That can't be right. What's your source?" Lenny was a sucker for clickbait and was outraged by articles in *The Onion* until I explained they were satire. What was worse, Lenny's friends were always making up things just to fake each other out.

He handed his phone to me. It was on the BBC, which I considered a valid news source. "The illness is limited to the island of Java," I read. "Don't worry about it."

Lenny made some java-coffee joke and we watched videos of people afflicted with the virus. "That's a weird dance they're doing," he said. "It's like they're swatting flies and stomping frogs."

"Are you sure these people are really sick? I don't know of any illness that makes you dance."

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So of course Lenny had to look it up. There had been a dancing plague in the middle ages but it was more likely psychological than virus-related.

"I don't know about them, but I've just come down with happy feet!" Lenny grabbed my hands and we danced the Charleston, though neither of us knew how.

We forgot about the Opposite Virus for a week, but it didn't take long to spread. Just like the coronavirus, the first case identified in the United States was in Washington State, where we lived.

"Strange times," I said, lying on the couch next to Lenny and easing my bare feet onto his lap in the hope he would absent-mindedly rub them. "I'm back to ending every email with 'stay safe.'"

"We're doomed," said Lenny, my foot in one hand, his phone in the other. "The Opposite Virus has a targeting mechanism to help it find people."

My neck started to prickle. That would be a nightmare. "How is that possible? It's a virus. Viruses are too simple for that. What's your source?"

This time he was looking at a non-valid news site. Nobody actually knew the details of how the virus traveled. But it zoomed around the planet like Superwoman on steroids.

Six days later, despite being in quarantine, I felt itchy and restless. I couldn't be sick, I told myself, I had just been sitting too long in pretzel position. I stood, trying to shake off my fear and fidgetiness, and found immense relief by waggling my arms and legs. Suddenly I realized I was doing the bug swatting/frog stomping movements we'd seen in the video. There was no doubt. I was sick with Opposite Virus.

I called Lenny on my phone even though he was in a different room. "I'm infected."

"I think I've got it too." Lenny's voice sounded like he was in the middle of a prizefight. "I'm swatting bugs. I'm nauseous. I feel hot. I don't understand why this is happening. I wore my lucky socks and everything."

"I'm scared," I said.

"The CDC says trading viruses with other infected people will keep us alive. So I guess we'd better swap spit." He came into the bedroom and leaned forward to offer me duck lips.

"Not like that," I said. "We have to 'trade virus' with a new person each time. So let's practice doing it like they say." I licked my hand and offered it to him. He licked his palm as well. We rubbed palms, then I licked my own hand again. I immediately felt better.

Twenty-four hours later we were symptomatic again. We called Joanna and Frederick, some neighbors who we knew were sick with the Opposite Virus, and arranged for them to come over. I couldn't help but run out to meet them on the sidewalk, licking my hand and offering it to Joanna. Normally I would feel repulsion—we'd been trained for that during the coronavirus pandemic, but I was too ill to care. I just wanted to get better. We licked our palms and rubbed their slippery surfaces together, then licked our own hands.

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Lenny had a harder time. I saw his face scrunch a little. He'd had germaphobe tendencies even before the coronavirus, and they had worsened during the pandemic. Still, he licked and rubbed palms with Frederick.

"See you tomorrow?" Lenny asked.

"Yes," said Joanna, "But we'll have to switch off. Lenny and me, Diana and Frederick. After that you have to find other carriers."

"That wasn't so bad," I said as we returned to the house. The tulips in our yard were blooming red and yellow, as if the world hadn't gone topsy-turvy. When I'd planted them none of this was going on.

Lenny wiped his hand on his pants. I could tell by his knitted brow that he wasn't happy. "What's up?" I asked.

He tried to speak cheerfully. "I just have to get used to another 'new normal.' But I can do it. I just have to swap spit with somebody new once a day until there's a cure. Seems manageable. I'll make it work."

I was the highly organized type, so I made contact with other neighbors and set up a meetup schedule on a spreadsheet, which I distributed to everybody and then uploaded to the Internet as an example for others. I have to say I was quite proud of my effort, and my neighbors were thankful. It made me feel like I was doing my part in a crisis. Stepping up. We'd all get through this together. Hashtag some inspiring statement or other.

A week later we heard that hand rubbing wasn't working as well anymore. When it didn't, you had to use a new technique. "They're calling it tongue-in-cheek transfer," I said, "because it works best if you press your lips against the other carrier and put your tongue in as far as their cheek. This is getting weirder."

"It's okay. I get to French kiss other women without you getting mad at me." Lenny's brow was knitting again.

"You're putting up a good front but I can tell this bothers you."

"How could it not?" said Lenny. "I don't like being told what to do by a virus. By a thing that has no brain."

"You mean a politician?"

He was quiet. "You're supposed to laugh," I said. "That was funny."

"It's too difficult," he stroked my cheek. "I'm toggling between exasperation at the inconvenience and the terror of death."

I loved the way he could sum things up so well. "Yeah, me too."

Two days later we met with a neighbor we didn't know well. Before this, whenever we had seen him around we had referred to him as the guy with Nike swoosh hair. We tried the hand swapping technique and it didn't work. I was still nauseous. I still fidgeted like an addict. We all knew what had to be next. Tongue-in-cheek virus transfer.

"This isn't easy for me," said the man, pulling back and giving a squeaky laugh when I presented my mouth for contact. "I'm shyer than a sasquatch."

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I was feeling pretty ill, and not in the mood for his reticence. And I was never good with rejection of any kind. I tried to keep it light anyway. "Kiss me, you fool."

"I've gotta be a fool to kiss you," he quipped back in Groucho Marx style, finally leaning forward. He stuck his tongue in my mouth, feeling for my cheek. I did the same. It was all the more awkward because he was so bashful, but it was a huge relief when my symptoms eased.

I watched him do the same with Lenny, wincing in spite of myself. That was my husband "kissing" another person.

We headed toward the house, the tension palpable until Lenny blurted. "His tongue was as big as a surfboard!"

"I know, right?" I said, my shoulders relaxing. "And his saliva was goopy. Like kissing Salisbury steak."

Lenny laughed. It was going to be okay.

And it was, for a while. We got used to it. Like shaking hands, everyone's style was different. Some tongues were as light as an aerialist on the upswing. Some were thrusters. Some were hairless mole rats, digging forward. It didn't matter as long as it made us feel better.

But soon we had to have meetups every twenty-three hours, then twenty-two, and so on. We ran out of neighbors and had to go further afield each day to find new people to tongue cheeks with. By the time three months had gone by, we stopped going home in between forays. We went to places like the Seattle Center where masses of people gathered.

At six months, we had to refresh the virus every ten minutes. We had long given up the idea of having any type of normal life.

Our meetups were fantastic orgy-less orgies without pleasure, pillows, or actual intercourse. There were only mounting symptoms, then a tongue-in-cheek with somebody new, then relief, then mounting symptoms. By the height of the pandemic we only had a few minutes in between each tongue-in-cheek to get food, drink, or news of when this all might end.

There were many moments of horror, with people dying before anybody could help them. There were moments of fear, like the time I was packed into a large crowd so tightly that I couldn't reach anybody I hadn't already tongue-in-cheeked. I survived because others lifted me and crowd-surfed me to another place.

There were moments of euphoria when I saved somebody's life by tongue-in-cheeking them when they were almost dead.

I lost touch with Lenny. All that mattered was survival. Luckily the Opposite Virus tended to block transmission of other viruses, otherwise we would have suffered continually from colds and flus.

Thank god for the three percent of the population who were immune to the Opposite Virus. They got us food and water, removed the dead, helped keep nuclear plants from exploding, things like that. Teams of them worked day and night to find a treatment.

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When they developed a cure six months later, we all got injections. Within weeks we were all well. It had been a year since the first death in our country. My mouth was bruised from desperate lunges. I had a couple of broken teeth. I'd lost a lot of weight. But now I could go home.

Our lawn looked like the Serengeti and there was dust all over inside, but the house was still there, and that was what mattered.

When Lenny arrived, it was like the sun burst through the clouds. But after the first joy of recontact, I could tell something wasn't right between us. It wasn't that neither of us wanted to kiss. Of course we would never purposely do that again. No, it was something else. I couldn't put a name to it, but Lenny nailed it.

"I'm having a hard time being with you," said Lenny. "You remind me of a time when everything was normal. Before all this happened. And we'll never be normal again."

I wished he hadn't said it. Because he was right, but I'd been ready to ignore the truth. Now it was like trying to sweep dirt under the rug when you had wall-to-wall carpeting. It was right out in the open. We were different people.

"We're like soldiers back from different wars," I said, hoping he would get into a silly debate. Tell me it wouldn't matter to a soldier that the wars were different. He didn't take my bait. It was a small thing, but it made me want to run away and never come back.

I didn't. I was tired. "Let's just sleep on it," I said.

And so we did. And the next night we slept on it again, and the next. We stayed together for weeks, not really connecting, but not knowing where else to go.

"We're stronger for having been through the disaster," announced Lenny one day.

We were back at the butcher block kitchen island next to the unused Instant Pot. I twiddled its knob. "I don't feel stronger."

"You don't have to feel stronger to be stronger." Lenny was ready for a silly debate. It made me hopeful things would be okay between us. Now I just needed to take a position and hold it against his Lenny logic as long as I could.

I took his hand and massaged his palm with my thumb. "I think we just had to get through it and so we did. And the next time something like this happens I'm going to say to myself, 'We have to get through this, and so we will.'"

"'We have to get through this and so we will.' I like that."

He was done. I raised my eyebrows. He'd never ended a debate so quickly before. Was my hope for reconciliation false?

But then he held me to his chest. I could hear the smile in his voice as he repeated my words like a mantra. "We have to get through this and so we will. We have to get through this and so we will."

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I wondered if he was right after all. Maybe I was stronger for having gone through the Opposite Virus pandemic.

When we let go of each other, I took the lid off the Instant Pot. "Since there aren't any restaurants in business, I suppose it's time to try this out."

Lenny seized a whole chicken from the freezer and plopped it into the pot, wrapping and all. "Hold on a sec. Nope, it's not done."

"What's the deal? It's been an instant and it's still raw."

"Our Instant Pot is defective." Lenny put the chicken back in the freezer with a dramatic sigh.

"Define defective."

Lenny raised his eyebrows and launched into a Rube Goldberg definition. I followed its ups, downs, and curves carefully so that I could bust his argument apart.

We were going to be okay.