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SCU IN QUARANTINE

Our Pandemic Stories

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Untitled

Michelle Burnham
Professor, English

Two months ago, I sat on the couch in my girlfriend's house looking into my phone. I had a video appointment with a cardiologist I had just been referred to. He was at a desk in a bedroom in his house. I could see clothing hanging from the door behind him and hear the muffled sound of children somewhere in the background. I watched as he clenched and unclenched his hands in quick syncopation to illustrate how the two halves of a heart beat together. Then he showed me how my heart was working: one hand slowly and randomly clenching, the other barely clenching at all. I had 3rd-degree heartblock. My heart's electrical conduction system had stopped working and was being sustained by the equivalent of a back-up generator, which itself could stop working at any moment. The only solution was a pacemaker.

Three days later, I was out of quarantine and in a gown on a hospital bed as a nurse coated the inside of my nostrils, lips, and gums with a cold antiseptic gel. I had showered the night before with a high-powered cleanser applied to every inch of my body. I did the same thing again that morning. I had slept on clean sheets and wore freshly-washed clothing, as my pre-surgical instructions dictated. These were COVID-era levels of sterility, I knew, designed to prevent infection. What was riskier, though: having 3rd-degree heartblock or going into the hospital for surgery to correct it during a pandemic? I had no idea. I wasn't sure what to worry about and to what degree. My crisis sensors were out of whack.

I have a pacemaker now and I feel great. But I realize too that we have all lost the emotional yardsticks by which to measure crisis. We usually measure crisis by the deviation from some kind of static norm or state of calm or level of security. Now every crisis is a sub-crisis or a para-crisis, an upheaval inside an upheaval, which may feel oddly undetectable or at least unlocatable. When there is no stasis, or the only static thing is uncertainty, do we know when to panic? Do we even know when we feel calm?



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