

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

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When the midnight owl hooted and cast its sharp eyes on all my worries and cares, when insomnia quelled my normal inhibitions, and when, not to sound too self-pitying, I also felt rather lonesome, I went on the Internet and looked up people I used to know. Scrolling through their golden lives made me feel worse than ever. Jeanne Chatham, the theater major I knew in college, was now the vice president of an insurance company. Jeff Stone, the PR chief from my old job at the art supply store, made millions as a land developer in Arizona. Barry Cutler, plain and timid in high school, beamed in his tuxedo in his son's wedding photos. Once morose and chubby, Sookie Billingsley from my old diet club glammed like a movie star in her exercise videos. Every once in a while, I looked up my ex-husband Dave. Still selling cars at the dealership and living with his new wife in their high-rise apartment with panoramic

views of the Delaware. Under my name, I found a White Pages listing and the usual people-finder ads but nothing else about the life of Faye Glassman.

I never contacted any of these people. But almost every day, I emailed my daughter Petra with news of cat food recalls, phishing scams, shootings, house fires, and other perils. I loved her so much.

Petra had unfriended me on Facebook, blocked my phone calls, and I guessed, deleted my emails or flagged them as spam.

“Take a cleansing breath, Mom. Stop feeding me your fears. You’re using up my qi,” she announced four months ago, and that was the last time we spoke.

Anyhow, I kept up with her after a fashion. To gaze at her lovely face, I visited the website of the elementary school where she taught. I read her lesson plans, smiled at the daily enthusiasms that festooned her class calendar. Framed photos of Petra greeted me in every room of my house. Petra baking cookies. Petra in her soccer uniform. Petra as high school grad, a college grad, Petra and her boyfriend, Bob. Although we lived outside of Philadelphia, no more than three miles apart, I had not seen her since Thanksgiving when she and Bob presented me with a pumpkin pie then ran off to dinner at Dave’s.

January of 2020 came with whispers of a new respiratory illness in China, a threat so remote we thought it hardly mattered. But now it was March, and the new coronavirus was rolling over the defenseless globe. My emails to Petra turned medical. Did she have a dry cough, a fever, chills, a feeling of exhaustion? Did she see the reports about Italy and Spain? Did she think the virus came from the horseshoe bat?

In order to halt the spread of the virus, Pennsylvania locked down in the middle of March: schools, libraries, offices and stores, gyms and hair salons, the museum where I worked part-time at the visitors' desk, and all the other museums, everything nonessential went from on to off. You hardly saw a plane in the sky or a car on the road. Every day dawned like early Sunday morning, quiet but for birdsong, and, happily, the air was alive with that. I sheltered in my home, fearful of breathing in the virus or touching a door handle that might be coated with the spiky little balls of the disease. When I had cabin fever, I screwed up my courage and ventured out for a walk.

"I always thought a nuclear war or an asteroid smash would end life as we know it. Now look," I wrote to Petra. "Some enemy RNA is going to worm its way into our cells and finish us off. Can you imagine?" Petra sent me no response.

I had always lived in an ambient state of fear, but now so did everyone. For once, I was right in step with the status quo. I reminded Petra of the lifespan of the virus on paper, plastic, glass, and metal, of how far it could fly through the air. Could I run an errand for her? Hand sanitizer was in short supply, but I could hunt some down for her or mix up a batch myself. She must be overwhelmed with all her online teaching. Had she seen the mass graves of unclaimed victims in New York?

She could have written me to say: Mom, I'm fine. Mom, you'll be fine. Take some cleansing breaths.

But she didn't.

If I had a close friend or two, I would not have leaned on Petra so, but my social life bounced around on short-hop conversations between coworkers and minor acquaintances. It wasn't easy to make new friends after the divorce: my few attempts made me feel as if I were nosing into other people's lives. Now, however, that the threat of contagion sent everyone into isolation, lots of people felt lonely. Again, I was right in step with the status quo. Living by myself, I hardly uttered a word aloud. Pleasing chats with Ted across the street and Bonnie next door and the clerks at the supermarket only went so far. Everyone ended conversations by saying, "Stay safe."

The newscasters and features writers began to encourage people to check in on each other, offer to run errands, phone to say hello. This call to action perked me up. Not only could I contact people I knew, I *should* contact them. It wouldn't seem weird. It was my civic duty.

I stopped trolling the Internet for updates on the denizens of my past and instead scrolled through the contacts in my cell phone. I embarked on my mission with relish, texting my coworkers at the museum, my neighbors, my neighbors who had moved away, women from my old garden club, distant relatives, ex-relatives.

“Hi Clarence/Jane/Maryanne/Paula/Linda/Terry/Robert/Rachel/Bess/Deborah/Mimi or any of twenty other names! Faye Glassman here, checking in. How's it going? I hope this message finds you well. If you need anything, just call.”

My spirits soared at the chime of their replies. Some sent emojis: a smiley face, a thumbs up. Others gifted me with words: “Working from home. So busy!” “Baking bread.” “Bingeing on Netflix.” “About to Facetime with my grandkids.” “Thanks for checking in. Hope you're well.” The texts made me smile like the tiny yellow celandines of early spring, and like celandines they bloomed but once.

I hoped to hear from everyone, but some people did not text back, and some replies brought horrid news. Jane Lincoln said, “We can only wave to my father from his nursing home window.” Rachel Hirsch wrote of her mother’s death. “We’re quarantining now. Terrible times.” Why did I not think ahead to the possibility that my eager shout-outs might reap some grim replies?

I emailed Petra with the latest infection totals and death statistics. Did she know how unreliable the Covid-19 tests were? So many false negatives. But it still made sense to get a test at CVS, especially with Bob going in and out of her apartment. Did she consider that he could be a vector? Had her auto insurance company reduced her premium? Less driving, fewer accidents, now there was an upside to the lockdown. As usual, my daughter did not respond.

My texting mission, with its bright pops of cheer and black bursts of awfulness, could not last long for I soon ran through all my cell phone contacts and thought it prudent not to bug my respondents with another round of texts. Craving conversation, I decided to call people who still had landlines.

I retrieved my tattered green address book. As a precaution, I checked the names against online obituary listings before I placed my calls. I found no deceased but unhappily few landlines still in service. As for phones that did ring,

how very exciting when some old acquaintances said hello. I hooked some conversations with nonplussed folks who must have blinked in astonishment to hear my voice. “Hi, it’s Faye Glassman. Long time, I know. Now that we’re all hunkered in our bunkers, I thought I’d catch you at home, ha ha, and see how you’re doing in these strange times. Safe and well, I trust.” Then I’d pause for their reply. While I annoyed a handful of people who dispatched me with a terse “What can I do for you?” or “Super busy, working from home,” I netted some who caught me up on their doings.

“We’re moving to North Carolina. At least, that’s the plan. You okay?” replied Chip Elverson. He asked if I were conducting a psychological survey or working for the Census.

I was half glad to be bored by Nina Cohen, who droned on about her online grocery orders, her wiping and washing, her canceled trip, all the books she’d read, her son’s promotion, her adorable grandchildren, her husband and his crossword puzzles. I had to find an excuse to get off the line.

“Nice to have a call from you out of the blue,” said Sandy Sherman. “No, not too weird at all. These are weird times, and they call for weird measures.”

When Sandy asked how I was holding up, I grew shy and brief: why darken this friendly conversation with my worries and fears? Instead, I pivoted to Petra, who was great. Teaching third-graders online. What a world, right?

Did you hear, I emailed Petra, that pets can get Covid and that people could get Covid from their pets? How do you teach remotely if there is a power failure or computer crash? And was this the end of brick-and-mortar schools? And what about office towers, libraries, college campuses, and museums, for pity's sake? Do you remember when I was so worried about my arthritis? Those were the days. Maybe she read the email, maybe not.

I dusted the house from top to bottom, swept and vacuumed, watched all of *Grace and Frankie* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. I read the *Bucks County Courier Times*, my *AARP Bulletin*, and the free circulars that came in the mail. One article in a little shopper paper caught my eye. A county agency was inviting isolated elders to sign up to receive phone calls from volunteers. Now I could call someone who *wanted* to be called.

I dialed the number of the county agency, my heart rate picking up a bit as if I were telephoning someone for a date.

"We'd be happy to have one of our community volunteers call you, Mrs. Glassman," said the staffer.

“Oh, not for myself. I’m perfectly fine. I want to be a volunteer. You must need more volunteers.”

Yes, he said, provided that the volunteers could commit to their elder for a minimum of a month. Our clients looked forward to the calls. I assured him that I was the dedicated type. Reaching out was what I did best. He gave me the link to the application form.

A week later after a background check and a video interview, a man from the agency got back to me with the good news. I was accepted! They gave me the phone number of Mrs. Lucy Shawmont, a widow age eighty-seven, who resided at Autumn Woods, a senior-living community. The sort of place I guessed I’d end up one day.

“Lucy is ‘with it,’” the volunteers’ coordinator explained, but one part of her background was strange. “She says she has a daughter who lives out West somewhere, but she has no contact information for her. We don’t know what to make of it.”

Our first chat was to be no more than twenty minutes, the staffer explained, and from there I should set up a regular phone schedule. A phone date you can both look forward to, he said, and emailed me a list of ice breakers and some discreet quality-of-life questions, as well some don’t-go-there items, such

as politics and religion. He also advised that I not ask Lucy about her daughter. You never know what kind of gopher hole you might step into, he said.

I composed a message to Petra but told her nothing about my new role as an elder-caller. Did she have enough masks? Did she watch the conferences with Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx? The death rate of Covid patients on ventilators was over twenty percent. Could she taste and smell things? That was the latest: Covid could take away your senses of taste and smell. Out went my message into the electronic void.

At ten the next morning, I dialed up Mrs. Lucy Shawmont. She answered on the first ring. Excitement rushed through her voice, matching my own anticipation. After the first bright greetings, however, an awkward pause set in, so I followed the agency's introductory script that asked about health, mood, appetite, and general getting around.

Lucy soon took the lead. She felt okay, normal aches and pains considered. Sure, she had enough to eat. Too much in fact. Leftovers crammed her fridge. Out of fear of contagion, Autumn Woods had closed down the dining room. Attendants delivered heaping meal trays to the rooms, but no one was allowed out of their rooms.

“It’s like we’re bad children having to go to our rooms and stay there. House arrest, really. All but the ankle monitor. We can’t even go out for fresh air or walk in the halls. You hope for a doctor’s appointment, just to get an hour of freedom.”

“They want to keep you safe.” I tried to sound positive.

“They want to avoid a liability case, that’s all. Besides, being a prisoner isn’t my idea of safe. Takes all the living out of you.”

Lucy asked me about myself. Was I married? Did I have children?

“Teaching, bless her,” Lucy said of Petra. “She must have a sweet temperament and a lot of patience.”

I agreed that Petra was sweet and patient.

And did she live nearby? Did we see each other often?

These days not so much with the stay-at-home guidelines.

Mrs. Shawmont said that talking to me was jolly good. I should call her Lucy, and we set up our next call. I looked forward to it. I knew that she did, too.

I felt restored and lively. I took a long walk. Amazing what you could discover when you went on foot: jonquils around mailboxes, garden gnomes, kids on their trikes, but none on the tot lots. Signs warned you away from

high-touch surfaces. People crossed the street or stepped wide if another walker approached. You did your best not to exhale near others.

The weeks of lockdown crept fretfully by. Now it was early May. We were in our third month of staying at home. I was in my second month as Lucy's phone companion. On the news, I watched the country's death toll mount toward 100,000, a number we thought—how wrong we were—would top the worst tally the statisticians could predict. On her online class page, Petra instructed her students to list five things that made them happy. A nice conversation starter for me and Lucy.

"Did you hear," I wrote to Petra, "Dr. Fauci said that this coronavirus was his worst nightmare? Did you see the case totals? How will we ever get out of this mess?" Not that I expected her to answer.

I began to see my calls to Lucy as special occasions. I put on lipstick, a nice blouse, the way I dressed to work at the visitors' desk at the museum. I thought of all the paintings staring at each other, wondering where the humans went.

I asked Lucy to name five things that made her happy.

"Talking to you makes me happy. Also, I am fond of cinnamon raisin coffee cake, the sing-a-longs and lectures we used to have in our community

room, most of all, shooting the breeze with my neighbors, especially Sadie Miller.” Lucy cleared her throat. I hoped it was only that and not a cough.

“Oh, look. Mr. Hirsch is making his getaway.” Lucy described the little parade: Mr. Hirsch on his walker, his daughter and grandchildren behind him toting suitcases, a lamp, and a TV to the car. “Escapees almost every day. I see them from my window.” Lucy coughed. There was no mistaking it for throat clearing. “If you test negative for the virus, they’ll let you go. But you can’t come back until the plague is over, and who knows when that will be.”

“I’m going to bake you a cinnamon raisin coffee cake.”

“And bake one for yourself,” added Lucy. “Then we can have coffee and cake together over the phone. And if you don’t mind, I’ll share mine with Sadie Miller. Sometimes we sneak out of our apartments after the night patrol has passed and visit each other. We sit six feet apart and whisper.”

“Why you, rebel, you. I’m impressed.” I was happy for her and a little jealous that she had a best friend. I was also quite concerned about her cough.

Lucy gave me the address of Autumn Woods and her apartment number. She explained that I must clearly mark the package with her name and apartment number and place it on the designated drop-off table outside the front entrance. The mailman had to put the post there, too. No visitors were allowed

inside the doors, only staff and emergency people. Upper management now worked from home.

“But don’t the staff go in and out? Returning to their families when they go off duty?” They could be vectors, I thought.

“Don’t get me started,” said Lucy interrupting herself with a cough.

“Lucy, about that cough...”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said. She asked if it would be okay if she called me sometimes. “I won’t be a burden. I imagine you have so much to do.” I gave her my number with pleasure. “Call any time,” I said. She coughed again.

I baked two cinnamon raisin coffee cakes and treated myself to the first warm delicious slice. I packaged Lucy’s cake and jotted a note to tuck inside: “So glad that the County Department of Aging has brought us together.” Then I worried that the staff might open the package, read the note, and conclude that Lucy was complaining about Autumn Woods. I tore up that note and wrote a new one that said cheerful things about friendship and cake, then I drew flowers on the page.

I drove to Autumn Woods, a trip that was not nearly as fraught as going to the grocery store. Wearing my blue mask, I deposited the cake on the table. A staff person, masked and gloved, recorded the drop-off. A family was moving

an elderly woman out. Just as Lucy said, the place was clearing out. I looked up and waved to some windows, not knowing which might be Lucy's or if she was at her watch post. What if Sadie's family moved her out? Lucy would lose her best friend. I wondered what it must be like to be one of a dwindling number of residents.

So consumed was I with Lucy that I had not written my daughter for several days. I composed an email: "Petra, how do the young mothers cope, working from home with all the daycare centers closed? And what if the parents were laid off? Even more terrible." What was the use in writing her? I saved the email to drafts.

The following day, Lucy called to say that the staff had brought her the cake, and she had shared it with Sadie that night. Sadie raved and said it smelled and tasted divine. "But I don't have much of an appetite," Lucy confessed. "Or it's my tastebuds. I don't get the same enjoyment out of food." Loss of taste and smell. And her little cough. Covid symptoms. It was beginning to add up. Lucy said that she was feeling weary and needed to lie down. I insisted that she call her doctor after her nap. I would phone her tomorrow morning as usual. I feared that this could go nowhere but worse. I rubbed my brow in worry.

It took many rings before Lucy answered the phone. She'd given the cake to Sadie. No sense wasting something wonderful. "Now it's Mrs. Altamiri moving out. Her daughter's putting her in the car. I always liked her daughter. Lovely girl."

Although the volunteers' coordinator had warned me not to ask about Lucy's daughter, all this talk about elders being rescued by their children naturally led to the topic.

"What about you, Lucy? Do you have children?"

A black silence opened between us. That gopher hole. An instant pang of remorse gripped my chest.

At last Lucy replied. Her voice sounded slow and far away. "I do have a daughter...and I don't have a daughter. Her name is Dana. I have not seen her in twenty-eight years."

I sat at my kitchen table, almost paralyzed, nearly forgetting to breathe. Twenty-eight years. What could that mean? Had the girl been kidnapped, was she jailed in a foreign country, did she hate her mother? Lucy seemed smart and reasonable. Had there been something she had done or failed to do? Often parents were to blame for things like this. Abusers were. But Lucy?

“Don’t feel bad about asking, Faye.” There followed a series of coughs. “We’re friends now, and it’s all right for me to talk about Dana. Not many people know our story nowadays.

“She is in a cult. That’s why I never see her. They call themselves the Gates to the High Place of Radiance. They elevated her—that’s what they call it when they take you in—when she was thirty. She calls me on my birthday. They let her do that, but she talks with an odd accent like she’s from an imaginary land, like she’s not in herself anymore. When it’s my birthday, I sit by the phone all day waiting for her call.”

“A cult.” I was dumbfounded. “You hardly hear of them these days.”

“Oh, they’re around,” said Lucy. “Some last for decades, like the one Dana’s in.”

“Oh, Lucy. I can’t even imagine...” What was my separation from Petra compared to this?

“They do something to your ego when you’re in a cult. But I don’t think she minds that.”

Lucy coughed harder this time. She had to catch her breath before continuing. “My husband Don and I adored Dana, doted on her as much as any mother and father could. She was a good student, never any trouble, but there

was a shadow in her heart. She hadn't many friends, at least not ones that stuck.

"Dana didn't finish college, but that was fine with Don and me. She found a job in sales, supported herself here in Philadelphia, had her own apartment. And then she met Lloyd." Lucy spoke the name as if it were poison. She paused Dana's story, coughed a few times. She observed that an ambulance was pulling up to Autumn Woods. It was either the EMTs or the relatives coming to get you, she said dryly. Then she coughed some more.

"Dana never had a real boyfriend until she met that terrible man. They moved in together, but things were always shaky. You never knew what would set Lloyd off. Sometimes an anvil wouldn't, sometimes a feather would. She'd tell us how much she loved him, how she'd apologized, cried, begged, pledged to be more respectful about whatever line she crossed. That was romance, she said. It was what the songs on the radio were all about. No, it wasn't, we told her. This was being tied up with a short-fused son-of-a-gun who didn't care about her feelings and punished her for speaking up. We pleaded with her to leave him and move in with us, but Lloyd was her first boyfriend, and she wasn't about to give up on him.

“Then he got her a ring. They set a date. We rented a hall for them. Got the invitations printed. It was bound to happen. One day she said something he didn’t like, maybe a criticism, an opinion, a request. Then down came the hammer. He called off the wedding. Boom. Just like that. Thank goodness we hadn’t mailed the invitations.” Lucy broke into a coughing fit, but she was determined to get her story out.

“I suspect she went through her usual weeping, apologizing, begging, and he grudgingly consented to take her back. They set a new date. We rented a hall again. Same story. Only this time we’d mailed the invitations.”

“Oh God, Lucy.”

“It only got worse. Lloyd’s company transferred him to California. Dana moved with him. They set a new date. She bought a wedding gown. Then Lloyd did it again and called the wedding off. Can you imagine? And Dana so far from home.

“She called me from a bus station gasping between sobs. Then in the background, I heard someone offering to buy her a cup of coffee. An hour later, she called me back from the same pay phone, sounding like the rays of dawn had filled her heart.

“I’m better now, Mom,’ she said. ‘I have a new friend.’ The leaders of the Gates to the High Place of Radiance sent out members to recruit lost souls, and they knew just where to find them.” Lucy began to cough again. The coughs came faster.

I offered to call the front desk, to phone her doctor for her, or an ambulance. Lucy said not to. The coughing was just coughing, and it would pass. It always did.

“You take a nap,” I said. “I’ll call you back later.” I started to call the front desk, then halted. I knew that Lucy hated the way management controlled the lives of the residents.

My fingers trembling on the keys, I typed an email to Petra. Had she read about the doctors and nurses living in their garages or in hotels, fearful of bringing the virus home to their families? And what about those anti-maskers? You know what was next? I wrote. Wars over who would get the Covid vaccine first. Oh, I could see that coming. I said nothing of Lucy. I did not think Petra would care. I felt proud of myself for not hitting “send.”

I set about cleaning some bathroom drawers. The things I found: twenty-five-year-old Vicks VapoRub, long-expired children’s cough syrup, old stick-on bandages with rainbows and stars on them. I watched a Marie Kondo video

about tidying up. I loved the way she folded clothes. Still, even as I cleared and straightened, fears for Lucy piled up in my mind.

I called her back. She sounded more rested and filled in more of Dana's story. The Gates to the High Place of Radiance had compounds out West, owned property, but she and Don were never able to find out where.

"We wanted to hire a deprogrammer and a rescuer, but without an address our efforts were useless, and a lawyer said that even if we did find her, the cult would fight back, claiming freedom of religion, charging us with abduction. Besides, she was a consenting adult."

Just then there was a knock at Lucy's door, an attendant with her dinner tray. No sense in starving, she said, even if the food tasted like cornstarch and cardboard.

By the next morning, we were off the subject of Dana, and Lucy had turned the conversation to me.

"Faye, let's talk about how you are doing. I get the impression that you are a bit of an anxious Annie."

The kindness of her interest melted over me, though I wondered how I had exposed my signature trait. I was about to confess that I breathed much

easier when we spoke, but before I could say a word, she broke out in a cry of pain.

A pressure headache had hit her. She yelled in pain again. Hurt like the devil.

“Do you have Tylenol? Lucy, take some Tylenol.”

The coughing started up again. She couldn’t catch her breath. She couldn’t speak.

“That does it, Lucy. I’m calling you an ambulance. And I’m driving over to Autumn Woods.” I dialed 911 then jumped in my car. My hands shook so violently that it was hard to grip the steering wheel. I swerved into Lucy’s complex just as the ambulance arrived, blue and red lights flashing.

“Lucy Shawmont!” I shouted her apartment number to the attendant. He grabbed a set of keys and ran, the EMTs barreling after him with the gurney.

Fifteen minutes later, they wheeled Lucy out, a little white bundle, hooked up to an IV, an oxygen cannula in her nose.

“Lucy! Lucy!” I cried, waving my arms wildly as they slid her in the ambulance. “It’s me, Faye. Your friend Faye!”

Lucy turned her head to me, her gray eyes catching mine.

That was the first and last time I saw my friend.

I chased the ambulance to the hospital and ran, heart pounding out of my chest, across the parking lot to the special Covid entrance.

A guard stopped me at once. I could barely speak for sobbing and shaking.

“Ma’am, I know you’re upset, but no visitors allowed. They’re taking good care of your loved one.” He handed me a card with Covid precautions and the number of the patient information desk. Was that all he could do?

On the walkway, I saw a group of people standing together. We nodded to each other in sorrowful acknowledgment. Storm clouds were gathering in the west. I had nothing to do but drive home, trying not to cry, as I struggled to stay in my lane.

“Yes, we have admitted Lucy Shawmont,” said the woman at patient information. “Are you next of kin?” I told her that the patient was my outreach client from the county agency. I thought that might help me break through the bureaucracy and privacy regulations, but it did not. “You could have your agency fill out some paperwork about guardianship, if that applied. We’d pass that on to legal. Then maybe...”

“But I’m her friend!” I burst out.

The lady took pity and gave me the number of the Covid unit, and when I called to see how Lucy was doing, I was again asked if I were next of kin.

Well, then, did I have power of attorney? Did the patient have a living will? Who *is* Mrs. Shawmont's next of kin? Can you tell us how to reach them? The same bureaucratic walls all over again. I ended the phone call in despair.

The cinnamon raisin coffee cake sat on the counter in its plastic keeper. I dialed Autumn Woods to ask for Sadie Miller's number. Who could understand but the two of us?

When I identified myself, the receptionist's voice turned icy.

"Are you the one that called the ambulance? You're supposed to have us do that. And I cannot give out a resident's phone number."

I clicked off the call. I imagined Lucy in Covid intensive care, monitors beeping. No Dana to hold her hand, but no visitors allowed anyway. Was she awake and thinking? And what was she thinking about? Perhaps they had put her in a coma and intubated her. I called the county agency, but it was after hours. Leave us a voice mail. Visit our website. Thunder rolled in from the spring storm. I slept in fits and starts. I had a Covid dream, something about an angry mob and broken glass.

The volunteers' coordinator at the county agency offered me sympathy. He was sure that Lucy was in good hands and asked if I wanted some counseling. Or maybe, I would like an outreach volunteer to call me?

I'd think about it, I said. Maybe it wouldn't sound too lame to say yes.

I knew that there was no use in asking the agency to intercede with the hospital. Day after day, I called the number of the Covid unit. And day after day, Lucy was still there. I don't know why but several times a day, I called Lucy's number at Autumn Woods. It went to voice mail until one day a recording announced that the number was not in service. They were turning over Lucy's apartment.

I had not sent Petra an email in two weeks.

I paced out my days in silence and fear. At least, I did not disrupt my daughter's peace.

One day, the person who answered the phone at the Covid unit at the hospital told me that they had no patient by the name of Lucy Shawmont.

"Yes, she's there," I insisted. "An elderly woman." The person double-checked then said that I would need to speak to the patient's family. That's all she could tell me.

Yes, the family, I thought. I broke down in tears.

I hoped that a nurse had held my friend's hand as she passed away.

I'd read about the protocols for the unclaimed deceased. Lucy would be in a morgue somewhere or maybe a refrigerated truck for overflow storage. Then

to the medical examiner. Then to a group burial. I thought of those group burials of yellow fever victims in Philadelphia hundreds of years ago. Maybe a pastor would say some prayers. Lucy. Good Lucy, my motherly old lady friend.

I put my head in my hands. Then I lay down on my bed. I fell into a black and dreamless sleep.

At last, I pulled myself awake, told myself to get on with it.

I wondered when Lucy's birthday was, when Dana would place her once-a-year call. What a jolt that would give her. Then she'd be sorry. Or maybe she wouldn't be sorry. Maybe she didn't even care. I resolved to make a memorial service for Lucy. Maybe the county agency helped with that sort of thing.

At night, I watched more cleaning videos. My days of looking up people I used to know had long since passed, but I kept up with my decluttering: shredding old checks and ancient receipts, giving away things I never used. The heavy work of casting out the souvenirs of my life was almost done. If I had to sell the house and move into senior housing, it would be easy now. But I sure as hell would not move into Autumn Woods. I kept myself from emailing Petra. Every day I held off was a day that I did not drive her further from me. The thing was not to lose your daughter. That was the thing.

It was not quite the end of May. Covid cases were falling, and the state allowed some businesses to open. A feeling of lightness suffused the air. We felt that we'd chased the virus back, starved it of hosts even as the experts warned us that, vaccine or no vaccine, the virus now lived among us and would rally its forces again to send us back in hiding to save our lives.

I made myself a cup of coffee and signed onto my email. I could draft another message to Petra, tell her of my friend who died, but I abstained. Just more talk of suffering. Petra wouldn't want to hear about it.

Maybe I'd call the county agency and volunteer again. Or even sign up to have a volunteer call me. About that memorial service, I'd ask for help with that: a group service conducted by us elder-callers. No doubt, some of our number would have names to add.

I scrolled through the newsletters and account notices in my inbox.

I drew back when I saw it. An email from Petra. "Hi, Mom" said the subject line. "No dire digests from you..." appeared in the preview. There might have been more to the message or maybe not. Some invisible hand kept me from opening it.

Anticipation quickened my heart. I felt something I had not felt in a long while: maybe it was joy. Look how my daughter has returned to me after my

long silence! I thought of how much closer we would grow the longer I held myself apart. Then I judged myself for that sad and pitiable thought. Better to see things some other way, but what was that other way? I would open Petra's email, but not today. The longer I left the email unread, the more precious it seemed, like a gift before it was opened, like a necklace in a box. The sun shone through my window. The social heartbreak, the demonstrations, and destruction that were to shatter our city and many others were days away. The second wave of the virus, and who knew how many other waves, had yet to come. And what more, what more?

I turned away from the computer and opened the window. The May air felt cool and fresh. I looked at the blue sky. I took a deep breath.

Lynn Levin's short fiction has appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Cleaver*, *JewishFiction.net*, *The Evening Street Review*, *Amarillo Bay*, *The Broadkill Review*, and other places. Her most recent book is the poetry collection *The Minor Virtues* (Ragged Sky, 2020), named one of Spring 2020's best books by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. She teaches at Drexel University, and lives in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Her website is lynnlevinpoet.com.