

DIXIE SALAZAR

Our Lady with a Mask, 2020
Xerox Collage, 8 1/2 X 14 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LINDA MURPHY MARSHALL

Fact or (Science) Fiction

Kate sits at the table in her family room, a sunny, welcoming place with cathedral ceilings and wooden beams, tall windows to let in lots of light. An overgrown schefflera monopolizes a corner of the room, and other plants line the perimeter, a few given to her by her children more than twenty-five years ago when they were in elementary school: a spider plant from her daughter, a small succulent from her son.

The room is a cheerful place, but that lightheartedness is a feeble counterweight to other forces that pull at her now, to sounds and images emanating from the room's television set. There's a steady drumbeat showing the latest news about the coronavirus pandemic, the infected and death toll numbers crawling up the side of the screen, up and up: total cases worldwide, total deaths, cases in the U.S. and deaths in the U.S. She can't turn the set off, afraid she'll miss an important notification about their depressing future. Magical thinking plays tricks on her; maybe she can stem the tide of the elusive virus by obsessively watching the latest news.

Papers surround her on the table. Mini-lessons she's written for her grandchildren during their home confinement, daily doses of fun and information delivered from her computer to their small, eager faces, antidotes to the world in which they're living now. Although she hasn't shared this with anyone, their time together is doubly important because her grandchildren are close to Kate's age when she missed almost half of the first grade due to an undiagnosed illness. While her classmates were learning how to write in cursive and improve their reading skills, she was stuck at home for months, stacks of mimeographed assignment sheets with smelly purple ink in front of her, a jaundiced and perpetually tired child. Her mother's words still rang in her ears: *If you can't catch up with the others, you'll have to repeat first grade.* This painful episode sprung up in her memory, unbidden, with the onset of COVID-19 and the closing of schools throughout the country. It triggered long-ago insecurities, and even though their circumstances are quite different than Kate's, she wants to help her grandchildren avoid a similar fate, avoid being burdened with that trauma.

Other islands of papers and notebooks on the table reflect an online art class; a journal filled with writing ideas; another popular online course (free during the pandemic),

the Science of Well-Being, which she can't get through for some reason. And there's the TV remote control, of course, allowing her to switch back and forth between her favorite news channels. When she can't stand to see and hear more of the grim stories, she watches anything on HGTV, or episodes of *Top Chef*, or even reruns of *Cheers* or *Frasier*.

Science fiction has never been Kate's go-to genre; dystopian themes, even less. And movies based on these novels are the most frightening of all, bringing to life the printed words on which these movies are based: *The Hunger Games*, *On the Beach*, *The Day After*. Kate remembers watching a rerun of *On the Beach* as a young teenager, initially seduced by the title. By the time she realized it wasn't just another Annette Funicello, Frankie Avalon Beach Party movie, it was too late to turn the channel; she was hooked, like someone who couldn't look away from a car crash. She lay on her canopy twin bed, chin resting on her propped-up hands, pillow at the ready to block the onslaught of frightening images, watching, watching, watching, as though a hypnotist were swinging a pocket watch in front of her. Haunted by it, by the world perishing in nuclear fallout, it was too much for her hypersensitive mind to handle. She had nightmares for weeks.

Kate fears that this aptly named "stealth virus" is the perfect storm, the confluence of many crises occurring simultaneously, causing her fears to escalate. Part war zone: a sniper—the disease—potentially lies on every corner, every surface, waiting to pounce. Every person she passes on her rare walks around the neighborhood is a potential contaminant of COVID-19 and they give each other a wide berth. Part totalitarian state: people forced to live apart from each other, with little contact and nightly curfews, orders to stay off the streets, with stores closing, many foods and basic items in short supply, toilet paper, hand sanitizer, for example. Part alien: still no way to combat this unknown, invisible, ubiquitous enemy. No cure, only rudimentary tools, like telling people to social distance. It reminds Kate of bloodletting in the nineteenth century, an unsatisfactory method of combating health crises, but all they had.

"Wash your hands!" "Stay inside!" the experts warn. "Wipe everything down with disinfectant!" "Stay six feet away from other people!" "Wear a mask!" But Kate is no better. Every time her husband sneezes or—God

forbid—coughs, she's all over him: "Are you coughing? Why are you coughing? How do you feel? Are you sick?" Used to the barrage of questions, he's always ready with, "No! It's just allergies." Or, "Just a tickle in my throat." Nonetheless, she continues to observe his behavior, acting like a detective in her own home.

Kate has traveled to a dozen or more African countries in her work as a translator, several of these trips involving personal risk: a coup in Zambia, a war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, terrorist attacks in Kenya, riots in South Africa. This is different, though. Those African dangers had a beginning, middle, and end, at least for her. This pandemic stretches into the future indefinitely, at least in her imagination. It's like the artist's vanishing point, two parallel lines looking like they'll intersect at some point "out there"—illness on one side and the cure on the other, in this case—yet the lines never meet.

It's as though they're passing through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. At first there was denial: it was a hoax. "Get on with your lives," "Nothing to see here," "A liberal plot!" politicians ranted, infuriating Kate. Then came anger when the number of infections and deaths spiked and the virus became a painful reality to a once-disbelieving, complacent population. A different kind of bargaining began when citizens were urged to stay at home and started scavenging for supplies, for food, in order to cope with this new reality, trying to hang on to the vestiges of their former lives. Then depression set in when the novelty of being in this crazy world wore off and the future became ever more uncertain.

Acceptance will come eventually, Kate supposes, though that will mean a flattening of emotions, a lowering of expectations, an acknowledgment of a new world order. The experts on the news shows claim this won't be a "V-shaped" recovery, or even a "U-shaped" recovery; life won't just bounce back to its pre-COVID-19 shape after this precipitous dip, they say. It will be something new, something they've never lived before. Some days Kate thinks it will be L-shaped: first, the precipitous fall from their former way of life, followed by a continuation of that flat trajectory, more of today's "same," the bottom of the L going on forever and ever.

Recently, she heard an expert on TV make the

observation that this crisis is particularly stressful because it's (a) unpredictable, (b) uncontrollable, and (c) sustained, with no end in sight. Regardless, yesterday's way of life is rapidly receding into the past and will perhaps become a distant memory for Kate's grandchildren as the world resets and acclimates to a new reality.

The closing lines of a late 1950s, early 1960s television series pop into Kate's mind as she straightens her pile of papers and heads to the kitchen to cobble together something for dinner for herself and her husband: "There are eight million stories in the naked city; this has been one of them." Everyone has their own stories of living through this crisis; she's living just one of them. There are the horror stories courageous medical personnel tell, the terrifying stories others on the front lines share: police officers, paramedics, and firefighters; those stocking grocery store shelves and delivering food and other supplies; gas station personnel, trash collectors, post office workers, utility workers, on and on—all the visible and invisible heroes. Three months ago she would never have thought of someone delivering her groceries as a hero, but now she does. Nor would she have considered the over-sixty masked plumber who entered her home the other day to fix her washing machine a hero, but now she does.

Kate realizes she's at the bottom of that hierarchy of horror with her own story. She's safe at home, and healthy so far, somewhat removed from what she sees and hears on TV. Still, though, she secretly longs for the time—was it really just a few months ago?—when she could go to the grocery store whenever she wanted and find everything she needed, when her calendar was full of upcoming trips and appointments, when she met friends for coffee, went to restaurants, the gym, the library, the mall . . . such simple, trivial pleasures. She misses those times before the world became this science fiction movie, misses the times when, if she wanted the horror to end, all she had to do was switch the channel or turn off the TV.

Linda Murphy Marshall is a multilinguist and writer with a PhD in Hispanic languages and literature, an MA in Spanish, and an MFA in creative writing. Her nonfiction and fiction work has been published or is forthcoming in the *Los Angeles Review*, *Maryland Literary Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Storgy*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and others. In addition, she is a reader for *Fourth Genre* and translation editor at the *Los Angeles Review*.