

Summer in Quarantine
(a very short story)
by
Beth Labonte

One of Many Saturday Mornings

All I can say is that it's a really good thing I went on that Bermuda cruise all those years ago. If I hadn't, I may never have married Graham (the love of my life, despite the fact that he's currently recording a virtual Zumba class from our living room and shouting *Whoo!* every thirty seconds). Had I never married Graham, I might be spending the COVID-19 quarantine stuck in my parents' basement. I can't even wrap my head around the horror of *that* situation—so, while things may not be ideal, they could most definitely have been worse. I tell myself that a lot these days. *Things could most definitely have been worse.*

Still, no matter how positive I try to stay—and in the notorious words of my mother—I'm having a nervous breakdown.

I've had several, in fact. There's the daily nervous breakdown I have when scanning through Facebook photos of everybody else's gorgeous homeschooling setups. They've all purchased brand new desks from Pottery Barn, and post photos of their children peering studiously into microscopes. Somehow, in the midst of all this chaos, they've managed to get their children *more* interested in their schoolwork. I can barely get our five-year-old daughter, Sarah, into something other than pajamas, never mind a freakin' *lab coat*.

There's the recurring Friday night nervous breakdown that I have when Graham tries to drag me into a virtual karaoke contest with my brother, Eric, and his wife. I've told him countless times that I would need to be quarantined for *years* before a virtual karaoke contest would sound even remotely appealing, and probably not even then.

And then, there's the thrice-weekly nervous breakdown that I have every time Mom and Dad attempt to FaceTime me, which is where I currently find myself.

I take my ringing phone and leave the living room, where Graham's doing something disturbing with his hips, and shut myself inside Sarah's bedroom. She's on the carpet playing with her dolls, and I notice that she's turned all of Barbie's bikini tops into face masks. A neon pink one with yellow pineapples is wrapped around a good portion of Ken's head.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, as her face appears on my screen. Speaking of face masks, she’s wearing one. “You know, I don’t think you need to wear your mask around the house.”

“Better safe than sorry!” says Mom. “Besides, your father is decontaminating the groceries.” She turns the phone so I can see Dad, who gives me a wave. They’re both in the basement, and Dad’s dressed in a black Hefty bag, yellow rubber gloves, and a plastic face shield. He’s standing in front of a long folding table piled high with groceries. Eric’s been ordering their groceries for them online, so they don’t need to leave the house. I watch as Dad sprays down a new can of Lysol with an old can of Lysol, before moving on to the canned goods.

“How’s everything going?” I ask.

To be honest, Mom and Dad are dealing with this whole situation better than I am. I think the fact that they’ve spent their entire lives preparing for the worst has sort of softened the blow. I, on the other hand, have spent recent years rebelling against their paranoia and anxiety. So, when I started hearing that toilet paper was becoming scarce, I shrugged it off. I thought, *What kind of a lunatic worries about that sort of thing? Not me! Ha!*

Now, I’m allotted two squares per visit to the bathroom.

Mom walks over to the table of groceries and points the camera at a box of Cheez-Its. “I asked Eric to order us Cheez-Its. What does he get? Pepper Jack!”

“It’s not easy to find everything you need these days,” I say, sticking up for my brother, even though we went through this same thing last week with the salt & vinegar chips. “Pepper Jack Cheez-Its are good! Give them a shot!”

“The spices will give your father a funny stomach,” she says. “The last thing we need is to clog the toilet and bring a plumber with God knows what sort of virus into the house. No, I’m throwing them away. Richard, throw the Cheez-Its away!”

“Don’t throw them away!” I shout at the phone. Sarah turns around to look at me, and I lower my voice. “Just leave them on the porch with the salt & vinegar chips, okay? I’ll get them later.”

“You eat that sort of thing? Pepper *Jack*?”

“Yes, Mom.” I put the phone down for a moment and take a deep breath, before picking it up again. “So, tell me, what else have you guys been up to?”

“Oh, this and that.” She shrugs. “Puzzles, television. We’ve been...what do they call it? *Binge-viewing*? We’ve been *binge-viewing* a series on Netflix. It’s called *You*.”

“Really?” I ask, trying to keep the cringe out of my face as several completely perverse scenes run through my mind. Hopefully they slept through most of them, the way they slept through all eight seasons of *Game of Thrones*. “Do you, um, do you guys like it?”

“All I can say is that you’re lucky you found a nice boy like Graham.” She pauses, and I can practically see the little nugget of worry forming in her head. She places one hand on her chest, looks intently into the phone, and whispers, “Graham never stood in the bushes outside your window did he?”

Here we go.

I squint one eye and pretend like I’m really thinking about it. “Well, there was that *one* time...”

“Oy!” She staggers backward a few steps, nearly crashing into the table of groceries.

“I’m kidding! Take it easy. And before you ask, Graham hasn’t murdered any of his ex-girlfriends.”

“You never know, Summer. They do these murders and they get away with them!”

“Who’s *they*?”

“Anybody! That Joe Goldberg, he seemed like such a nice young man! Just promise me, Summer, if anything ever happens to Graham, you won’t remarry. You’ll come back, and you’ll live with us.”

“I am not promising you that. Here, talk to your granddaughter for a few minutes.” I’m about to pass the phone off to Sarah, when something in the background catches my eye. “Hey, Mom, what’s all that?” I squint at the shiny floor to ceiling pile of white stuff over in the corner of the basement.

“What?” asks Mom, looking over her shoulder. “What’s what?”

“That, over there.” I point to the right side of my phone and I gasp. “Is that *toilet paper*??” Oh, man. It *is* toilet paper, and it’s like ten mega packs high by God only knows how many deep. “You’re one of those people hoarding all the toilet paper!?”

“We *need* it, Summer!” she shrieks. “We’re over sixty-five! They said so on the news!”

“They told you to stay home! They did not tell you to hoard all the toilet paper! And is that...” I trail off and cover my mouth with my hand. Next to the floor-to-ceiling pile of toilet paper is a huge box with the word *Purell* on the side. “Oh, Mom...not hand sanitizer, too...”

“That?” She glances at the box. “That’s just your father’s stash from Y2K.”

Right. Forgot about that.

"I'm going to put Sarah on now," I say, sinking down onto the carpet beside her. I notice that she's stretched Barbie out on a couch inside the Dreamhouse and moved Ken, along with a Thanksgiving turkey and a bottle of grape soda, into the R.V. outside. She's taped a sign to the side of the house that says SICKOS KEEP OUT.

Strange times, indeed.

I hand Sarah the phone and let the two of them babble at each other for a while, before I realize what time it is. "Hey, Mom, we have to go. We actually have a scheduled call with Graham's parents in a few minutes."

"How *are* John and Babette?" asks Mom. As she walks toward the stairs, I see Dad in the background Clorox-wiping a bottle of Clorox wipes. Eric may have done a crap job on the Cheez-Its, but he sure did a fantastic job tracking down cleaning products.

"They're okay," I say. "Bored, though. Everything at Sunset Havens is shut down, so they don't really have anything to do. They can't even golf!"

"Florida." She rolls her eyes. "Oy, please. I'll have to email Babette and tell her to watch *You*."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear from you. Okay, we'll talk later, Mom. Love you!"

I hang up just as Graham appears in the room, plunking himself down beside me on the bed. Before we can even say a word to each other, his phone buzzes with the call from his parents.

"Hello, hello!" says Babette. She looks as cheerful and optimistic as ever, dressed in her brightly colored Zumba clothes, and holding a glass of white wine in her hand. An unshaven, melancholy-looking John sits beside her with a glass of red. It's 10a.m. "Wonderful class this morning, dear!"

"Thanks!" says Graham, putting his arm around me. Sarah climbs onto his lap and we look like the perfect quarantined family. Hashtag blessed. Hashtag loving-every-moment. "How's it going down there?"

"Terrible," says John. "The town commons are all closed. Can't play beach tennis. Can't go to the bars. Fifty golf courses, all going to waste! We may as well be back up where *you* live." He shakes his head and takes a slug of his drink.

Babette pats him on the shoulder. "It's been rough on your father, but we're doing our best to stay busy! Janice, Francine, and I do Zumba with Graham's videos every morning, and then we do Zoom every night! Oh, would you look at that!" She nudges John with her elbow. "Zum Zoom!" She laughs maniacally and takes a long sip of her wine.

Wow.

“At least the weather’s nice,” I point out, changing the subject. “Do you get out for a walk every day?”

“We try,” says Babette, nodding. “But, you know, the other day we had to practically run from this woman out on her front lawn. She came right up and tried to hug us! She said ‘I’ve always been a hugger and no *little flu* is going to change that!’”

“I told her winding up *dead* might change that,” says John.

“He really said that!” says Babette, laughing. “We came straight back home, locked the door, and whipped up some Bloody Mary’s!”

“Gin and tonics,” says John.

“Oh, that’s right,” says Babette. “The Bloody Mary’s were on Monday, after that man with the cough followed us for half a block, shouting about the ‘hoax.’”

I raise my eyebrows. “You know what, maybe you guys should just stay inside.”

“Yeah,” says Graham, nodding in agreement. “Stay safe, please. I was thinking that once this whole thing is over, we should take a big trip! Us, Eric, Tanya, Summer’s parents...”

“How *are* your parents doing, dear?” asks Babette, cutting in before Graham can elaborate on this *big trip* idea he’s told me nothing about. “This seems like the sort of thing they might fret about.”

“They’re handling it surprisingly well,” I say. “They were born for this sort of thing. My mom’s actually emailing you about a TV show later.”

“I can’t wait to hear from her,” says Babette. “Maybe she and Richard would like to join the Sunset Swishers Friday night Zoom meetings! It’s amazing the things you can do over Zoom.” She gives John a wink and a nudge.

I look over at Graham, whose face is slowly turning red, and I try not to laugh. We had a bit of a run-in with the Sunset Swishers right before our wedding, and I’m still not convinced that all they swap is clothes.

We let them talk to Sarah for a few minutes, before saying our goodbyes and hanging up. Then the three of us walk out into the kitchen.

“Now what?” I ask, looking around at my family. It’s still early, and most of Saturday still looms ahead.

“Ice cream?” asks Sarah.

“Before lunch?”

“Not before lunch,” says Graham. “*For* lunch.”

“Seriously?”

He takes a few steps toward the freezer. “If you can’t have ice cream for lunch during a global crisis, Sum, when *can* you?”

He has a point. He usually does.

“Ice cream it is.” I take a seat at the island and pull Sarah onto my lap. Graham does a few silly Zumba moves as he scoops our ice cream, making the both of us laugh. I smooth down Sarah’s buttery blonde hair—the exact same shade as her father’s—and kiss the top of her head. There are certainly worse conditions in which to be quarantined.

“Have you really been thinking about us all going on a big vacation?” I ask, taking a bite of coffee ice cream.

“Maybe,” says Graham. “I mean, why not?”

“Because I can’t even think beyond this weekend,” I say. “Never mind when all of this is over. It just seems so...*endless*.”

“It’s not endless,” says Graham, pointing his spoon at me. “We’re going to get through it. And in the meantime...Alexa, play ‘We Built This City’ by Starship.”

I laugh as the music starts and my mood instantly lifts. There’s no way can I wallow when this song comes on, and he knows it. If we’re still quarantined five years from now, I may even sing it in a virtual karaoke contest.

After we finish our ice cream, Graham and Sarah (who is so her father’s daughter) drag me into the living room for a dance party. Graham’s got an entire playlist of my favorite songs queued up, and he refuses to pull down any of the shades. May as well give the neighbors something to look at.

I flop down on the couch, exhausted, after three songs, and watch the two of them continue to dance. They’ve both got endless energy and zero inhibitions. I may not be hashtag “loving every minute” of this quarantine, but I am loving *this* minute. And probably the next one, too.

I suppose that the secret to getting through this is finding joy in the little things, one moment at a time. Watch your silly family dance. Enjoy the sun as you drive to your parents’ house to pick up a box of Cheez-Its. Look forward to that next big, chaotic family vacation.

Breathe. We’ll get through this.

And if you run out of toilet paper...I know a guy.