

Use soap & Mango spoiled

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Volume 8, numéro 1, 2021

True Stories from the Front: Facing COVID-19

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076505ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v8i1.279>

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Éditeur(s)

McGill University Library

ISSN

2291-918X (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Niburski, K. (2021). Use soap & Mango spoiled. *The International Journal of Whole Person Care*, 8(1), 57–61. <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v8i1.279>

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USE SOAP

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Wake up
wash hands
read the news

message friends around the world

hope they are safe

wash hands

take medications

eat breakfast

wash hands

call mom

she tells me it is no more than the flu

she says only the old will get it

she says that I have always looked for an excuse to avoid work

wash hands

go to store

empty shelves

buy bleach

man in front of line has eight bottles of purell

person in cash register coughs

coughs in hand

coughs again after

“do you want anything else?”

ask for hand sanitizer

they are out

bleach is 90 dollars
it is a promotion
leave it at front
go home
wash hands
wash hands
wash hands
friends say they don't feel safe
they say they are scared
wash hands
check news again
told to avoid the sick again
wash hands
take medication again
wash hands
try to sleep
can't
throat has a tickle at the back
like a laugh ■

MANGO SPOILED

She smelled different. Something like a promising mango, one that is loose, ripening underneath the fingernails, one that spits black seeds in every bite. Other parts like horse manure.

The odor streamed from her hair, wafting down to her recently shaven legs, anchoring itself between her glossy toes that tapped against the purple carpet we purchased four years ago because it would look nice – the place was so empty.

The carpet looked bruised. She told me that the hospital was changing slowly, but medical students like myself could still play a role fighting COVID-19.

“Everyone has their part in making the world whole again,” she declared.

Her feet stopped fiddling.

“In a pandemic, all the bodies are useful for all the bodies could be no more,” she continued.

The smell swallowed each syllable. She looked at me, head down, waiting for me to nod.

“This is serious,” she said.

I nodded seriously.

Yes, she was right that there was still magnificence no one or anything could steal away, as seen in the floral pattern of on her dress. She was right that all bodies had a use, even as I sat lumped waiting for something, something such as a purpose. She was right that the world was not whole anymore.

“I love you and we’ll get through this thing,” she added.

Her bracelets rattled as she stretched her arm around me. She smiled in the soft, infectious way she learned I liked.

Did I smile back? I was unsure. Maybe I winced from the smell.

*

Each day I expected a call-to-arms, a virtual conscription where home was safe while safety was relative. The rules of engagement in this new world were simple: venture out to doom oneself to a stranger’s hygiene ritual. Each person a carrier of disease; each encounter a skirmish with unknowns. A cough was a snotty punch. A sneeze a spitfire. And a fever forecasted the heavenly heat to come.

Then the call came. I was instructed to dial into patients’ homes to report their positive COVID results. When I did, I apologized. I waited. My feet were draped across my couch during these pauses, blanketed and warm. Her smell was nestled in the cushions, aroused by my sporadic movements. Tea was close at hand. I sipped it in between revealing the information, the inevitable, and the incredible, until there was total silence.

Muted whispers followed each conversation, as though the patient was speaking to their past self and to the person they were now. Then, the questions erupted.

“How long would the disease last?”

“From what we understand,” I started.

“How did I get it?”

“From what you’ve told me,” I continued.

“What will happen to me?”

“From what I know,” I muddled. “We don’t know.”

They would ask, “Who knows?” I nearly said her name. She was on the frontlines, there among the whirling ventilators that shook the walls and bodies. She, who combated the virus while others hid. She, who promised to make a cure a mere suggestion of will. She was tough. She was strong. She, I mused, was doing all that could be done for she aimed to do it all.

I never answered that question. I told the patient that we would talk again in a few days. Then the nights stretched on and on until she returned home seemingly untouched by the deadening day. She took a long shower and dried her body neatly. After eating the meal I had prepared and eyeing me tussle with the dishes, she declared that I could not touch her.

“It is a precaution.”

Her smell was afresh, different now, like a banana-split blended with a beached whale.

“It is a new perfume,” she said one day as we ate another meal in silence. “The Chinese apparently tested it against COVID.” Some of it still pooled on her neck. The puddle pulsed, pounded.

A text message appeared moments before she bit into warm lima beans.

“Oh! Urgent patient,” she said, smiling down at the phone.

I watched her shadow climb the stairs, face lit by the flickers from her phone that could burn everything down, the smell lurking behind like a hungry, bloodied beast.

*

She stayed at the hospital longer each day. I, accordingly, accepted more contact tracing shifts. We rarely saw each other. I only heard her whispering at night while I lay semi-asleep.

When not calling COVID positive patients, I kept our home safe. I cleaned and cleaned and cleaned the surfaces, even if it had no effect on the persistent smell. The carpet was the most difficult as it was a vortex of cat hair, miscellaneous stains, and faded purple. Vacuums were no match against its fur. The carpet was too large, shabby, and wild to be thrown into a washing machine. Hands would have to work with knees, knees with feet, feet with the floor to scrub and soak and squash and stamp, and still, the smell lingered. The virus may have been scoured by Febreze and soap, but the odour transmuted into that rare mix of the first spring blossom and defrosted winter poop.

She failed to notice. She did not comment on the orderliness of the house, nor of the floor flossed clean, nor the sterility of the place, nor of the WASH THE HANDS sign above the kitchen counter, nor how I swore to the virus that I would be its homey vanquisher, nor how I had worn my skin raw by repeatedly washing my hands, nor how the welts hurt when I did her dishes, nor the fact that I was helping her, doing all this

for her, cleaning and feeding and calling countless patients before some of them would meet her brand of healing.

I caught her in glimpses. She rose before dawn, revealing that there were still things that can break before the horizon. She dressed in more elegant dresses as COVID progressed. Her make-up was perfected into a blend of effortless and wide-eyed attention. Her hair curled with delight. She smelled of every wondrous thing crushed, jumbled together.

This is how I would lose her, I told myself. With beauty.

*

It was the 43rd time I washed my hands that day. Some soap seeped into the torn skin. It no longer hurt.

I called another patient. She stated matter-of-factly, "This cannot be happening. This is worse than death. This *not knowing* the future."

The door opened. Her form was backlit, unprotected by the night. Another silhouette sniffled near her. Their hips almost touched. He smelled like her, like mango spoiled.

"This is Cyril. We work together in the ICU."

I nodded seriously.

"I wanted to show him the work you're doing. It's really helping."

I nodded seriously.

"Nice to meet you," he said quickly. He stepped forward to shake my hand.

I nodded seriously. He reached his hand out further towards me.

"With COVID being so serious, I cannot shake your hand. It is a precaution."

He, too, nodded. She stood at the door. He stood at the door. Their hips inched closer, bodies nearly kissing. I could hear the patient on the phone saying, "Hello, Hello, Hello."

I inhaled. What? I inhaled more forcefully, trying to breathe in all the air of the home. Nothing. For the first time during the pandemic, I could not smell a thing. ■