

## **TAKING THE JAB**

**(A Canadian's Quest for Pfizer in the Catskills)**

**by**

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I have a theory, and like most theories, no one wants to hear it. Not just because I'm a terminal optimist, which drives people nuts, but because my theory is about what we're all sick of.

As I approach what I hope is the mass vaccination center, its doors guarded by a small platoon of National Guard in fatigues and masks, I'm telling the Tourettic part of my brain—"Don't say it." My wife, Celia, is apparently thinking the same thing. She's fifty feet behind me, not quite hiding, more like praying that her husband doesn't get shot for seditious enthusiasm.

Like everyone, we're exhausted. It's April, and we're desperate. We've driven four hours to get here, been lost three times in the Catskills, and now twice in Oneonta. I expected a lineup snaking into the green hills surrounding the campus, but the parking lot is nearly empty, except for the soldiers pacing behind the concrete abutments. Who knows where their last assignment was: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Capitol?

I hold my hands up in front of me, a sign of surrender. I'm running the words through my head—"I just want to make sure we're in the right place."

But instead, out comes my theory: "Don't you think the pandemic has raised our collective sense of compassion?"

Every one of them turns to watch me, on full alert: What kind of nut is this?

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It's true. My mouth gets me in trouble. Don't get me wrong, I'm no Forrest Gump, waltzing across the world stage dispensing pith to foreign leaders and ping-pong champions. I'm just an engineer with a broken filter. As I face the US military, all I can think is that I don't belong here. I'm Canadian, I'm healthy, I'm taking someone's spot, and I have to pee. I'm here because of my wife. In late March, when Governor Cuomo opened vaccines to all New York residents over fifty, Celia was on it like a shot. "We live here half the year," she said. "We own a house. We're *residents*."

Easy for her to say. She's a dual citizen. My only proof of residence is a letter from our bank rejecting a line of credit, and a delivery sticker from a shoe company called Masai Barefoot Technology.

I explain myself to the lead soldier and he softens. "You can go in anytime, sir, as long as you have an appointment today."

We enter the vast sport complex of SUNY Oneonta, its vaulted atrium the size of a small destroyer. I can almost smell the fear. The place is set up like a militarized border crossing. We've just passed Checkpoint One, to keep out the crazies. Checkpoint Two is just inside the door, where a stern-eyed woman steps forward and points a temperature gun at my forehead. She sees my Canadian passport and asks if I have proof of residence.

I open my manilla folder of documents, cradled in one hand, with my head cocked, peering through the sliver of space between my fogged glasses and mask. The doors open behind me and a gust of wind scatters my papers. I scramble to gather them up, bent over, and my glasses slide off my face. I catch them in one hand but drop the folder from the other. I'm on my hands and knees, suddenly an old man, when the soldier, crouched beside me, hands me the rest

of my papers. She looks at me for a moment, and I see, up close, her eyes are not stern, but sad. She has seen death, she has seen it recently, and she has seen too much of it.

She stands, abruptly, as if this closeness is too much, and waves me through. “Just have them ready for the next station, sir,” she says, quietly.

It is here, in the no-man’s land between Checkpoints Two and Three, beside the giant red letters—DO NOT STOP IN THIS AREA—that I find Celia hunched over her purse. She’s passed the test faster than I have—she’s a master’s student at Sarah Lawrence College, after all—but seems to have misplaced something called her passport. I’m used to this. She’s a poet. She’s naturally discombobulated. It’s where metaphor comes from.

But this is no place of poetry. Or is it? Tomorrow she will birth a beautiful, poignant, and infuriatingly perfect poem about everything I missed. But right now, she wears a fissure down her forehead like the Hudson Gorge. She abhors needles, long drives, and being rushed. She prefers to make her entrance like royalty, papers ready. I watch, dumbstruck, as she empties her purse onto the top of a chest-high concrete wall. The wall is a foot wide, and I manage to snatch her passport just before it slides over the edge into an abyss of steel and concrete stairs. I know this because I’m leaning over the wall, legs in the air like a five-year-old, holding her passport.

Back at Checkpoint Two, all eyes are firmly upon us. I wave Celia’s passport in the air, victoriously. No one waves back, but the woman soldier who helped me gives a subtle shake of her head. I think I see a glint in her eyes.

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What Governor Cuomo’s invitation failed to mention last week was that unless we wanted to wait two months, the closest available appointment was a three-hour drive north. We decided to make a trip of it: drive up the Hudson Valley, see the Catskills, maybe buy some Dutch furniture

made before Canada was a country.

The route looked simple enough. I gave us a two-hour buffer, but we immediately lost thirty minutes convincing the doggie day-care that our cocker spaniel did not have kennel cough. We lost another twenty minutes because our on-ramp was closed, and the only detour took us south. Then I missed a turn at Peekskill, and we wound up in Fishkill. I missed another turn at Scotchtown because my brain wouldn't stop riffing off the Beaverkill sign. By the time we reached Tilley's diner in Monticello, we'd lost ninety minutes and hadn't eaten lunch.

I ordered a nut salad, Celia ordered eggs, and we were out of Tilley's in a miraculous seventeen minutes. In the town of Walton, our navigation turned us onto Mead Street, for no apparent reason other than my surname is Meade. After twenty minutes down narrowing, harrowing roads through a century-old forest where we lost our cell signal and satellite map, I risked our lives to ask directions at a shack with a bright red "TRUMP 2024" sign in the window: "Which way to Oneonta?" But I pronounced it *One On Ta*. I might as well have asked the way to *Scheveningen*—the Dutch Underground's password in the Second World War, a word no German could pronounce.

We sped into Oneonta with our necks as tight as the Lincoln Tunnel. The only things I learned about the Catskills is that you need an old-fashioned paper map, and that the Dutch word for creek is kill.

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Checkpoint Three: Identification. My throat squeezes to a dry reed, pushing my voice an octave higher. This is where I'll get deported for false representation. I tag along with Celia, hoping to ride on her well-documented coattails, but I'm shoo-ed to the next table, manned by a Sherman tank camouflaged as a human. I hand over my Canadian passport, into which I've inserted a

selection of documents.

As Sherman flips through a computer printout, looking for my name, I see his mask is tied oddly around the back of his head. There's a gnarled mound of flesh where his left ear used to be. I can't take my eyes off it, and I can't help imagining how it happened. I see him lying in a ditch somewhere, or in the desert, facedown in the sand, clutching his ear as his blood and eardrum ooze over his fingers. How long did he lie in the sand, alone, waiting? Who was he thinking of while waiting to die so far from home?

Someday, maybe soon, I will take my last breath. As will Sherman. And that woman in the bright pink mask at the next table, and the man behind her in the goatee and muscle shirt and swirling tattoos, and the man over there with the wooden cane. Every single person in this facility has thought about death today, at some level. Their own death, or their partner's, or their kids', or parents', or friends.' Even the death of strangers on television feels personal.

It strikes me that compassion literally means to *suffer with*, or *together*. You don't have to be The Enlightened One to see the suffering and fear around you. Here we are, all of us in this communal act, trying to defer our own death. Rarely has death been so universally palpable.

"Mask *down*, please," Sherman says, as if repeating himself. "Glasses off."

I bare myself to him. Maybe this is how we'll all feel when we finally drop the masks: naked, exposed—*showing our mouths*. My mouth, though, truly does have something to hide: my lower lip is covered in dark red scabs. He glances at the scabs, says, "Mask up."

I glance left and right down the row of tables. I realize that others have their New York driver's license to prove residency. Just the fact that we have our passports raises a flag.

"How are you eligible for the vaccine?" he says, flatly.

I point to the address on my credit rejection, which I've placed on top. "I'm a New York

resident.”

He shakes his head. “What’s your eligibility?”

I swallow, confused. “I’m over fifty?” My voice rises at the end like a teenager’s.

His face does something beneath his mask. “Well, I’ll be. You sure don’t look it.”

He hands back my documents and waves me on. I stride, beaming, and catch up with Celia midway through the next no-man’s land. I share the good news—that I don’t look fifty.

She does not break stride. “Your suitcase tells a different story.”

I’ve heard this jab before. She means my Bran Buds, and Metamucil. My glaucoma eye drops, and compression socks. I stop outside the men’s room.

“I have to pee.”

She sighs. I hand her my folder.

Most public restrooms now have every second urinal blocked off, which has the fortunate effect—for those with a shy bladder—of creating a buffer zone in which one can quietly hum oneself into action. But oddly, not here. There is only one free urinal, squeezed between two giant soldiers on either side. I stand almost shoulder to shoulder, or rather shoulder to elbow, eyes closed, humming, but nothing comes. I try to breathe, to let go. *Quiet the mind and the soul will speak*, Rumi said. But I’d settle for a few words from my bladder.

After a minute, a deep voice beside me says: “You okay, sir?”

“Stage fright,” I confess, hoping this will help. I’ve read up on fear: turn toward it.

The giant beside me nods, an expert on fear. “Me too.”

We fall into a shy bladder standoff. He leaves. My shoulders drop with relief, like when you’re hosting a party and at last, they’re gone and you can finally be yourself.

I emerge to find Celia at the next checkpoint, having been told by three different soldiers

to move along. “If they wanted proof of your age,” she says, drily, “they could’ve just clocked you at the urinal.”

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Checkpoint Four: Registration. I still haven’t proven I’m a *New Yawka*, the name itself designed to prove me a fraud. I can’t even pass the *New Yawka* greeting test—*Hi-how-aw-ya*—one word, not a question. As a Canadian, I can’t help answering politely—*I’m-fine-thanks-how-are-you*—to blank stares.

We step into the vast gymnasium, a Sahara of hardwood partitioned by what could be the largest curtain on the planet: five stories high, fifty yards long. The floor is taped with red arrows and socially distanced X’s in roped lineups. We’ve watched the online computer models: how droplets disperse through classrooms and airplanes and restaurants. Now whenever I enter a room, I can’t help visualising the viral streams, as if an inky, poisonous fluid has been poured into the swirling bath of air around us. I find myself holding my breath, absurdly, beneath my mask, as I pass through what could be a droplet-rich zone.

As we join our line, Celia gestures toward the side doors, all propped open. “This is a good room.”

The woman in front of us half turns to look at Celia, her eyes glassy and red, like she’s been crying. She has a knitted green shawl pulled tight over her shoulders, with a brown wool skirt. She inhales to speak, but doesn’t, or can’t.

“Sometimes I feel like our lives have turned into one big science project,” I say.

The woman blinks, mumbles something like *home*, and turns back around.

I turn my attention to the cinder-block walls, draped with athletic banners of red SUNY dragons, to which none will be added this year. Just below the ceiling runs a black, horizontal

banner, with stark red letters:

*Knowing what must be done does away with fear – Rosa Parks*

I've never felt such courage. For me, knowing what needs to be done usually fills me with dread or anxiety. I'm not alone. Our daughter, for example, has become intimate with fear.

We shuffle forward and I say to Celia, resuming our discussion from the car about our daughter, "Lots of people fail first year university, even without a pandemic. Besides, I think we're closer to her than ever, now."

We've tried to imagine what it was like this last year for her and her friends—a generation of caged birds. Their rites of passage utterly gutted: a high school graduation reduced to a drive-by with their parents, frosh-week madness reduced to online "icebreakers," their freshman classes a marathon of Zoom catatonia. Right before our eyes, this former tsunami of energy—our daughter—sank into a pit of Wi-Fi apathy, a kind of suspended animation. It was like trying to prop up a rag doll. Now we fear that this year might've buried her so deep she'll never find her way out again.

"With the pandemic," I continue, "instead of our being outraged and disappointed with her, we can say, *Well, thank God you're healthy*, and move on."

"Of course," Celia says, "you're not saying the pandemic's a good thing."

I shrug. "Some people say war was the best part of their lives."

The words come out of me just as we reach Table Five, where two privates stare me down.

"My dad was in the military," I say, trying to explain myself.

"ID," one says, flatly.

We hand over our passports, with documents inserted.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I say, loudly, defending myself. “I won’t be saying, five years from now, ‘You know what we really need? A good pandemic to bring us closer together. Make us appreciate what we have.’”

The private hands back our documents. I see no compassion in her eyes. “Go on in.”

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Finally, The Jab. On the other side of the giant curtain, we’re each directed to a table with a nurse with swabs and needles and a soldier with a laptop. The nurse smiles her twinkling green eyes, a skill perfected through eighty jabs a day. Above her blue medical mask, she wears a paisley scarf swept elegantly around her scalp which, I see, is bare. My heart sinks.

She picks up her clipboard and begins a long questionnaire. I try to focus on her questions, but I can’t get over how much she looks like my mother, who wore a similar “chemo scarf,” as she called it.

“Do you have any condition that could cause a weakened immune system?” Her voice shifts, it seems, when she adds, “Such as HIV or cancer?”

“Yes,” I say, then quickly, “I mean *no*.”

She looks at me for a moment.

“I have pre-cancer on my lip,” I stammer. “But not cancer. Yet. As far as I know.”

There’s an awkward silence. “It’s just my lip. I mean, it’s not—” I stop.

Her voice lowers. “Have you undergone any chemotherapy treatments in the past six weeks?”

“No.”

Now my heart races. This is an outright lie. Beneath my mask, my lower lip is dark red and scabbed. Eleven days ago, I finished three weeks of chemo cream on my lip. Since then, I’ve

told myself repeatedly that it was only a topical cream, that the chemo is not in my bloodstream. Taking the shot should be fine. I searched the web, obsessively, but couldn't find a definitive answer. Some said there's little risk; others said make sure you tell your doctor first. I meant to tell the nurse, but when the question came, my mouth wanted the shot.

It's too late now. I can't go back.

She holds my gaze, nods, and puts her clipboard down. "Let's get to it, then."

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Afterwards, I'm guided by Private Matt Damon past another curtain into a vast orchard of red plastic chairs in rows spaced six feet apart. Private Damon tells me, in not so many words, that I'm to sit for fifteen minutes. If I don't fall off the chair, if my body doesn't balloon into the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man, and if my face doesn't turn Sunkist like a former president, I'm free to leave.

I sit and watch the other humans shuffle in, stunned and blinking like birds after striking a window. We've all wanted this moment for over a year, but now what? We stumble back into the wilds as if nothing happened?

Along the top of the wall runs a horizontal banner. This one quotes Marcus Aurelius: *If it isn't right, don't do it. If it isn't true, don't say it.*

My heart rails in my chest. I just lied right to that woman's face. Now if I do turn orange and fall on the floor, I'll have to admit the truth—that I just finished chemo. That I might have cancer. That I don't really live here. That I'm a fraud and a liar.

I close my eyes and try to breathe. I can feel the mRNA moving through me, up my shoulder, into my chest, my gut, searching out the bad cells—and the *chemo* cells. I know this is absurd, but my chest doesn't believe me.

“Are you okay, sir?” a woman’s voice says.

I open my eyes. It’s the same woman soldier who earlier picked up my documents from the floor. They’ve rotated stations. “Just resting, thanks.”

“You’re sweating, sir.” She leans closer to me.

“I’m just—*nervous*.”

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Beside the exit door stands a poster with a photo of a smiling Governor Cuomo. He’s standing with his arm out so you can fake a selfie with him, with the caption: “I got shot! Spread the word!”

I convince Celia to pose with me, biceps flexed, showing off the Band-Aid. I ham it up, shove my thumb under my bicep. Across the gym, a few soldiers laugh.

We burst out the side door of the gymnasium, finally free. I hold the door for another couple, and we emerge beside the entrance, where the soldiers are still screening out the crazies.

I raise my arms in the air, like victory, and call out to them, “Wow, that was so efficient! Almost like a military operation!”

The soldiers stare at me. Not even a wave.

The man behind me calls to them, in a calm, clear New Yorker voice, “Thank you for your service.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

We ease into the parking lot, and as the other couple turns toward their car, we wave to each other. Celia rummages through her bag in the trunk. I sit alone in the car for a minute, sweating, heart pounding, hoping Rumi was right: we’re all just walking each other home.