

HOTEL ON BALTIC

The guy who runs the Mobil station on the corner of Main Street and Route 27 stands outside the marquee sign holding a long pole with a suction cup on the end. He's pulling off the numbers — lowering gas prices from \$2.28 a gallon to \$2.16. He's wearing a blue surgical mask. I watch him lower the price once a week — as I mail my bills from the mailbox in front of Borough Hall. The drivers who pass me wear dark glasses and masks. They look like aliens.

James Taylor is singing "Moon River" as Lynn and I sit at the dining room table, attempting to finish a game of Monopoly which has now stretched into three days. Lynn is clearly bored, and ready to finish me off if she can. Half my properties are turned upside down: mortgaged. We are both nearly cashless. I tell her the game was invented in 1934, and she says, "It feels like the Depression right now." Lynn has been trying to stay in jail for as long as possible, but she finally hits my hotel on Baltic (\$450), and, like a thousand families around us, declares bankruptcy.

We head out to walk Nellie by a pear tree spectacularly festooned in white blossoms. Lynn photographs the tree. "Nature goes on and on," she says. On the sidewalk near the tree, chalked in pink and blue, someone has written *April Distance Brings May Existence*.

Later I talk to Bob, who has been my plumber and my friend for 30 years. He tells me I've been a client longer than anybody else. In better times we go out to lunch once a week to Anthony's Coal-Fired Pizza. Today we talk on the phone. He tells me in complete seriousness, "You know, I'd give up everything I have just to go back to the way things used to be. Seriously. I would."

The nuns on my street have placed handouts in everyone's mailboxes asking that neighbors come out and stand in front of their houses at 5PM during Holy Week when no one can safely congregate. They want us to join in their silent prayer "to express gratitude to our God who loves us unconditionally and is sending us blessings even now in our suffering."

Lynn and I wander out at 5PM. I'm holding our dog Nellie so she might offer her appreciation to St. Francis (and her fervent hopes for a Paul Newman snack-stick). Two other families stand on the sidewalk. The nuns emerge and wave to us as the church bells toll five times. We all wave to each other again. The wind blows the blossoms. The birds gather twigs for their nests.

The following morning, I receive a phone message from the sister of my college friend Tim Korzun. I call her back, and she informs me that he died the day before from the corona virus. I am astounded by the news; we were emailing each other four days earlier. I have known Tim for 47 years. For reasons I no longer remember, we always referred to ourselves as Dr. Tim and Dr. Bob. We collaborated writing songs and sketches for NPR's "Morning Edition." I try to hold it together to take in the details, but by the end of the conversation I can't stop crying.

That night I call Tim's wife Sharon, and I'm amazed at her strength. I tell her: "Back at Rutgers, Tim and I recognized something in each other almost immediately. The same, I don't know, surreal sense of humor? He was the only person I've ever *collaborated* with. We'd walk into a studio with nothing; we'd walk out with six minutes of comedy we were both proud of...*It is so unfair....*"

I read his online obituary this morning. There he is. Wire-rim glasses. Arms folded. Smiling. Tonight at 5PM I stand in front of my house with the nuns in the distance, and I pray for Dr. Tim.