

Doomscrolling

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Dear Mom,

Well, it's been a long time since we've spoken. I was just looking back at the e-mail messages I have from you. There aren't very many. The first one is from March of 2006 and the subject is "I'm Trying." You were trying to get e-mail working. I was trying to get you to move off of America Online and onto a local dial-up service. In that message you told me that you had been to visit Grandmother, and she did not seem well. That's how we always referred to her — as "Grandmother," with the capital letter. You wrote that she was "restless and distressed — hot and cold," and that she was barely eating.

Just a few days later we were in Erie for her funeral. I shared with you a draft of the things I was going to say, along with Linda. I don't know if I still have that file. I should look for it. You were very kind to mention that some people told you they liked my talk.

You told me that you planned to live a long time, and that you hoped you could be a good grandmother to my kids. You wrote "I do appreciate knowing that your would want me with you someday but I hope to remain independent for a long time."

We sent messages back and forth quite a bit, for a while.

But it wasn't a very long while. Looking back, it seems very short. Because in the summer of 2007 your cancer came back, and you got sick faster than we could have possibly imagined, and then you died, too, just a couple of weeks after you realized that something was wrong.

I had seen you the night before you died, and spent as much time as I could with you, all week, but I had completely exhausted myself. I needed to rest a little bit and spend a little bit of time with Grace and the kids before I went back to the nursing home. So I wasn't there in the room with you, the morning that you died. But I did come in and sit with you for a while, and say goodbye.

I miss you.

Reading through our old conversations, it struck me how you were always

concerned for both my physical *and* mental health. You knew that I was a pretty high-strung person, and that my mind was always racing. You would say “I hope you can relax.”

I do my best. I’m fifty-three now. You only met three of my children. Grace and I have eight, now. The ones who were just tiny babies when you met them are teenagers, now.

Grace and I still have a wonderful marriage. We’re coming up on our nineteenth anniversary. Spending time with Grace is very calming for me. We talk about anything and everything, when we can, although it is so rare for us to speak with each other without constant interruptions. On Saturday we got out of the house for a long walk together, just the two of us, and that was great. But we haven’t been able to get a babysitter, or have an evening out together, for a long time.

I should probably back up.

There’s this thing people do now, called “doomscrolling.” Everyone’s phones are connected to the Internet, now. Some people still watch TV, but a lot of people just get all their news from the Internet and communicate with their friends that way, too. Over the summer, I stayed in touch with some friends by recording video clips on my phone. They’d do the same and we’d send them to each other. Like video e-mail. That was free for a while, but it’s not free now, which means if I want to save the clips of Richard playing ukulele and singing, I have to pay them now. I’m thinking that over.

There’s an awful lot of news these days, it seems, and a lot of it is bad. So, “doomscrolling” is when we sit and stare at our phones, or our computers, and just keep scrolling through bad news. If we reach the end of one news site, we can go to another one. CNN and the other TV channels are all online, now. All the newspapers, too, more or less. So it is really easy to spend an entire evening doomscrolling.

It’s a bad habit, though. It’s not very good for anyone’s mental health.

Back when you were dying, I asked you to talk with me about the things you were afraid of. You talked about how you hoped we would all be OK — successful and happy. And you said you were worried about the planet. I remember telling you that I was doing well and that you gave me a great start in life. I also told you that the planet would be OK — human beings might get into trouble, but the planet would eventually be fine. I don’t know if you found that reassuring. Maybe not.

The big news since you died is actually that not much has changed. We’re still burning coal and oil and gas and we aren’t really doing anything to fix global warming. I always thought that when the effects became blatantly obvious, people might do something. But they haven’t. This year we have had many hurricanes and the fires out west have been terrible. The smoke even affected us here in Michigan. Richard and Cheryl have managed to stay safe, although there have been fires all around Santa Rosa and Vacaville. There has even been a fire

that burned a million acres. That's a record. This year, parts of this county had frost in the middle of September. I don't know if that was a record, but it was unusually early. So it's been fire and ice and floods. Michigan is not a bad place to be, while all this is happening.

You missed the first Black president. He got two terms. That was inspiring to see. But not much changed. Then there was a backlash and we elected a guy who is not just a mediocre president, but one of the worst.

It's been a bad year. You knew about polio and the flu epidemic of 1918. I don't remember talking with you much about what it was like before the polio vaccine, or if you knew people who suffered due to polio. I remember getting my smallpox vaccination as a young kid. I still have a scar, although it is pretty faint.

Anyway, there is a new disease epidemic. I don't remember if they used the word "pandemic" back then, but it's a pandemic. It's affected the whole world.

That's why Grace and I haven't had a babysitter or gotten out for a date in seven or eight months.

It might go on for a lot longer.

It's gone very badly. We knew a lot about this virus because it hit other countries first. It hit China and Italy very hard. There were a lot of experts here who understood how serious it was and what we needed to do. The president was briefed in great detail. But his administration didn't pay attention to them. The president deliberately downplayed the virus. If he had just been indifferent, it would have been one thing. But he and his family are completely corrupt and have done everything they can to take financial and political advantage of the situation. They made states bid against each other for medical equipment. He put his son-in-law in charge of a task force.

Because the administration downplayed it so much, a lot of governors downplayed it, too. Ours wasn't too bad. But she was still slower to react than we would have liked.

The president has a lot of fans, and all the basic public health measures became politicized. Even the medications for treating it became politicized.

Things have gotten really, really stupid. If it was a TV show, we'd be rolling our eyes at how unbelievable it is.

It's an airborne respiratory virus. We know that sanitizing things and wearing masks and maintaining good ventilation and staying apart from people in public places helps. There are studies. So we've been "on lockdown" — severely restricting what we do — for seven months now. We've been sanitizing our groceries and putting our mail in quarantine for a few days before we handle it. We go out as little as possible.

The economy took a huge hit. A lot of companies laid off employees. I was

laid off for three months, but I wasn't fired. We got food stamps and extra unemployment and some extra federal money, and I was able to suspend mortgage payments for three months. So we got through that part of it and I was re-hired. Meanwhile, we built garden beds and grew some food. It's like Grandmother and Grandfather's victory garden, which I think they never really stopped growing after the war. So that's been great. Working on the garden has helped a lot with my mental health.

A lot of people haven't been as fortunate as us. A lot of businesses have closed, or are in deep trouble. Some people never got a penny of financial support at all. A lot of people lost their jobs. A lot of people are getting evicted. Since the original support money back in March, there's been nothing else.

Schools have handled this badly. Colleges and universities keep opening up with students, then they have an outbreak, then they blame the students. They are doing this because they can't survive, financially, otherwise. But it's horrible. Younger people usually don't get that sick, but some die, and they don't keep it contained within the schools, so they take it home, and it spreads. So cases are spiking all over the place, including here.

I'm back at work and the president has continued to downplay the pandemic, and a lot of people seem to be "monkey see, monkey do." He's consistently refused to wear a mask when he's around other people. He's mocked people who wear masks. So some of my co-workers aren't wearing masks. It's nerve-wracking to go into the office some days.

This is where it gets even more ridiculous. I don't know what else to call it.

His personal aide became infected. Then he became infected. He knew about it, but went to fund-raising events anyway, and didn't wear a mask. His administration held a big get-together to introduce his Supreme Court nominee. It was crowded with Senators and various other officials, as well as journalists. A lot of people were infected at that event. Every day now we are hearing of more. That includes the White House housekeepers and other people who are just trying to work at their jobs and survive.

Then the president was actually hospitalized for a few days. They gave him all the latest treatments including antibodies and steroids. The antibody treatment is not something that just anyone can get. But now he's back in the White House, still refusing to wear a mask, and saying that people shouldn't be afraid of this virus. He said "don't let it dominate your life."

He's on steroids, though. And it's really early. He might come through fine, but he might not. A lot of people lasted a few weeks, or a month, but then wound up on a ventilator, and died.

There's an election day coming up in under a month. A lot of people have already voted absentee or by mail. We already voted. What happens if he dies right before the election? It's really not clear. It's never happened before.

Over a million people have died, mom. In the United States, we've lost over 210,000 people and the rate of death is going up.

We could have been mostly done with this, if we as a country had handled it better.

It might be a long time before we have a vaccine. We're heading into the winter. I think my job is secure for now but it's starting to get frightening. The kids are having a bad time of it. We are doing as well as we can, but this year is going to really affect them, for the rest of their lives. We had to cancel their choir. They don't see their friends. It's too hard to do everything over the computer. Things aren't that reliable. The choir is going to start holding rehearsals in person, and we just didn't think that is safe.

I really do miss you. But I also find myself feeling relieved that you aren't living through these times.

Is that bad?

I know in your retirement, you really enjoyed getting out and doing things with people. After a life of working so hard for other people, you really deserved more of that kind of thing. These days, I'm not sure you could do any of it. You'd probably be pretty miserable stuck at home, not even going to the YMCA for your swim club, which as you described it was more about socializing than swimming, but that's okay.

In one of the last e-mail messages you sent me, you told me about your trip to Portland and a little river cruise. You told me that you had a great time. You said you met up with your old friend Marcia in Pendleton. You told me she lives in Walla Walla. You said she can be seen in one of the old family movies at one of the birthday parties. I think I still have a video clip from that home movie. I don't know which one is Marcia. I know which one is you, though. You were a cute little girl. I think it was filmed about eighty years ago.

You'd like Elanor Susan, your granddaughter.

You saw Margaret in Astoria and saw her house. Bud took you to his church in Portland and you had lunch there. You said that everyone on the ship was so friendly, and the meals were great.

Things aren't great in Portland these days.

I hope you wouldn't think badly of me for thinking that, in a way, I'm glad you aren't here to see this.

If you were here, I would want you to be spared from worrying about us and about everyone else, and everything else that is happening.

In the Catholic liturgy, they say "In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ." I think in the Presbyterian liturgy we used to say "keep us safe from all distress."

I would want you to be safe from all distress.

I think you are, now.

Maybe that's arrogant, though. Maybe you would like to be here. Maybe you would find ways to make it bearable. Maybe just being here, knowing you were in the middle of it, with everyone else, would be enough.

I don't really know. I've been thinking about it a lot, though.

We're doing our best here. We'll probably be okay.

Grace and the kids send their love.

We have that old family portrait, the one that used to be over the fireplace in the house on Highmeyer Road. I was about sixteen years old then. Even with the airbrushing you could still see my pimples. The glass is cracked and the color is kind of faded. But we have it set up in the family room. Maybe we'll get a new frame for it.

I miss you, and love you.

Paul

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