

Sampling a dystopian world.

In March of 2020, Marilyn and I lived in Nauvoo, Illinois, a town of 1,100 people located on a big bend of the Mississippi River, three hours from St Louis and four hours from Chicago. We knew all three police officers and four of the volunteer fire department. The village boasted a medical clinic, staffed by a physician assistant and a receptionist who worked in Nauvoo three days a week. For emergencies, the small regional hospital in Carthage was a 30-minute drive away.

We experienced the emergence of Covid-19 through the screens of our iPads. Like Bavarian villages during the Black Plague, we knew that the disease was ravaging larger population bases but believed we would be safe if we remained isolated. The State of Illinois Department of Public Health stood up a website to track Covid activity statewide. We watch in disbelief as Chicago recorded its first deaths and as Governor Pritzker announced closures of schools, businesses, and government services.

Marilyn has Minimal Change Disease, a kidney disorder that causes edema, blood clots and severe back pain. It can be triggered by stress. Several days into the pandemic, her MCD, which had been in remission for three years, came roaring back. The disease severely compromises the victim's immune system. A phone call to her Mayo nephrologist convinced us that Marilyn had two choices: drive the six hours to Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, or fly home to Phoenix and be tested and treated at Mayo in Scottsdale.

Nauvoo was our bubble. What if travel exposed Marilyn to Covid? She would be defenseless to an illness that could be worse than MCD. In the absence of established science, rumor and superstition took up rent-free residence in our minds. Well-intended friends and family members offered all sorts of advice. Some suggested fly-by-night preventatives espoused on the internet. Our Scottsdale doctor's husband volunteered to be our "mule" driving 900 miles to deliver prednisone and Cellcept.

We opted to fly her home to Arizona. On the appointed day, we drove to St Louis Lambert International Airport. The short-term parking lot was sparsely populated, and most of the cars we saw looked like official airport vehicles. At four stations on the way into the terminal we were reminded of the symptoms of Covid and to wear masks. There were no buses or cars to dodge as we walked across the arrival lane into the terminal.

I should share at this point that I have a moderate case of tinnitus. When the audiologist asked if I had been exposed to loud machinery, rock n roll concerts and firearms, I replied, "Yahtzee! I am around all three!" The worst places for tinnitus sufferers are crowded restaurants, sporting events and airport terminals. The continual buzz of tinnitus, added to crowd noise, makes hearing nearly impossible. I prepared myself to switch into lip reading mode.

But walking through the ticketing and check-in door, we entered a science fiction world. It looked exactly like Lambert Field, but there was no one there. Restaurants and magazine shops were closed. Have you ever seen *I am Legend* or older dystopian films like *Omega Man*? We were in one of the busiest places in America, and not a soul could be found. I heard the steady thud-thud-thud of our luggage wheels on the vast tile floor.

"The Department of Homeland Security reminds you..."

I jumped at the sound of a prerecorded public address message. It boomed and reverberated through the hollow concourse. I don't recall ever listening to one before. My Merrell Flexconnects squeaked obnoxiously as we walked. Up ahead, I heard the conveyor belt of the security checkpoint. There was no line, in fact, there was no one there at all, not even a TSA person occupied the station. Then one popped out of a small office. The balaclava he wore left only a slit opening for his eyes and made his words difficult to understand. I hugged Marilyn, and she disappeared into Concourse C. I walked back toward short-term parking, aware of a sound like escaping gas.