

*I wrote regular updates about our lockdown life during the spring of 2020 as emails to my brother Gil, in Brewer, Maine, and my sister Barbara and her husband Bob in Naperville, IL. They're compiled into one document, below.*

*A few explanatory notes about personal references in the document.*

*Olivia is Olivia Cory, our daughter. She was a medical student in Cyprus at the pandemic's outset, and had also been a volunteer EMT in the Park Slope Volunteer Ambulance Corps. She returned to Brooklyn just before air traffic from Europe effectively ended, and drove an ambulance in Brooklyn throughout the worst of the pandemic's first wave. I'm also enclosing a photo, an April 2020 screenshot from Good Morning America, of Olivia wheeling a gurney into Maimonides Hospital's emergency department. She will graduate from St. George's University College of Medicine this spring.*

*Ian is Ian Cory, our son. In addition to being then employed at Carnegie Hall he also was and continues to be a musician -- a drummer, vocalist, and composer with several Brooklyn-based bands.*

*Caroline Kearney is a retired attorney whose career included stints at Legal Aid and at Legal Services of New York. She also taught a family law clinic at Brooklyn Law School.*

*I am Bruce Cory, a writer and editor, now mostly but not completely retired. My career included speechwriting for Mayors Michael Bloomberg and, briefly, Bill de Blasio, and also for Manhattan Borough Presidents Ruth Messinger and C. Virginia Fields. I now work part-time for the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School.*

3/15/20

Here is what is up with us.

First, we're all in good health.

Olivia, who had been planning to come home on spring break in April, is effectively marooned in Cyprus. Air travel in and out of the country, which reported its first cases of Covid-19 last week, ended on Friday. Many of her classmates are Israeli and had already gone home by then to sit things out there.

Medical school classes have been suspended until at least March 20, but she thinks that in-person classes and labs are likely to be cancelled until at least Easter. Some "distance learning" is contemplated but it is still a work in progress. Cyprus is a small country and a lot of her teachers double as public health officials so as you can imagine they are pretty busy right now. Covid-19 Cyprus case #1 was a doctor; he was

diagnosed while working in a hospital; that hospital has been at least temporarily closed.

Olivia is frustrated about sitting on the sidelines; she'd like to be back in Brooklyn, being an EMT and pitching in where she is needed. But even before the travel ban went in, she recognized that if she came back to Brooklyn, she'd probably be prevented, with good reason, from re-entering Cyprus. So it's the sidelines for her for now.

Ian, who is an assistant manager in ticket sales at Carnegie Hall, has started working largely from home. His big job: refunding ticket sales, since all Carnegie Hall performances (and all gatherings in New York State of 500 people or more) are now prohibited by law. While his job seems secure for the time-being, he's furious that people he works with, self-employed freelancers who work in ticket sales, have been sent home with no unemployment benefits. (It's not clear to me if the stimulus bill Congress seems about to pass will have any effect on that.)

Ian was here last night; it was going to be our one big annual social event, a St. Patrick's Day corned beef dinner. But by yesterday afternoon half the friends and neighbors we had been expecting had decided against even such a small gathering, so we let the others know they could stay home, too, and they did. Thankfully, cooked corned beef freezes just fine.

Caroline has been furloughed from her volunteer job at the Housing Works thrift shop in the neighborhood, where those over 50 have been asked to stay home. The New School, where I work part-time, closed shop on Friday until at least April 12. I can do what I do for them (writing and editing) almost as well from home, and that's what's in store for me.

Anyway, it's an early spring in Brooklyn, after an exceedingly mild winter (we've had less than 6 inches of snow, and have never needed to shovel the walk). Many flowers and bushes (hyacinths, daffodils, japonicas, forsythia) are already in bloom -- about 10 days early in some cases by my estimation. The lilac bush in our front yard has put out its leaves, and the cherry tree is budding out. Magnolias are starting to flower, too. I can count on a big flock of migrating Canada geese heading north in the skies over our block each March -- and a bit early this year, the annual flyover took place about 10 days ago.

We'll keep you up on our necessarily reduced activities in the days ahead.

3/22/20

Olivia arrived home from Cyprus on Thursday. She came by way of Qatar; counting a 10-hour layover between flights in the airport there, the trip took about 30 hours. She

spent much of the day with Caroline and me Friday. That included joining us for some of our leftover corned beef for Friday night dinner.

Not currently being a car owner, her first order of business was re-inflating the tires on her bicycle, which she used to travel to and from her home about four and a half miles from us. She hadn't cycled for a while and let us know that she was pretty sore the next morning. She also hasn't driven since last August when she left for Cyprus (doesn't need a car there, doesn't have a valid license there, and anyway, as a former British crown colony, they all drive on the left side of the road). So she also borrowed our car on Friday afternoon to reacquaint herself with the basics of driving and parking. Of course it all came back to her very quickly. But she wanted to get some practice in before she is asked to get behind the wheel of an ambulance -- a much more demanding proposition than handling our Audi.

When she is going to resume volunteer EMT duties is a little unclear. She has registered on a web site the State has established to create a reserve force of retired medical professionals and also anyone with any amount of medical training. Olivia texted us on Saturday to say that call-ups from the reserve list have started. She'll keep us informed.

She'll also be doing distance learning small group medical school classes -- which will take place at about 3 am Eastern Daylight Savings Time two or three nights a week.

Ian dropped by on Monday afternoon to do his laundry here. We initially invited him to come have dinner with Olivia and us on Friday -- then thought again and urged him to stay home. Like everyone else in this boat, we're finding the lesson that showing love for others means staying away from them now is a tough one to learn and apply. But he certainly gets it and isn't offended.

One of Caroline's longstanding volunteer activities has been, once a month, to help prepare and serve a free post-Sunday service dinner at our local Park Slope United Methodist Church. The church has a big kitchen and dining area (they also have a preschool program and an after-school program that Olivia went to back in the day). Anyway, the congregating eating program is of course cancelled (as are worship services) so Caroline came up with the idea that the volunteers instead prepare brown bag lunches to hand out to people coming for the church meal today. In fact, she's busy playing with her food (chicken salad) in the kitchen as I am writing this.

In addition, she is also regularly calling elderly neighbors for friendly telephone chats. (We've also had two nieces who live in Brooklyn check in with us to see if we need anything. It's taking a little adjusting for us to think of ourselves as being on the looked-in on rather than the looking-in on side of the ledger book, but there you are.) We both also tried to volunteer for meal delivery from a senior center in the neighborhood -- but there were way, way more volunteers than available slots, so we'll just bide our time and see how we can be useful in other ways.

I spent two mornings this week working at the neighborhood garden where I've volunteered in recent years. There's a new gardener in charge, who was supposed to start April 1, but he wrote me this week and said, "Going stir crazy yet? Tell me when you're ready to start." Nice young guy, about Ian's age, and great for the body and soul to get workouts at Gym Mother Earth.

We're also fortunate to be a short walk from Prospect Park, a 520-acre gem that is now coming alive with flowering plants and migrating birds. Every time I hear birds singing, there or on our block, it's a reminder that their lives are going on just as always -- that human existence isn't all of existence.

Caroline and I get out for walks each day, weather permitting, either to shop or go to the bank or just to stretch our legs. We go out separately, not with each other, in the hopes that we'll come up with experiences and impressions that will give us something other than the headlines to talk about at dinner. (What we both observed yesterday is that, for the first time, virtually everyone you encounter goes out of the way to stay out of the way -- social distancing on the sidewalks.) Other than that, it's hand-washing, surface-cleaning, Sudoku and crossword puzzle time around here.

3/29/20

Gil, I'm adding Barb and Bob to this message, since I was planning to write to everyone today anyway. I'm making Sunday letters part of my weekly routine, like remembering to change my socks and shave.

I don't know what your sources of information are about conditions here. Governor Cuomo's briefings each mid-day are pretty comprehensive, informative, and reliable, so you can always get the latest that way.

From my perspective, I'd say we're faced with the usual New York City paradox.

Here's what I mean. The Covid-19 outbreak is producing big numbers. The one-day record for 911 calls for emergency medical services in the city was broken three times in the past week. As of yesterday there were about 26,000 cases reported in the city and 300-plus deaths.

But the paradox part is: Remember, this is a city of 8.6 million people. So even 26,000 people, which is, what, about three times the population of Brewer, don't make much of a dent in the big picture or in everyday life -- unless you're one of them, or know one of them.

But with the rapid growth in cases, the "knowing one of them" part is starting to happen: the grown daughter of a friend who lives up the block, now self-quarantined at her home; a woman I work with at The New School who wasn't diagnosed, but went through two weeks of being knocked off her feet at home with all the symptoms, including, weirdly, the loss of the sense of smell; a retired reporter for the New York Times, who I had a nodding acquaintance with from my early days in City government who died last week, age 72.

Other than that, the main way the outbreak shows up in our lives is absence: Absence of vehicle or foot traffic on our neighborhood streets; near-total absence of airplane flyovers of our block, which are normally quite common; intermittently the absence of essentials on supermarket shelves, although it looks like the initial binge of panic shopping/hoarding that swept the neighborhood 10 days or so ago has abated, at least for now.

And then there's the absence of anything else to think about or talk about. The virus shapes every conversation you have or overhear. It has thoroughly taken over our lives, and so there's a constant unspoken, individual battle with fear and dread, even though, as I said, if you're not sick yourself, or driving an ambulance or working in a hospital, you're not in direct touch with the virus. We hope. Which is, of course the whole idea of the isolation regime we're now living through, which probably will go on at least through the end of April. No one can say when or how it will ease up. I saw my dentist on the street yesterday, and he offered this advice: "Don't have a toothache until next year."

So other than that, we're all fine. It's been days and days since we've seen Olivia or Ian -- although Olivia let us know that she saw Caroline a few days ago. Olivia was practice-driving an ambulance one afternoon and saw Caroline who was out for a quick walk to clear her head and stretch her legs, and resisted the temptation to use the ambulance public address system to say, "Caroline, go home right now!" Yesterday, Olivia wrote that the driving practice period is about to end; the volunteer ambulance corps she is part of is going to be hooked into the City 911 system this week, and she expects to be pulling tours of duty by Friday, maybe sooner.

As I mentioned last week, Caroline was overseeing a brown bag lunch operation at the local Methodist Church, which normally feeds a hot meal to about 60 hungry people who show up each Sunday. But the message to stay off the streets resulted in a pretty small turnout for the brown bag program last Sunday, and today will probably be the last day for that activity. Her new project for the week was suggesting to our neighbors in the building (there are eight households altogether) that we establish a local lending library for the next few weeks.

The neighborhood senior center that I have volunteered to help assigned me three people to make phone reassurance calls to this week -- you know, just checking up, are

you healthy, do you have enough of the prescription drugs you usually take, that sort of thing. Perhaps there will be more such calls ahead. Other than that, I've been working (remotely of course) with my colleagues at The New School's Center for New York City Affairs, which researches and publishes studies and reports on issues ranging from public schools to housing to family welfare. Naturally, it's all corona-virus all the time for us now. An economist on our staff estimated last week that New York is going to lose half a million low-wage jobs in our medically induced recession. This week, he thinks the number is going to be even bigger. So as with the virus itself, there's a lot of dread and bracing for the yet-to-come worst. I'm really glad not to be working in City government anymore these days; it must feel like being in an elevator in free-fall.

I'm also continuing to put in a couple of mornings a week volunteering at a local garden. So far, it's mostly been spring preparation work: collecting leaves, cutting back last year's dead growth, mending fences, rearranging some of the shrubs and other plants to suit the new head gardener's overall plan for the place, and getting the ground ready for when the moment is right to plant the flowers and vegetables he has been germinating under grow-lights in the basement of the Old Stone House -- the reconstructed Dutch colonial farmhouse that the gardens are arranged around. It's really satisfying and occupies hands and thoughts constructively.

Ok, that's about all for now. I hope all of you are well, too.

4/5/20

Not a great deal to report on this end -- an instance when no news genuinely is good news. We remain in good health and hope you are too. Bob, we hope that you continue to recover from last week's urinary tract infection and everything that went with it. Barbara told us about it and I'm sure it was a very difficult time for you both.

Caroline and I are seeing quite a lot of each other these days. Hand washing and surface disinfecting have become our new hobbies. (After being cleaned out in the panic shopping frenzy two weeks ago, disinfectant wipes suddenly showed up at the corner hardware store Wednesday afternoon, and we joined the neighborhood run there.) On Friday, when Trump said that mask-wearing was optional and you wouldn't catch him with one on, that clinched it; whenever we go out now we put on bandannas, Western desperado-style.

Tomorrow Caroline will shift her sandwich-making and delivering activities from the Methodist Church down the street to a nearby soup kitchen, which will be handing out bagged lunches. There could be some other volunteer meal delivery opportunities in our future.

Ian still continues to be hunkered down with his two roommates in nearby Sunset Park. In addition to doing his ticket-refunding day job for Carnegie Hall he stays busy with writing music and interviewing other musicians for a podcast he does from his kitchen

table. He says he is hatching plans for some actual paying work for the bands he plays with; we of course wish them all luck.

Olivia pulled her first two volunteer ambulance tours Friday and Saturday. She described the first one as "pretty scary"; she said that she and her partner "saved a patient's life or, more accurately, prevented her from dying at the moment." Saturday was slower, at least for her. "It felt," she said, "like there were more resources on the streets" if not in the hospitals. Since text messaging is her preferred form of communication, we didn't get more details than that; we'll go for those at a later, calmer date when we can once again speak face to face.

For what it's worth, ambulance runs on neighborhood streets did seem to reach a crescendo on Friday. The sirens started early and didn't stop -- and because we knew Olivia was on duty Caroline and I were both very on edge the whole day. Her next shift is Tuesday night.

Both the mayor and governor have said that public health modeling suggests that the coming week is likely to be the worst; we'll see. Statewide, the number of new fatalities yesterday dropped for the first time, but no one knows if that's the beginning of a hopeful trend or just a hiccup.

Saturday we learned that a young woman who lives in the building next to ours (and who, it seems like only yesterday, was a little girl making fantastic sidewalk chalk drawings) has recovered from what was almost certainly Covid-19 after two weeks of self-quarantine. We found that out during an across-the-fence conversation with her mother, with whom she lives and who, fortunately enough, is a registered nurse.

Today is, of course, Palm Sunday and at 11 am church bells across the neighborhood sounded -- but the pews were empty, and so, very largely, were the streets. Nevertheless the progress of the spring season continues. Tulips are flowering in many front yard gardens. The first blossom opened on our ornamental cherry tree today, and our lilac bush is also beginning to bloom. The early bird spring arrivals in Prospect Park are right on time; prairie and pine warblers; Eastern phoebes; golden-crowned kinglets. The first returning hermit thrush of the season showed up today. A few days ago I spotted a green heron, who probably had spent the winter in the Caribbean, stalking along a pond shore looking for lunch.

4/12/20

"I feel like a lot has changed and nothing has happened."

That's how Ian summed up his life over the last few weeks in a phone call he made to me and Caroline earlier today -- the first we've heard from him in days and days.

And at some level, what's true for Ian goes for us as well. We're about to enter our second month of pretty thorough Covid-19 social isolation. It has changed our lives a lot by steadily reducing what happens in them. In Ian's case, he's still thankfully employed by Carnegie Hall's box office operation, where they're trying to slow the hemorrhage of ticket sales they're refunding, by urging ticket-holders to instead take credits on what everyone hopes will be a 2020-21 concert season.

We're all still in good health. In fact, my first activities on waking up each day are to check for a sore throat or fever -- and ok, so I'm not sick -- head for the kitchen to make coffee. Often I've then got some Covid-related editing work to turn to involving the Center for New York City Affairs, which can occupy the rest of the morning or, sometimes, a full day. And two mornings a week I head down to the gardens around the nearby Old Stone House. The gates to the park where the gardens are located are, as of this past week, now all padlocked shut, but one of the three Parks Department maintenance guys assigned there (and oddly enough, all three are named Greg) will let me in. I get an assignment, a wheelbarrow, and the tools I need from the head gardener, and for the next few hours I might as well be in outer space for all the social interaction that's involved. But mentally and physically, it's a Godsend.

Caroline generally takes a slower approach to her day than that, beginning with a long and thorough read of the New York Times. That will occupy her through lunch and jangle her nerves enough to require some fresh air therapy, either with a short walk around the neighborhood or, if the afternoon is warm enough, a lingering visit to the benches in our building's front yard garden. Her life has always involved more social interaction than mine, so she also makes regular check-in phone calls with friends and family. And although her proposed sandwich-making for a neighborhood soup kitchen hit a glitch last week, the plans are back on for tomorrow.

On Friday evening, Olivia also made a brief appearance here. She was on duty with the Park Slope Volunteer Ambulance Corps, but had enough down-time to make a pre-arranged stop at our place to pick up the keys to our car (she'll be using it the next few days to get from her home to the ambulance base and back, and will return it thoroughly sanitized), and also get some N-95 masks that one of our upstairs neighbors had acquired and wanted to get into the right hands. We left everything for her in a bag on the front stoop, and so long as I have a memory I think I'll remember watching her come up the walk in her EMT uniform, with her ambulance parked behind her at the fire hydrant in front of our house.

On this Easter Sunday, Caroline and I decided, without much prior consultation, to make a small occasion of the day. We've each gotten a bit dressed up (in my case, that meant ironing a shirt and putting on my new jeans). Caroline baked a cake. And we asked ourselves, what would Jesus eat? Answer: lamb meatballs and rice. And Happy Easter to you all as well.



4/19/20

Guys, thanks very much for your messages about Olivia's EMT work. Yes, we are very proud of her -- and on edge all the time, too. A memory that keeps coming back to me is of Olivia at her pre-school classroom slapping a little firefighter hat on her head and announcing, "I'm going *into* the fire!"

She's pretty closed-mouthed about what she has seen and done on these Covid-19 ambulance tours. Early on, I asked her if she had anyone to talk to if things got to be too much. She said, yes, she's close to the others in the ambulance corps, and added that they're campaigning, without much chance of success, to get a bar opened in the basement of Methodist Hospital. (She also sent a text message this morning with the good news that, with more ambulances on the streets now, and at least for the moment a reduced demand for them, she's been spending less time as an EMT and more time as a student.)

Now, Caroline and I would like to know: How are all *your* kids and grand-kids doing these days? Everyone holding up, I hope. I'm sure you miss all those that you can't regularly see now. We have quite a few grandparent friends and normally we envy them deeply. But now we're watching them go through grandchild withdrawal and it's pretty poignant.

When will a return to something more like normal social contact start again? That seems to be the number one question these days. In Brooklyn we're expecting not much change in status until at least the middle of May. No complaints here. We're fine; we can manage; we can do this time standing on our heads.

But all the same, we worry about the local garage mechanics who work on our car -- the local clothing store where I wish now I'd bought another new pair of jeans back in January -- the barber and hairdresser we're each going to need pretty desperately in a few weeks -- the fish store and shoe repair place, and all the neighborhood businesses that we sort of just took for granted as part of our lives. Are they going to hold up, or are they even going to be there when the isolation orders start to lift?

In the meantime, we've spent the last week pretty much doing what we do. Using cold cuts bought and donated by an upstairs neighbor, Caroline spent a couple of mornings making dozens of sandwiches (and popping popcorn) and carrying everything down to Community Help in Park Slope (CHiPS), a local soup kitchen, where they could be handed out as bag lunches. On Wednesday afternoon she and I also loaded up our car with donated food and delivered it to refugee families at their homes in the South Bronx. When we were finished, in what would normally be the evening rush hour, we zipped home from Yankee Stadium in about 30 minutes -- a trip that would easily have taken two or three times that long in pre-coronavirus days. (There's actually quite a bit

of dangerous high-speed driving on the empty local highways after dark, and the cops are trying to crack down.)

We know that we live a pretty stress-free life, all things considered. We're grateful that we're not worried about trying to work (or even worse, worried about no longer having work) while isolating at home with school-aged kids doing remote learning classes and bouncing off the walls of their confinement. We're fortunate to be able to escape from time to time to nearby Prospect Park, as I did this morning, to enjoy a socially safe walk through woods dotted with blossoming wild apple, crab-apple, and weeping cherry trees and alive with birdsong.

And yes, we're staying in good health, and even, at least in my case, packing on the pounds that are going to give me the famous Covid-15. We hope you all stay well too.

5/10/20

Hi guys; hope you are all well where you are.

For our part, we'll be wrapping up Month 2 of the great Brooklyn lock-down this week, and, yes, things are getting weird -- or maybe more correctly, the weird things are becoming more out-in-the-open. Like the man we saw walking along the street last Wednesday in his bathrobe. At 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Or like the Style section of *The New York Times*, which is normally unbearable to read (who wore what at last Tuesday's charity ball, etc., etc.) suddenly going all Little House on the Prairie in its selection of articles: How to make candles out of leftover pork fat! How to turn your old blanket into a jacket!

We also tried to get into the improvise and do-it-yourself spirit of things yesterday. I first encouraged Caroline to study barbering techniques on YouTube. Then I carried a dining room chair into the kitchen and, to get the atmosphere right, popped a Sinatra disc into the CD player and announced: "I'm next. How about those Mets, huh?" But she only managed to snip a little off the top before she chickened out on my haircut.

So, okay, May is going to be another bad hair month; need I acknowledge that things could definitely, poz-a-lutely be worse? We're really in fine shape for the shape that we're in. No health complaints, no school-aged kids going bonkers from boredom and in the process of forgetting how to count past 20, Social Security and pension checks rolling in on their boring old monthly schedule -- at least as long as we can hold Mitch McConnell and his pals at bay.

On Tuesday I brought home the first seasonal bounty from the Old Stone House gardens where I'm a volunteer: half a dozen fresh-dug, first-prize-at-the-county-fair leeks, some of which I left with our downstairs neighbor and the rest of which went into a showstopper potato-leek soup for last night's dinner. (Caroline contributed homemade

vegetable stock that she brewed from onion skins, carrot peels, and other leavings from earlier dinners. That's going the Style section one better: Turn your garbage into soup!) There's a nearby farmer's market every Saturday morning and, since I'm an early riser every day of the week and don't mind a little socially distant shopping, we're well stocked with good, straight from the source, and reasonably priced eggs, bread, fish, and produce. Most days about 4 pm I feel kind of retro, so I crank up the Victrola and play some vinyl Duke Ellington or Linda Ronstadt or other blasts from the past. Who needs Zoom?

We also keep trying to make ourselves useful. One or two mornings a week Caroline turns the kitchen into a sandwich factory, and then we load them and fruit and juice boxes donated by our upstairs neighbor into our car and carry them off to a nearby soup kitchen. Three of the last four Wednesdays we've done some more long-range food distribution, carrying groceries off to newly arrived refugee families who haven't managed yet to get on food stamps or who live in neighborhoods where the shopping pickings are mighty slim. On one of those excursions in Queens we dropped groceries off on the front walk for a Tibetan guy who proceeded to text-message Caroline for the next 45 minutes with emojis of praying hands and quotes from the Dalai Lama. I was starting to worry that we were never going to shake him, but he did finally stop just as we got home to Brooklyn. A Nepali woman who was also on our route that day has texted over and over asking when we're coming back because her cupboard is bare; the woman organizing this food distribution service has had to say, sorry, you're not on our list for this week, we'll see what else we can manage with the agency that's sponsoring you.

On a brighter note, Olivia pulled her last ambulance shift this weekend, and is switching over into full-time studying for first-year med school final exams. We also talked with Ian this week; he had a lawn chair parked on the sidewalk in front of his place (Chicago natives would recognize it as a two-flat), taking a break from work and getting some fresh air and sunshine. He and his two roommates are doing fine; they shop and run errands for their downstairs landlady, who lives with her aged parents and so is effectively housebound. She also gave her tenants a month's pass on April rent, which, given the fact that Ian is currently the only one of her renters with a regular, predictable income, was much-appreciated.

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