

Coming Up for Air

by [Armando Simón](#) (September 2020)



The Dentist Society, Biljana Đurđević, 1996-98

Richard was lucky. Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic that had been confidently predicted would kill millions and millions of people, but had failed to do so, civilization was on the verge of collapse, not from the effects of the virus, but from the ordained preventive measures decreed by the wise authority figures. They had decreed that in order to stop the spread of the virus, everyone had to wear face masks covering the mouth and nose, practice “social distancing” of not being closer than six feet, outlaw all gatherings, shut down all businesses, all institutions, and put entire cities under

house arrest. By not being allowed to work, people were running out of food and were about to be evicted from their homes.

The various authorities at the city and state level throughout the country were thoroughly enjoying their exercise of power. One could see it in their facial expressions, in the gleam of their eyes as they gave their daily briefings to the media hive mind.

And they were all still getting a paycheck.

Like journalists. Journalists kept being paid for spreading fear and being alarmist on a daily basis and for suppressing any news, any information, that ran counter to the panic.

So, anyway, why was Richard lucky? He was happy because Mayor Rottenberg, in consultation with the governor, had decreed that some establishments would be allowed to open for one week in order to relieve some of the pressure. Towards that end, he and his bureaucrats had concocted an elaborate list of conditions for each establishment. They were deep believers in the need for "regulation."

One of these lucky categories had been dental clinics and the moment that he had heard the news, Richard had jumped at the chance for an appointment, since one of his teeth was bothering him, and he was one of the first lucky enough to secure an appointment for the next day.

Just in case there had been a change of mind, though, he turned on the television for the morning local news. Sure enough, there was Mayor Rottenberg, wearing a mask. Apparently, he was volunteering at the local food bank—at least volunteering until the camera crews left—distributing food donated by local charities for people who were desperately short of food. As a result of the lockdown, there were four lines of cars waiting for free food, and the line

was over three miles long, bumper to bumper. Richard made a mental note to go there.

And it seemed that there were no last-minute changes.

Richard did not like Mayor Rottenberg, no, not one bit. In fact, he had a deep, deep loathing for the man. He thought that there was something positively Mongoloid looking about him. To be sure, his perception of the mayor was influenced entirely by a deep antipathy towards the man's restrictive policies regarding the "pandemic."

For example, in the early stages of the virus' spread, someone, somewhere in the country, had decided that calling it the Wuhan virus, as it first began to be referred to, was racist. It was irrelevant that it was standard medical practice to use the geographical origin for a novel illness for its nomenclature, like Lyme Disease, Manchurian plague, West Nile virus, Zika flu, or the Spanish flu. Someone, somewhere, had been stupid and had stated that it was "racist." And that was that! It was like a signal. A mob of angry cattle in the internet repeated the accusation and became indignant whenever anyone used the term.

One of these self-righteous zealots was Mayor Rottenberg. The moment that he learned that his political brethren labeled the term "racist," he instantly had the city council pass a resolution condemning the term as "racist," and anyone uttering it as committing "a hate crime." And it wasn't just the "Wuhan virus." It was also the joke going around, "the Wu-wu flu," that was also racist. The resolution then went on stating how the city administration, nay, the entire city had "no place for hate." That they were Inclusive. That they were Diverse. That they were Welcoming. "There was no room to hate"—unless it was to hate persons using those terms. And the police were instructed to investigate and arrest such persons, and to use deadly force in doing so, if necessary.

"It takes a special kind of stupid to think that using medical nomenclature is the equivalent of a hate crime!" Richard had fulminated with his friend over the telephone when he first heard of it, practically screaming into his friend's ear.

Richard did not know it, of course, but every night before going to sleep, Mayor Rottenberg would check under the bed to make sure that there were no racists hiding there.

Nor did he know that the Mayor, while sleeping, would often dream of sitting on a cloud, flying over the city, distributing beneficence to the people down below who looked up adoringly at him. It was his favorite, recurring, dream.

So, Richard's disdain for Mayor Rottenberg, knew no bounds. As he watched the Mayor posture before the cameras, Richard, as usual, let loose a volley of insults.

Rottenberg was explaining to the reporter that since a vaccine would not be ready for another year, the mandatory lockdown would resume in a week for a year or two. In about a month or so, people would be allowed to leave their homes again for a couple of days to come up for air before being pushed underwater again. For their own good, of course.

Richard fired another volley of insults at Mayor Mongoloid.

Enough of that! He turned off the television. He dressed and drove over to the dentist. Several patients were waiting their turns inside their cars. According to Rottenberg's protocol, the patients could not wait in the reception room, but had to wait in the parking lot. Upon parking, he called the dentist on his cellphone and told the receptionist that he had arrived. The receptionist began asking him a series of questions.

"Did you bring your face mask?"

"Yes," he took it out of his pocket and put it on.

"Do you have a temperature?"

"No."

"Do you have shortness of breath?"

"No."

"Do you have a cough?"

"No."

"Have you been around someone confirmed having the coronavirus?"

"Not that I know of. No, actually, no. I haven't been out. And no one that I know has the Wu-wu flu."

"Have you lost your sense of smell, or taste?"

"No."

"OK. Hang tight. It'll be about fifteen minutes."

After a little while, he was called in to the office's front door. There, the receptionist, wearing a medical gown, gloves, and a face shield on top of her face mask, took his temperature with a touchless thermometer. Then his blood pressure. Everything being normal, Richard was allowed inside and he sat in the dentist chair.

"I think I may have a cavity," he said.

As usual, the dental assistant would look him over first. To his absolute surprise, she grabbed two plastic mechanical arms and hands, the type found in toy stores and, sitting apart from him by three feet, removed Richard's face mask with the prothesis and tried to peer in his mouth without getting close.

“Wider. Open wider.” She adjusted the lamp and craned her neck this way and that. She adjusted the lamp some more. “Wider.”

“I don’t think this is going to work,” Richard mumbled.

“It will,” she responded, but did not sound too convincing. “OK. Yes, I see it. You do have a cavity in one of your molars. I’ll call Dr. Olson.”

She returned with Dr. Olson, another woman.

“Hello, Richard, how are you holding up through this crisis?”

“Don’t get me started,” he warned.

“OK. Let’s see what we got.” The dentist picked up the mechanical arms and from the same distance peered in. “Turn a bit to your left. Open . . . wide. More. More! Ok, yes, I see it. You have a cavity in your molar, all right. We’ll have to put in a filling.”

“You’re not going to use those things, are you?”

“Sure. Won’t be a problem.”

But there was a problem. Specifically, the round syringe containing Novocain was slippery while using the mechanical hands. It slipped once and fell on his chest, needle first, and jabbed him. Richard whimpered in pain. Dr. Olson retrieved it as if nothing had happened and rammed it into his mouth. Richard’s back arched and his eyes almost popped out.

“Don’t move! Sit still!” The mechanical fingers kept slipping off so that the plunger of the needle did not push the Novocain into his gum line, though the needle’s end moved this way and that while embedded in his gum.

“Sit still! I said, sit still, dammit! Hold him down!” The assistant pushed him down on the chair with all her might as Dr. Olson maneuvered the mechanical fingers to no avail. She kept at it, but nothing.

“Oh, to hell with this!” she blurted out and pushed the plunger in with her own fingers, releasing the Novocain with so much force that Richard thought the needle would go all the way through his neck. She then pulled out the needle with a *plop* and motioned to her assistant, who let go of Richard. He collapsed into the chair, straightening his back once more.

“Jaysus! That hurt!” There were tears coming out of his eyes.

“Oh, suck it up!”

They waited for the Novocain to take effect, all three of them panting.

After a while, the dentist asked him, “Do your lips feel numb?”

“My chest feels numb.”

“But does your chest, I mean, your lips, do they feel numb?”

“Yeah.”

“Good!”

Richard watched with alarm as Dr. Olson picked up the drill with the mechanical hands and went at him.

“Open wide!” she barked.

She drilled the right lower molar. She drilled the left upper molar. She drilled one of his canines. She even drilled where the cavity was. And, throughout, Richard’s body

strained, twisted, and turned like a pretzel.

And throughout was the constant battle cry from Dr. Olson. "Hold still, damn you!!"

Occasionally, after Richard would scream, she could be heard screaming back, "Oh shut up!" but his screams would resume.

It was all even heard by the patients who were outside the parking lot, standing by their cars. A couple of the patients decided that their dental care could wait, so they left. One of them peeled out of the parking lot in a hurry, burning rubber, before the dentist could have a chance to come out hunting for him.

Richard's ordeal finally ended and he left the office. Looking at his face, his own mother would not have recognized him from the swelling.

Back at his apartment complex, stumbling his way towards his apartment, a mother and child were approaching. The child took a look at him, screamed, and ran back home, followed by her mother.

Richard went inside, swallowed a handful of aspirins along with a sleeping pill and fell on the couch. He slept.

He slept all afternoon.

When he woke up, it was dinner time.

He looked at the mirror and saw that the swelling in his face had greatly reduced. He was his own self again, presentable to the public, so he would eat out. It felt like ages since he had gone to a restaurant and, besides, he was craving Italian food.

He went to his favorite restaurant. The door of the restaurant had a sign stating that face masks were required at

all times while inside.

The hostess took his temperature with a touchless thermometer before seating him. And it turned out that both the hostess and the waiters and waitresses wore not face masks, but gas masks, the type seen in WWI pictures, as per the Mayor's edict. It was an eerie sight.

He looked around. Some of the customers who had been served food were still wearing face masks and they were eating with the mask on, laboriously pushing the fork with food upwards between the mask and mouth, then turning it so the food would go in, whereupon the fork was withdrawn for another morsel of food. Almost all of the masks of these people were completely stained with the food that they were eating. Others, however, had taken off their masks in order to eat, which made Richard wonder what was the point of requiring masks to enter the restaurants if they would be taken off the moment one sat down.

He decided that he would take his off.

Presently, a tall waiter came to take his order.

"What would you like to drink?" His voiced was muffled, but Richard could make it out.

"A glass of tea, please."

The waiter came back with a glass of tea on a large tray, which he held out at arm's length. Richard looked up at the masked man.

"So, take the tea already."

Richard took the tea.

"Take your silverware," said Darth Vader.

Richard did so.

"Have you decided what you would like?"

"Yes. I'll take the chicken piccata, please." The Sith Lord left with the order.

"May the force be with you," Richard muttered.

Richard looked around. The restaurant was less crowded than usual because, according to the conditions for temporarily reopening restaurants, they had to serve at 25% capacity, so three quarters of the restaurant's tables had been removed.

After a while, the waiter brought his food. It was again on the large tray, which he held out at arms' length.

"Take the plate, please."

"No."

"What?"

"No."

"Whaddayamean, no? Take your food!"

"No. That's not my food. I didn't order that. I didn't order spaghetti. I ordered chicken piccata."

Even with the mask on, Richard could tell the waiter was confused. The latter held the tray with one hand and with the other wiped the steamed-up lenses of his gas mask.

"Oh, right," he said. "I'll get your order."

A while later, he did come back and he extended the tray once more towards Richard.

"That ain't it."

"What?"

“That ain’t it. That’s chicken parmigiana. I ordered chicken piccata.”

The waiter stood still as he tried to control his temper. Then, he wiped the lenses with one hand while he held the tray with the other hand. As he did so, the tray became unbalanced and the plate of steaming hot food slid off onto Richard’s lap.

Richard shrieked in pain and bolted upright. Just like earlier that day at the dentist’s office.

The upshot of his dining out experience was that he did finally get his chicken piccata. And a desert. For free. In a to-go box.

Once home, he washed up and had his dinner.

And tomorrow he would go out again.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Armando Simón is a retired forensic psychologist and author of *A Prison Mosaic*, *Samizdat 2020*, and *Very Peculiar Stories*.

Follow NER on Twitter