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Heartless – Ann E Wallace

The man behind Curtain #6, in the bed next to mine, is moaning. Moaning the plaintive sound of a man who is very, very cold. The sound of a man who is burning up with fever and cannot keep the warmth within his body. A man who is so cold and so hot all at once that it hurts.

Whenever he stops moaning, he coughs. And coughs. And coughs. A deep, dry hacking cough.

In my bed, in Curtain #5, I cover my head with my jacket. The curtain between us is not thick. And I am quite sure, though I cannot see him, that the coughing man is facing me. And I am facing him. I know I should face away. But that would require a great deal of effort.

The coughing continues. I roll, slowly, from my left side onto my right. I rearrange the lines attached to me—attached to my blood pressure cuff, to the blood oxygen monitor taped onto my index finger, to the IV in the crook of my right arm. I spread my sweater and jacket over my body, pulling the soft collar of my coat over my face once more.

I am wearing a surgical mask, but I am not confident it can block out that cough, with its millions of infectious particles whirling through the air from one bed to the next to the next.

Many of the doctors and nurses here wear two masks, one on top of the other. Some wear a mask over an N95 respirator. Others have plastic shields over their faces. I feel naked in my thin paper mask.

They must feel naked even in their double or triple layers when they duck behind Curtain #6 to care for my neighbor.

He moans and coughs for ages, surely an hour or longer. I wonder how the staff does not feel the distress I feel inside of me as I listen. I cannot not listen. He is 6 feet away, maybe closer. I have no job other than to lie there and listen.

My bedside monitor beeps often, intermittently. My heartrate is 48...49...50...49. These numbers are low. So low that they set the alarm to beeping.

I wonder if my heart is trying to slow itself to a putter, so I might protect it from the man in Curtain #6 and all the other coughing men, coughing women, behind the curtains. If I could slow its rhythm down, down...down, I might lie still and know his breath, their breath, cannot touch mine.

As the monitor beeps with each dip of my heart below 50 beats per minute, I know that if I allow myself to feel anything for the man in Curtain #6, my heart would race with concern.

But my job here in this ER is to safeguard my lungs, my body, my heart, my family. And hope that there will be time to cry for the man in Curtain #6 later from the safety of my home.

Ann E. Wallace is writing at home in Jersey City, NJ while she and her daughter recover from COVID-19. Her poetry collection Counting by Sevens (2019) is available from Main Street Rag, and her published work can be found online at AnnWallacePhD.com. She is on Twitter @annwlace409.