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Good Morning COVID Nation

Gillian Rolfe

University of Nebraska Medical Center

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Gillian Rolfe



| Inspired by my mother, the director of pharmacy at our local critical-access hospital, I first joined the medical field in 2006. I worked as a ward clerk for several years before moving out-of-state and briefly pursuing a career in education. After teaching Biology both domestically and abroad, I decided to come home to Nebraska and return to the medical field. I started as a specimen processor at another lab before joining the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Regional Pathology Services in 2018. I recently began pursuing a BS in Medical Humanities at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where I discovered the field of Narrative Medicine, which blends my passion for patient-centered care with my love of creative writing. I felt called to write this piece as a way of reflecting on and processing a recent unsettling encounter I had while working in healthcare during a global pandemic. When not at work or school, I am an avid animal-lover, gardener, baker, reader, musician, and gamer.

Good Morning COVID Nation

- Gillian Rolfe



We are right back where we started.

My alarm goes off and I hit the snooze button, not ready to face another day. Bug, my chunk of a Maine Coon snuggles deeper into the blankets, purring contentedly as I sleepily wrap my arms around him. I am almost asleep again when the rooster crow of my alarm breaks the peace. I sigh, turn the alarm off, and fumble around for my glasses. Bug protests loudly as my movements jostle him, and I give him a kiss on the forehead as an apology. Glasses on, eyes open, sitting upright, I begin my now-familiar routine. Where is that thermometer? *We are right back where we started.* 99.9 degrees. Uh oh, that can't be right. I feel the panic welling in my chest. It's been nearly two years since I've gone to a grocery store. Eaten in a restaurant. Seen a movie in a theater. Hugged my niece and nephew. I've been so careful! *We are right back where we started.*

I try to slow my breathing while I check my temperature with the oral thermometer. Maybe the batteries are going out in my infrared one? 98.6. Relief floods through me, so overwhelming it nearly brings me to tears. I check again to be sure. 98.6. From behind me, Bug chirrup, like he always has when he knows I'm upset. I hold him to my chest as the anxiety fades to a manageable level. *We are right back where we started.* I make a mental note to add batteries to my Amazon cart as I swing my legs around the side of the bed and stand.

Coffee. I need coffee. I haven't been sleeping well lately, although you think that would be the last of my problems given the multitude of overtime hours I've been pulling. I can't remember the last time I just worked 40 hours. Well, that's a bit of a lie; I can almost guarantee it was

January 2020. *We are right back where we started.*

I trudge sleepily into the kitchen, where I am greeted by Miss Marple, Bug's dilute calico sister and the only morning person in this house. She squeaks and prances happily behind me as I gather what I need: electric kettle, coffee beans, grinder, French press, sugar, creamer, coffee mug, spoon. Gone are the days where I can pop into my favorite coffee shop for a latte before work. *We are right back where we started.*

While the coffee steeps, I pull out my phone and brace myself for the news. How many new cases? How many deaths? How many families' lives changed forever while I was desperately seeking the, however brief, peace that comes with sleep? *We are right back where we started.* I check the COVID dashboard, and an icy fist clenches my gut. *We are right back where we started.* No. No. No no no no no. *We are right back where we started.* Every day, I hope against hope that I will see the numbers start to fall again. That there may be light at the end of the tunnel. *We are right back where we started.* I had hope once. When I got the news that I was eligible for the vaccine, I sobbed with joy. *This is it,* I thought, *we are almost there!* I dreamed of all the things I would finally be able to do again, even the smallest adventures, like getting my hair cut at a salon. My coworkers and I celebrated, we cried and hugged each other (even though the latter was still forbidden) as we waited in line for our shots. We posed proudly with our "I got the shot" stickers and our vaccine cards. We collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Then,

the light at the end of our tunnel turned out to be a train. *We are right back where we started.* Months later, the Delta variant is wreaking havoc and things are getting worse and worse. No relief, no reprieve, no end in sight. *We are right back where we started.*

I pull myself from my reverie and doom scrolling to fill my thermos with that delicious dirty bean juice. Just a dash of creamer, enough sugar to make my diabetic grandmother roll over in her grave. Gotta do what you gotta do to get through the day. *We are right back where we started.* I head into my guest bedroom where all my work clothes now live. In the pre-COVID era, all my clothes were haphazardly scattered in my bedroom. Mostly hanging in the closet, but also spilling out of drawers and making their home on "the laundry I don't have the spoons to put away tonight chair". My beautiful, organized chaos. Not these days, though. When I return home after my shifts, I undress in the entry way by the front door. COVID clothes go into a grocery bag hanging by the door and straight into the washer. Shoes on the door mat. Straight into the shower for me, dousing my skin and hair in hibiclens to wash away the germs and the horrors of the day. *We are right back where we started.*

Scrubs on, teeth and hair brushed, coffee in hand, I head to the door to pull on my shoes. "Goodbye, I love you, have a good day!" I say loudly to the cats, although I know they have already both taken over my bed and are snuggled in for a hard day of sleeping.

I pull the door shut behind me and brace myself for another day in the trenches. *We are right back where we started.*

The drive to work is uneventful, but my heart sinks as my trusty Ford turns the corner onto Dewey St. He is there again, and this time, he brought friends. *We are right back where we started.* I don't know this man, and he doesn't know me, not that he seems to want to. All he sees are my scrubs and my hospital name badge. All I see is a misguided soul standing on the corner with his sign and his anger, trying to spread his hate and misinformation to anyone who will listen. *We are right back where we started.* First it was "COVID is a hoax!", then it became "COVID is a liberal conspiracy! They're just fear-mongering". Try telling that to the family that just had to say goodbye to their son via iPad because they couldn't visit him at the hospital. Later, he would scream "This vaccine is just another way to try and control us. My body, my choice!" and "No jabs for jobs!". As much as I abhor the message, I must admit that last one is catchy. *We are right back where we started.* Car safely stowed in the employee parking garage, I desperately scan the area for a familiar face. Well, familiar eyes anyways. I haven't seen anyone's face in over a year. *We are right back where we started.* I don't want to face the small crowd of protesters alone, but it looks like I don't have a choice today. Okay, head down, walk fast, don't make eye contact. *We are right back where we started.* They are just a few yards away now, and I can hear their chanting. *We are right back where we started.* Faster, nearly at a jog, I hug my backpack close and

pray to all the Gods and Goddesses that the “don’t walk” sign doesn’t force me to stand among them. *We are right back where we started.* I see the white “walk” sign change to orange, and my heart is pounding. My throat tightens. I break out in a cold sweat. *We are right back where we started.* I can’t do this alone, not today. Please don’t make me do this alone. *We are right back where we started.* I’m at the corner, and the angry orange hand is counting down. I think I can make it if I hurry. *We are right back where we started.* My feet throb as they pound the pavement in my too-worn shoes. At a jog, I skirt around the crowd of protesters and nearly run into the street. Their belligerent cries wash over me like a wave, but I retreat into myself and don’t hear the hate they are spewing. *We are right back where we started.* With monumental relief, I reach the far side of the street and make my way to the employee entrance to face another harrowing day. *We are right back where we started.*

I hope that someday this will all be behind us, a dark but distant memory. Someday, I will be able to walk into a HyVee without having a panic attack. In my dreams, I am at my sister’s house, playing with her children in their back yard. Smiling, laughing, my niece and nephew shrieking with joy in the way that only small children can. I’m sitting on their well-worn but oh so comfortable sofa, one child snuggled into the crook of each of my elbows, reading Wolfie the Bunny or Guess How Much I Love You. I’m tucking them into their tiny beds and kissing their foreheads good night, hearing them say “I love you Aunt Gilly” in their sweet, precious voices. I have to hold on to the hope that things can get better, WILL get better. Someday, my morning check of the COVID dashboard will fill me with hope instead of panic and dread. Someday, things will be back to “normal”, whatever the heck that means. Someday, I will hold those children in my arms and never want to let them go. But today, all I can think is

**We are right back
where we started.**