

3 April 2020:

Dear Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus II,

Boy, we've really got to find you a better name. I know it's not quite right to call you Covid-19, but frankly I don't care. Nobody cares.

Let me introduce myself. I am a dumb, fanatical college student with asthma. There, that's enough about me.

This time last year no one had even heard of you. Today you need no introduction. You've had a busy few months. You've spread across the continents faster than wildfire. But I've been preparing for you my whole life.

When I was little, I played hide and seek. It's a silly game for silly kids. A few people find dark, quiet places to hide, one person is "it". I still don't know what "it" means. You, like "it" are transferred by human contact. Maybe "it" is simply generic, "it" stands in for whatever "it" is. "When you are "it" you are the most fearsome thing on the playground: that is all "it" means.

People talk about coronaviruses, although most people have had a coronavirus before. They used to mean the common cold. But not anymore. You no longer just *a* corona virus. You've become *the* coronavirus.

The whole, wide world is having an absolutely terrible time because of you. So, congratulations, you've become the world's most hated bundle of proteins. You are officially "it".

I know this whole mess is not exactly your fault. We may have stumbled upon you. Maybe we invaded your space. Maybe we fished in waters we shouldn't have. We may have woken you up. But we don't care. "Ready or not, here I come!"

Playing hide and seek was not much fun at the start of the game. You tell yourself the room you are in is hidden enough. You think to yourself that no one will ever find you down here. You pretend that no one ever comes here, that it is the last place they would check. You say to yourself that everyone else will be found before you are. I was at school when I began to get worried.

Being "it" might be fun at first. The other kids sit in their dark, quiet spaces quivering in terror of you. But "it" is only fun for a little while. You may be the most fearsome thing on the playground. But sooner or later the other kids catch on- and start to play a meaner game.

The games get scarier the older you get. In elementary school it wasn't good enough just to find the other kids anymore. When you've grown up to be a big first grader, you have to catch them- and tag them. So there "it" goes trying to catch someone, anyone. But that is hard, grueling work. Your next victim will see you coming from the other end of the playground. And then the

other children, safely perched on the playground set, will start to make fun and heckle. Kids are cruel. Actually, adults are cruel too, they just do a better job of pretending that their cruelty makes them just. I am not writing this because I want to explain the finer points of the game. I am writing because I want to heckle.

When we got older, the game of tag changed again for my peers again. You might even say it mutated. Back in the sixth grade, we played "zombie tag". Zombie tag is just like any other game of tag, with two important distinctions. First, the zombie is selected without the players' knowledge. When the game starts, the zombie can be anybody. Your best friend might be a zombie in disguise, just waiting for you to put your guard down. The second important distinction: when you get tagged, you become a zombie, but when you tag someone else, you *stay* a zombie.

Over spring break my friends and mentors were starting to get jittery. We chatted, nervously about your coming while we worked on our ROV in the computer science lab and the engineering makerspace. Together, we were assembling, programming, cutting, drilling, and soldering a thing of beauty. We wondered what would happen if our event was cancelled on your account. We told ourselves we would keep on building to the end. We saw some workers digging a trench up by the Emmanuel building. We joked to ourselves that they were preparing mass graves. And yet we were still content to drive to the top of the hill. Then our event was cancelled and I haven't touched a soldering iron since.

In the engineering labs, I grabbed our bundles of power cable and carried it down the hall to find a room where I could stretch it out. Looking ahead was as if I could see the hallway properly for the first time. I now saw every table, toolbox, and door handle as a surface where you might be lurking.

So, you've mutated? You've changed the rules of the game? Do you think yourself powerful yet? Yes, we know you are dangerous, but you should be worried. We are apex predators. Actually- that's an understatement. We are *the* apex predators.

So, you are hunting us and using our very cells to grow more of yourself? We hunt too you know. Actually, we don't merely hunt other creatures. That's not good enough for us, just as playing hide and seek isn't good enough for children. After we move past hunting other creatures, we domesticate and enslave them. We raise their progeny to better serve us on the dinner table. We selectively breed them to maximize the rich, juicy meat we can later pluck off their bones. You might be viral, but we subdue the earth.

We've had other plagues you know; the black death, bubonic plague, smallpox, influenza, HIV, Ebola. But before you came along, we were pulling the hairs out of our heads trying to find someone to blame. It seems like we all need something terrible- anything terrible to help us revel in our self-righteousness. If "it" isn't you, it's someone else.

We've done the whole world war thing before; twice. Neither time was pretty. Humanity has done some very ugly things, as it did in many bloody revolutions and uprisings, as it did

when it instituted racial slavery, as it did in many so called "holy wars", and as it always has. Those are just the kinds of things humanity does to itself, so what then do you think humanity is going to do to you?

This is a new kind world war. Actually, it's the best kind of world war we could of asked for. Because this time, all humanity has something better to fight than itself: you. So welcome to world war III Covid, your not going to like what happens next.

Every kid who plays tag has a secret. As terrible as "it" is, as frightening as the prospect of being tagged is, as horrible as the long wait in the dark, lonely closet can be, every player is glad, jubilant even, to be playing the game.

As such I am encouraged. I hope that we all might glean some clarity as we dispatch you. Before you changed the rules of the game, we humans were stressing ourselves countless other "its". Often, we make "its" of each other. After all, there is no shortage of splinters in our neighbors' eyes to scrutinize, scold into their faces about, or condemn from the soap box. Fighting other people is easy, and it makes us feel just so, self-righteous and just. What is so much harder is learning to listen from afar, to speak calmly in the middle of a crisis, to empathize with people we don't know.

I am encouraged because humans, spread across continents, are panicking- together. We are suffering, some more than others, but all together. We might all be going crazy. But we are going crazy together. And I am inclined to wonder if perhaps, in our isolation we might become more united than we have been in a very long time.

So now you've really done it dear Covid. You've stirred up humanity's need for humanity. Don't get me wrong, I wish you had never mutated. But deep down, I am glad to be playing this game with you, because finally, at long last, something else is "it" again.

As for me, this isn't tag. If I can't keep you out with brick walls, or my skin, or by hand washing; if you do manage to catch me, I will fight you to the death with every cell in my body. My body will sic its white blood cells on you. They will open up wide and engulf you. You don't want to mess with my cells. If you and I should meet, just remember (and dread) that I have something like a ninety-five percent chance of survival and nothing to lose.

But for now, I only have one more thing to say to you: MISSED ME! MISSED ME!
NOW YOU'VE GOT TO KISS ME!

Wishing you a terrible day,

Henry