The screeching starts at 7:30 in the morning. Sandi slowly rises from the bed, slips into her worn slippers, and shuffles down the hallway in her pink nightgown. “Shh!” She scolds the harried budgies in the kitchen, her shushing louder than the frantic chirps. “Shh!!” The birds yell back at her in defiance. Sandi sighs, then starts her daily routine: cleaning out the birdcage, freshening the food and water, and adding a layer of newspaper under the grate. She makes sure to place yesterday’s comics face up, in case the budgies want something to read. She feels bad for them. It must be very boring being stuck in a cage your whole life.

Creaking and moaning fade into hearing, alerting Sandi of David waking up. In movements mimicking his wife, he shuffles towards the kitchen, as if it was miles away instead of feet.

“Morning, hon.” He kisses her on the cheek.

“You don’t need to be up so early, Dave, I was just quieting the birds.”

He shrugs, yawning, and pours himself a heaping bowl of Raisin Bran, then mixes up an equally large portion of chocolate milk.

Sandi grabs a granola bar from the cabinet, then puts it back. Didn’t she already eat? Yes, well, maybe not, but she wasn’t hungry for breakfast. She’ll wait until lunch to eat, like usual.

A new loud, screeching noise startles Sandi, and she shakes herself out of her thoughts, turning to see a disgruntled Sammy waiting impatiently for her R2D2 coffee machine to spit out her sour coffee. Her black hair is tangled in an afro around her head, her zombie t-shirt wrinkled. She smiles at Sandi in greeting, but it comes out more like a wince.

“Can you feed the turtles again for me, Grandma?” she asks. “My boss just texted me, I have to take an early shift. Apparently no one at work can properly embalm a 350 pound old white guy.”

“Sure, Sammy. I’ll go do that now.” Sandi doesn’t want to forget to do something as important as that. If another one of Sammy’s turtles died, she’d surely have a breakdown. Last week the smallest turtle drowned, stuck under a crate in the mini-aquarium. Sammy was distraught. They had a funeral service, of course, and buried the creature in a specially-made turtle coffin Sammy bought on Amazon.

“They making you work on Christmas Eve?” Dave asks Sammy between spoonfuls of soggy cereal.

Sammy sighs. “‘Course they are, Grandpop.” She takes a long drawl from her mug and goes to her room to get dressed.

Sandi sits down across from her husband, forgetting about Sammy’s turtles.

“It isn’t Christmas Eve already, is it? That snuck up on me fast. Did we go shopping, Dave? Oh no! I haven’t even started getting ready for tomorrow’s party! And the food, too!”

Dave stares at Sandi with tired eyes. He sags in his chair, all bone and bruises. He rubs his forehead thoughtfully, contemplating what version of a response to give his poor wife this time.

“There isn’t going to be a family party this year, remember hon?” he says, somewhat sympathetically. “We have to quarantine because we have the virus.”

“Huh?” Sandi doesn’t understand. *Nothing new about that*, she thought.

“Remember? We caught COVID-19. We don’t want to get the kids sick.”

“I’m not sick.” The way she says it, with so much confidence, makes Dave half-chuckle.

“Yeah, hon, you are. You tested positive. A bunch of people are sick because of the virus.”

“Well, we still are going to have a Christmas party, right?” Sandi was starting to get scared, they had to have Christmas! It just didn’t make sense not to. A *virus* couldn’t be that serious.

Dave started squirming and letting out a series of sighs, followed by a head rub. *Sigh. Rub. Sigh. Rub.*

“No, no party. We are going to zoom with the kids, and hopefully some of the grandkids, tomorrow night instead.”

He stands up quickly, perhaps to avoid another repetitive question, and moves towards the hall. “Ms. Rice called again about her sink. I think I’m gonna check it out. I’ll be back around lunch, probably taking the rest of the day easy. My back is killing me,” he finished.

Sandi knew what “easy” meant. Crime novels and the Hallmark Channel in the basement. Takeout for lunch, and most likely dinner too. She no longer cooked- after her last kid left for college she swore if off for good- and so either Dave would fix up an odd combination of shrimp and beans or Sammy would come to the rescue with sushi. Little Debbie brownies for dessert.

Sandi sighed (there was always someone sighing or groaning in that house) and went downstairs to start the laundry. She forgot the ironing, but at least she remembered Sammy’s turtles. Sandi fed them five times before noon.

The next day, Christmas, was a drag. Sammy spent the day out with some “friends” doing God knows what and Sandi nearly blew Dave’s head off with the mantra “When are the kids getting here?”

Cookie, Sandi’s next door neighbor and best friend, called to wish Merry Christmas, which was the highlight of Sandi’s day. It was not so enjoyable when Brian called with bad news.

“Hey ma, how you holding up? Having a good Christmas?” His voice was scratchy, a combination of static and cigarettes.

“It’s fine Brian, how’s yours? Are you coming up from Florida for the party?” Something scratched at the back of Sandi’s brain. *Not party, zoo. Zoof? Zoom!* “Oh, I mean zoom, Brian. Are you...doing the zoom?”

There was hesitance on the line. “Actually, that’s what I was calling about, Ma. I don’t think I’m gonna see you tonight. Not really celebrating Christmas this year, ya know? Since Marlene, and everything. Anway, my computer’s shot to shit- ‘cuse me, ma.”

Sandi nodded sympatheticaly, then realized he wouldn’t be able to see her over the phone. Marlene was Brian’s girlfriend for about two years, and passed away a couple of months ago from drug overdose. Sandi never really liked Marlene- she was always vaping inside and wore leather pants- but she did understand Marlene was the closest person Brian related to emotionally. Except for Sammy, of course. But their father-daughter relationship is more or less one-sided; Sammy doesn’t want to get involved.

Sandi cleared her throat. “Well, we miss you here, Brian. Your dad and I hope you feel better soon.”

“Yeah, me too. Thanks,” Brian said. “‘Bye, then.”

He hung up suddenly, and Sandi listened to the phone’s drone of disconnection.

“Bye,” she whispered, returning the phone to its rack.

The winter passes in slushiness, indecision, and ultimate boredom. It was February 2021, and the new year promised nothing more than outdoor dining for the city of Baltimore. A sunny day, Sandi stood on her back porch, breathing in the transition of the seasons. Dave came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She giggled and leaned back into him. God, she was glad winter was over. She always despised the cold.

“Nice day out, isn’t it, hon?” Dave’s tone was content, matching the scene.

“Could be warmer,” Sandi teased. Dave tickled her side and she squirmed.

He said, “Wanna go to El Salto for lunch? They have outdoor dining.”

Half an hour later, the couple was sitting down outside the restaurant, browsing the Mexican menu. For them, they made incredible time. Sandi didn’t even protest Dave’s occasional speeding.

They ordered their usual enchiladas and Cokes. Sandi could live off of Coca Cola. In fact, she has for the past thirty years. She was half-convinced that it was actually good for her.

Sandi shivered and Dave draped her coat across her back.

“Thanks. It’s a little cold out here, isn’t it? Are you cold? Maybe we should eat inside.”

“We can’t yet, we have to wait until Phase Three for indoor dining,” Dave replied, somewhat hesitantly. He had a feeling he knew where this conversation would go.

“What do you mean?” Sandi asked, fulfilling his expectations. Dave told himself to at least try to be patient with her.

“There are phases the state has to go through when opening up again. Like the zoo and takeout places, where we used to go a lot. We have to be careful so people don’t start getting sick again.”

“Why would people get sick?”

“Because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We got sick, remember?”

As if on cue, Sandi answered “I’m not sick.”

Despite what he told himself, Dave started to get agitated. “Yeah, well, you were.”

Sandi flushed a bit, and poked at her enchilada. They’d been served lunch over half an hour ago and she was barely halfway through her dish.

Dave sighed. Forehead rubbing ensued. He said suddenly, “Hey, remember when your sister gave you chickenpox in highschool? And you were in complete denial that you caught it? You wouldn’t let anyone check your temperature- gave hell to your mom for trying to keep you in bed.”

A slight smile curved the side of Sandi's mouth. Of course she remembered- when it came to her days of youth she could recall every invigorating detail.

Dave, encouraged, continued. “And you felt so smothered that you ran away? You had me drive us to the theater. When I picked you up, you were wearing your prom dress! I was stunned by you. That was a great night. Though you did give me chickenpox, you devil.”

Sandi let out a laugh. “Me, devil? You were the rowdy one! Always running red lights in that farming tractor, and not even twelve, I bet at that. I still can’t believe you used that old dynamite we found in the shed as target practice. And there’s still a crater to prove it!”

“Only a teeny one,” Dave answered. They both laughed.

“So… is this virus like chickenpox?” Sandi asked anxiously. She wanted to get this right.

“I guess you could say that.” Dave said. “I mean, it’s contagious in the same way.” He leaned across the table and took Sandi’s hand in both of his own. “Just pretend that COVID is like a massive outbreak of chickenpox, hon, and that might make it easier.”

Sandi giggled. “I really do hate being itchy. Thank you, David.”

Dave and Sandi sat there for a while longer, just holding hands and smiling knowingly at each other under El Salto’s canopy.

*Ring ring.*

“I’ll get it!” Sandi leaps, almost literally, from the kitchen table to the wall phone in the hallway entry. She enjoys eating dinner with Dave and Sammy, but for some reason can’t sit still for more than five minutes for the life of her.

“Hello?”

“Hey, San, this is Cookie.”

Sandi turns toward the kitchen. “It’s Cookie!” she calls, and Dave and Sammy take it as an invitation to resume dinner. Sandi could chat Cookie’s ear off for hours. Which, gratefully, was fine by Cookie.

“What’s up, Cook?”

Cookie hums. “Just missin’ my bestie, is all. I’m sure I’ve forgotten what you look like! Hey, why don’t you go onto your front porch, and I’ll go onto mine, and we could see each other?”

It was as if Cookie offered that they go to the amusement park. She could always make Sandi feel like a little kid again, playing around just for the heck of it.

“Sure!” Sandi exclaims. “I’ll be there in two shakes.”

Sandi rushes for the door as fast as her prosthetic knees will allow her, the cord from the wall phone objecting as she stretches it across the length of the living room and out onto the front porch.

Cookie, beating her to it, sits on the top step of her stairs, surrounded by massive hanging ferns and sparse flowers. It seems she’d been sitting there awhile. From what Sandi can tell, she’s wearing pink flip flops and a green, fuzzy cardigan. Cookie always looked like a twenty-year-old in a seventy-year-old's body. She waves enthusiastically, and Sandi waves back.

“Hey, hot stuff, strike a pose for me. I wanna check you out,” Cookie jokes.

Sandi crosses her arms over her head and leans back in a dramatic gesture, then holds up the phone to her face.

“Whatcha think?”

“Gorgeous. You’re a young Marilyn Monroe.” Cookie wolf-whistles from across the street.

Sandi can’t help but grin. “Your turn!”

Cookie puts the phone down on the step, then stands and slowly sashays up and down her porch. Sandi claps and whoops. Laughing, Cookie returns to the phone.

“God, I miss you, San.” Her tone switches from teasing to dismal.

Sandi leans across her railing. “I know the feeling,” she answers. “It’s been a little tough, lately. I…” Sandi’s voice lowers to a half-mortified whisper. “I think I’m losing it a bit, Cook. It seems like I can't remember a single thing! Most of the time I have no idea what’s going on. It’s scary. I hate feeling this way.”

Sandi’s fingers tremble against the railing and she tightens her grip around it, wiping some moisture from her eyes while cradling the phone in the crook of her neck.

Cookie draws out a hum across the line. “I’m so sorry, San, I know it must be difficult. What’s going on right now can’t be easy on you. It definitely isn’t for me.” She pauses. “But if there’s one thing that keeps me going, it’s gotta be you, baby.”

“Me?” Sandi wipes her eyes again.

“Yeah, you! You’re so stubborn!”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Sandi asks defensively.

Cookie chuckles. “It’s just… I know you can beat the tough times. Whenever something crazy is thrown your way, you object to it so powerfully. You change things for the better with just your stubborn will. And I don’t think you even realize you’re doing it. I wish I could.”

Cookie stands, and Sandi trains her eyes onto her, feeling like she was standing right next to her.

“I try to be like you, San,” Cookie continues. “Whenever Richie’s having a bad day, and it feels like I can’t keep going. I think, ‘goof that. I’m doing this,’ because I know that’s what you’d do. You’re strong, Sandi. Don’t forget that.”

Sandi takes a deep breath. “Okay,” she whispers. “I won’t.” Her tone is wobbly, yet definite. For once she is sure of herself. “I love you, Cook.”

“Love you too, baby.”

The friends wave to each other, then turn simultaneously and return to their burdensome lives.

Sandi’s not giving up. And she’ll remember it.