

Malaria (a pandemic prose poem)

By Dudley Stone

Because it's not safe outside, because I say so, because your father says so. Furlough just means he'll be around more. Won't that be fun?

Because you could get sick. Then we'd have to take you to the ER and they'd do an EKG or an MRI, check your BP and blood and electrolytes and take you to the ICU, you remember, where grandma was when she — take you there because your lungs will turn to pink fiberglass and your liver — how about this? You can have an Oreo, you can have two, but only if you eat them here. Well, just because someone knocks doesn't mean you have to answer. If it's Amazon, they can leave whatever on the stoop.

Wave to your friends. You can wave. I'm not saying ignore them. I'm not saying be rude. Hi, Billy, hi, Janice. Jenny. I'm sorry. It's not Janice? I woulda swore it was Janice. Between you and me, their parents don't care or just don't know any better. Sit still. Do you want that Oreo? I said two but only if you sit here, inside, at the table.

Do you know about malaria? It's Latin, means bad air. Bad air, bad area, bad Oreo. I'm sorry. That's not funny and I shouldn't have made a joke.

Anyway, they thought malaria was caused by being around swamps, so they named it after bad air — mal (bad) aria (opera). Turned out they were wrong and it was caused by mosquitos. But they didn't know. Just saying, you could be right, it might in fact be fine outside, maybe their parents aren't irresponsible after all, but nobody really knows.

I just want you to have the facts so you can make an informed — no, but — yes, it's your decision. I can't make it for you. I can't lock you up. I can't hold you hostage. That's right, that's kidnapping. They give you the chair for kidnapping. Well, the law gives parents a certain amount of leeway, but I'm just saying, yes, your friends could be safe, they could be, or they could be mosquitoes that don't wash their hands and rub their malaria all over you. Or the air outside could just be bad, it could be opera, and we can't see it. Risk and reward, like your dad says. I'm not sure what that means either, honey.

I suppose you'd jump off a cliff if your friends said so. Will you at least wear your mask? That's what I got them for. Yes, you can put a scary face on it. Sharpie's in the drawer.