

“Much Ado About Corona: A Dystopian Love Story”, by John C. A. Manley

A Sneak Peek Inside the New Novel. From the opening pages of Much Ado About Corona

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Prologue: Mountie 019

A field somewhere in Northern Ontario, Canada, December 26, 2020...

I’d never flown in a plane before, much less a helicopter. When I was sixteen, Mathéo and I took the train to Toronto to see a Leafs game. Even for the grade eight trip to Quebec we traveled in one of those two-storey coaches with the tinted windows.

Now, strapped to a yellow cot, wrapped in some sort of emergency, crinkly, subzero sleeping bag, I stared at the air ambulance that awaited me. It was painted orange with the letters ORNGE on the side—as if they left out the A to save money. From above its windshield extended a metal spike like a unicorn’s horn. Except this orange, flying unicorn had only three legs—two in the back and one in the front—disappearing into a foot of snow.

Through the haze of pain, I could barely see the evergreen trees that surrounded the field, serving as a barrier against the howling wind. The dark night was lit by the headlights of many police vehicles and the red and blue light bar of an ambulance.

Overhead, the blades of the medical copter were whipping in circles—making the cold December air even colder. At least it numbed the excruciating pain in my chest a little. On the unicorn’s tail, a tiny vertical propeller was also spinning like a windmill in a hurricane—proving how the seemingly inconsequential can alter the direction of the large

and powerful.

“Here we go, buddy,” said the Mountie who was holding the front end of the cot.

Instead of the iconic Red Serge of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, he was suited in a thickly insulated black uniform. Rather than a brown, felt, wide-brimmed hat, he wore a military-style helmet bearing the ironic identification number 019. His white face mask matched his white eyebrows.

“You’ll be warm in a minute,” promised Mountie 019. He spoke in the groggy and grizzled voice of a man who had done too many back-to-back twelve-hour shifts.

The side door of the chopper slid open. With the grace of a gymnast, a thin, feminine figure dropped down onto a patch of frosty grass. Someone had cleared away the snow, making a path across the field to the emergency landing area.

Like the medic holding the back end of my cot, the woman approaching also wore a blue face mask and a round flight helmet with dome-shaped headphones. The bulging helmets, glowing body cams and one-piece flight suits made them both look more sci-fi than medical. Their epaulettes, however, proved they were not from outer space—each heralded a Canadian flag with a red maple leaf.

Mountie 019 introduced himself to the approaching paramedic. “I’ll be overseeing transport of the prisoner.”

Prisoner. It seemed too harsh, too hard to believe. *Me.* I still lived with my parents in a two-streetlight town no one had ever heard of. I went to Mass every Sunday—at least until they made church illegal. I must have groaned or moaned or something because Mountie 019 retracted his statement.

“Uh, I mean accused.” Icy vapour escaped from the edges of his face mask as he chuckled. “You know, in the academy, we’re taught to call those in custody our ‘clients.’”

“*Clients!*” exclaimed the medic behind me. “That’s a joke.”

“No kidding. God, I need to retire.”

They all laughed in the way people do when they want to banish anxiety, guilt or confusion. I, however, did not laugh. Could not laugh. And if anything was funny, it was that they felt I needed this RCMP paratrooper to watch over me. It hurt enough to simply breathe; I was no threat to anyone. At least the black-clad Mountie no longer had the Remington assault rifle hanging from his shoulder. He’d traded it in for a modest fifteen-round Smith & Wesson sidearm.

The female medic looked down at me and asked, “How’re you doing?”

Her eyes were a pretty blue. But I knew not to trust them.

From behind my head, the male medic warned, “He’s a confirmed COVID case.”

No! I’m not, I wanted to scream. But I didn’t dare. The inferno of pain in my chest was burning too strongly.

“Can you tell me your name?” the female medic asked me.

I closed my eyes.

“Vincent,” answered Mountie 019, as if he was reading from a notepad. “His name is Vincent McKnight. Age twenty-four.”

“Oh,” she replied. “Is he the one we saw on—”

“Yes, ma’am.” He didn’t sound happy about it.

“Is he... *the moose?*”

“That’s the other guy, I think.”

No, I’m the turtle and my shell is broken.

As they hoisted me up into the helicopter I screamed—the pain moving into the realm of sheer agony. Without a pause, they slid my cot headfirst into the warm chopper like a coffin into a funeral truck.

Mountie 019 buckled up in the seat beside me, all the while watching me intently. His gaze wasn’t one of a guard watching his prisoner. Instead, his eyes looked confused and bewildered as if asking, *how did a kid like you end up in such a mess?*

The answer, of course, involved a woman.

At twenty-eight some would say she was just a girl. And she would say that such juvenile labels were part of the grand plan to keep adults behaving like easy-to-manipulate children. She was certainly not a child. And in as little as six months, between her and this so-called pandemic, I had been forced to grow up real fast.

1. No Face, No Service

Friday, July 3, 2020, Moosehead, Ontario, Canada...

Hands on hips, she stood behind the counter glaring at me.

“No face, no service.”

“*What?*” I blurted, as the door swung closed behind me, jingling a bell. “You mean: No *mask*, no service—right?”

“No *face*, no service,” she repeated. “This is a bakery, not a bank.”

The overwhelming smell of fresh sourdough penetrated the polyester fabric stretched over my nose, mouth and chin. I took a few slow steps toward the counter which separated us, shaking my head in non-understanding.

“A bank?” I replied. “What’re you talking about?”

The twenty-something girl, with bright blonde hair, raised a hand mirror from the countertop and aimed it at me.

"You look like a bank robber." She spoke with the slightest hint of a Germanic accent.

The mirror reflected my brown eyes peering over a bright green face covering. In a mask-muffled voice I replied, "I think I look more like a turtle than a robber."

"Well, you're acting like a turtle, hiding behind a green shell."

She lowered the mirror and rested her unmasked chin on her knuckles, elbows propped up on the countertop. Underneath, rows of dark crusted bread, sprinkled with rolled oats, lined the display.

"Do you always keep a mirror so handy?" I asked.

"Ever since people started auditioning for the bubonic plague."

"Well, if you haven't noticed," I said, gesturing to either side of me, "we *are* in the middle of a pandemic."

Her head turned slightly right and left, looking to either side of me.

"I don't see any bodies piling up," she replied. "All I've seen this year is a regular cold and flu season. And we'd be over it by now if turtles like you weren't so scared of catching the sniffles."

I felt oddly irritated (though at the same time attracted) by this blonde lioness. She also wore green, but not a mask. Her short-sleeved dress fit so well around her trim body I suspected she must have made it herself. The leafy green garment topped by her blonde hair reminded me of a...

"Hey, if this green mask makes me a turtle," I jested, "then I'd say you look like a dandelion."

"Suits me." She removed her elbows from the counter and stood tall. "Dandelions aren't afraid to be in the open air."

"Yeah, well, plants can't catch COVID."

"No. Just really sick and old people."

"Uh-huh," I said.

I felt like calling her a covidiot but she was way too pretty: Big, blue and unblinking eyes dominated a lightly tanned face. Her pursed lips—it appeared as if she was restraining them from making further comment—had no lipstick. Her impractically long hair was held back by a braided portion that wrapped around her forehead like a golden diadem, reminding me of some medieval damsel—except this damsel was not in distress.

"COVID's hitting more than just old folks," I said. "Hundreds of thousands have died. Don't you watch the news?"

She sighed. "Hundreds of thousands? Do you know how many people die each year from the old-fashioned flu?"

I hadn't a clue. And even though half my face was covered, I'm sure my eyes betrayed my ignorance. Avoiding her question, I asked my own, "If you can't trust the World Health Organization, then who can you trust?"

"How about evidence-based science?"

"Uh, I think scientists work at the WHO."

She walked out around the counter, revealing the rest of her green dress, draping all the way down to her brown sandals, barely allowing me a glimpse of her ankles. Those sandals stepped toward me, coming dangerously close to breaching my COVID bubble. Instinctively, I backed away.

"I said evidence-based science," she persisted, "not the words of scientists bribed, blackmailed and bamboozled into propagating mass hysteria. Because if you look at the facts, eight thousand Canadians died from the flu in 2018. Every year, on average, about 650,000 around the world die with the flu. Nothing has changed. Our government is lying to us."

"You're one of those... conspiracy theorists, aren't you?"

"Ha!" she laughed. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"All I want is some bread."

"Well, as they say in Italy: 'Niente sorriso, niente pane.'" Her Italian accent was rather convincing. She made another step closer. "No smile, no bread. *Capito?*"

I stepped backwards again, hitting the door, jingling the bell. She was about half a foot shorter than me, but nonetheless intimidating.

"I really doubt they say that in Italy," I muttered.

"Probably not," she admitted, swaying side to side for a second.

"And most stores won't even let me inside without a mask."

"Forcing medical treatment on people is against the Nuremberg Code," she said, taking another step closer. "I'm surprised a big, strong guy like you would put up with that kind of abuse."

I felt like prey. Part of me wanted to run, to open the door and never come back. I'd tell Grandad I couldn't get him the bread he wanted because the place was run by a COVID denier. But I knew he'd just laugh at me. He'd already warned me that the baker was a "real hoot."

"But masks save lives," I protested.

The Dandelion looked me straight in the eyes. "And how do you know that?"

"The sc-science..." I stuttered.

"You've actually looked at a scientific study?"

“Uh, no...”

“Well, I have. Fourteen of them, actually. Every randomized controlled trial ever conducted on *human beings*—not mice or mannequins—shows that masks don’t stop people from getting sick or dying from the flu.”

“Ah!” I said, raising a finger, “but COVID’s far worse than the flu.”

She slid even closer, leaving barely six inches between our noses. “All right, Mr. Science, if a mask can’t even stop the humble flu, how’s it going to hinder your killer coronavirus?”

I reached my hand up to adjust my mask; but then pulled it away, remembering we aren’t supposed to touch them.

“Masks do work,” I said firmly. “I don’t know which conspiracy website you get your information from, but—”

“*The Journal of Infectious Diseases*,” she interrupted. “In March, the CDC reviewed every study ever conducted on masks and found... they did nothing.”

“Well...” I said, drawing out the word, “nothing wrong with a placebo. Stops people from freaking out.”

“Freaking out over the common cold?”

“It’s *not* a cold,” I insisted, taking a deep and tense breath. “You think you know better than the experts?”

“Experts like Professor Ioannidis?” she asked.

I didn’t respond.

“You do know who Professor John Ioannidis is, don’t you?”

I sighed the sound of prey that had tired of the chase, ready to suffer its demise.

“Professor Ioannidis. One of the world’s leading epidemiologists. Stanford University. He says the SARS-CoV-2 death rate is in the ballpark of the regular flu season.”

“All right! All right!” I held up my hands. “Grandad’s waiting for his bread.”

Her face softened and she took a step back. “Who’s your grandad?”

“The old Indian with the long white hair,” I said, happy to change the subject.

“You mean Paul, the Anishinaabe Elder?”

“Yeah,” I said, taken aback by her familiarity. “Though, he’s more specifically Ojibwe.”

“Dokis band?”

“Uh-huh,” I said with a nod, though I truly could not remember which band he belonged to. “To me he’s just Grandad.”

That made her smile. “Can I call him Grandad, too?”

I paused, stumped on how to respond. “He’d probably be okay with that.”

“You don’t have him in quarantine, do you?”

“Kicking and screaming.”

“Shame on you, Turtle!” She waved her index finger. “That’s why I haven’t seen him since March. Under house arrest.”

“He’s at the nursing home, actually. We’re just keeping him safe.”

“He’s as healthy as a horse,” she said.

“He’s eighty-seven.”

“That proves it.”

“Anyway, now that the lockdown’s lifted, I was actually heading over there today—as soon as you sell me some bread, that is. I have an appointment”—I pulled out my cellphone and glanced at the time, 10:38 a.m.—“in thirty minutes. He told me he really misses your bread. So, I thought—”

“If his jail sentence is over, why doesn’t he come and get his own bread like he used to? I’d love to see Grandad again.”

“Well, it’s not safe enough yet,” I sighed, feeling a heaviness in my upper chest. “They’re only allowing them on the front lawn to meet with family.”

She rubbed her face with both hands, as if trying to hide from the world for a moment. “Four months locked in his room,” she said through cupped hands. “It’s inhuman.”

“He says it’s not been too bad.” Not that I believed him. “He reads a lot. Memorizes Shakespeare. He’s a bit of a loner.”

“So am I,” she said. “But four months of isolation sounds unbearable.”

“They are just trying to take care of him.”

She began twisting a strand of her hair tightly around her forefinger. “Oh, yeah, sure. If they call it *caring* then it must be okay. *Abusing* people is the new *helping* people.”

She’s nuts, I thought.

“That’s not really what’s going on.”

It can’t be.

She stared silently back at me. She didn’t appear to be breathing. And neither was I.

When I could hold my breath no longer, I inhaled deeply and demanded, “Are you going to give me some bread?”

“Are you going to lose the facial inhibitor?”

I pulled on the top of the green cloth and let the spandex snap back into place. “Hey, my mom made me this mask.”

Her blue eyes rolled up and to the left. “She also made your face.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” I said, putting my hand to my forehead. “Do you have to be so difficult?”

“Do you have to wear a face diaper?”

More silence.

I needed her bread. But she didn’t seem too concerned about getting my money. She obviously placed her protests above profits. I could’ve left. Called it a draw.

No, I thought. All Grandad wanted was a loaf of her sourdough.

I was running out of time. If I was going to be defeated, I decided, I couldn’t let her win without some small victory on my side. Looking her in the eye, heart suddenly pounding, I said:

“I’ll take off the mask on *one* condition.” She took a big step back, crossed her arms and said, “What’s the condition?”

To find out what happens next, you can [order the book here](#).

What Readers Are Saying...



“Sometimes fiction is the best way to get the truth across. Shakespeare and Charles Dickens knew that and so does John C. A. Manley. He has crafted a ripping story of courage, awakening and love (with some good laughs thrown in) all in the time of COVID. As with the truth, you won’t want to put *Much Ado About Corona* down.”—*Patrick Corbett, former director/producer for W-5, Beachcombers and Dateline*

“*Much Ado About Corona* weaves a fascinating, entertaining, and sometimes very sad story, full of irony and subtle humour. The protagonist’s narrative is full of sarcasm, openness and directness. Heart warming and outright hilarious.”—*Dr. Éva Székely, retired psychologist, author of [Never Too Thin](#)*

“I enjoyed *Much Ado About Corona* immensely. The police interaction was bang on and the subtleties are not so subtle and portray an authentic realism to me. Constable Mackenzie is a tragic character.”—*Retired Constable Leland “Lee” Keane, Royal Canadian Mounted Police*

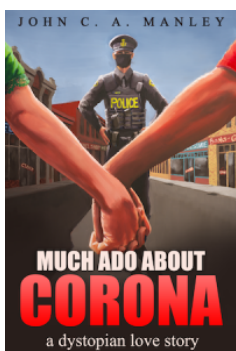
"I felt there was no more data I could absorb about COVID-19 without going crazy. Hence, it was refreshing to read a page-turning fictional account... Living in a profession where so few seem to see the horrors we are participating in, reading *Much Ado About Corona* was a cathartic experience."—Andrew Brannan BScN, RN, ER and ICU nurse

More testimonials available at MuchAdoAboutCorona.ca/testimonials.

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John C. A. Manley is the author of the full-length novel, Much Ado About Corona: Dystopian Love Story. He is currently working on the sequel, Brave New Normal, while living in Stratford Ontario, with his wife Nicole and son Jonah. You can find out more about his controversial work of fiction at MuchAdoAboutCorona.ca. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.



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