

Letter to a Stranger
Sebastian Samuels

“My mother died from it last weekend.”

This was while we were walking to the large makeshift tent, which was dirty in appearance yet completely sterile inside. We all provided our condolences, but as some of the others began to gently ask questions, I looked at your emotionless face and felt a knot form in my stomach. It was mid-April, and I finally had a real face to associate with the numbers I was seeing on the news. We were silent as we began to don gear: first we switched our flimsy porous surgical masks to sturdier, impermeable N-95s, then put on one set of nitrile gloves, and next, our choice of several types of surgical gowns, then hair nets – even the bald among us – then came the goggles and face shields which always seemed to fog up, and finally, a second set of gloves.

“She was at the home around the corner.”

We were now moving ourselves and our equipment to tables in the next tent, which only had two sides so that cars could move through it. Any conversation among us that had arisen since your last remark quickly faded. I looked at your still-emotionless face, my stomach getting tighter, and apologized, all while knowing that my words did little to comfort you or alter the situation.

How could I change it beyond what we all were there for? That *was* enough to eventually fix this, I told myself then. We were heroes who should be proud of our work, or at least that is what the signs said.

We were about three hours and one hundred tests in when you began to cry. Not a lot, but enough that we could see your sorrow behind the medical equipment on you. You elected to go home after that, and none of us objected. Having showed up, not only as a volunteer, but as a retired physician who lost her mother only three days earlier was nothing short of heroic. Watching you leave, the discomfort in my abdomen turned to pain.

Driving home that day, I saw an ambulance leaving with lights and sirens from the nursing home where your mother was one of many recently deceased residents, and the pain in my stomach began to increase. As I passed by, I saw a sign near their front entrance, again thanking people like you and I, and realized how little it meant, and the knot started to unravel.

In the summer, I would frequently pass by that site, and sometimes believed I saw you, despite knowing that you chose to stay away from testing indefinitely, and the knot would reappear. Whenever I provided emergency care to a patient like your mother, the knot reappeared. When I turn on the news, I think of your mother, at this point just one of over two hundred thousand nationally, and the knot reappears. But when I see a sign on a front lawn, a banner in the window of a local business, or a smug, optimistic commercial for a billion-dollar corporation, I am unaffected, because what we *could* do was not enough.