



The Case of the **COVID CRISIS**



PENDRED NOYCE

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COVID CRISIS

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS AN OUTBREAK?

MASSACHUSETTS, FEBRUARY 10, 2020

KNOX COUNTY, OHIO, JUNE, 2014

Clinton Chang looked up with his mouth full of taco to see three eighth-grade boys jostle around a girl who sat alone at the end of the next table. A boy with low-slung jeans yanked a brown lunch bag out of the girl's hands. She was a small girl who had just joined Clinton's math class. Her name was June, she wore her glossy black hair in two pigtails with pink ribbons, and she had recently moved with her family from China.

“Whatchoo got in here?” demanded Brandon, the boy who had taken June’s lunch. He peered inside the bag. “You Chinese’ll eat anything, won’t you? What is it? Snakes? Rats? Cockroaches? Bats, right?”

He tore the brown bag open, spilling a box of noodles onto the floor.

“Oh, dear,” sang out the tallest boy, whose name was George. “Looky, he spilled your worms.”



Clinton climbed free of his bench. *Uh-oh, what am I doing?* he thought. But he felt the cool round disk of the G.A.S. medal against his chest. Clinton was no hero, but he had caught a thief once, and the Galactic Academy of Science had named him a trainee and awarded him a medal. The medal made him feel like he had to do the right thing. He crossed over to June's table.

George, the taller kid, leaned down and practically spat in June's face. "We don't need any filthy germs here, you understand?"

"Yeah, you should be wearing a mask," Brandon said.

"Or better yet, stay home," the third boy, a kid with curly hair Clinton didn't know, chimed in.

Clinton approached. "Hey, guys," he said. "Come on, now."

Brandon turned to him. "Oh, yeah? What do you want, punk?"

Clinton felt his courage melt. He stared at the floor. "They're just noodles."

"Yeah, don't you know anything, buddy? The Yellow Peril? Haven't you heard about that new Chinese virus that's killing people? That comes from them eating weird stuff and then coughing all over?"

Clinton wished he'd paid more attention to something he'd vaguely heard on the news. "Well, I'm sure June doesn't have any disease," he said, staring at June's feet, which were in shiny, black, patent leather shoes and white, silky socks. Her feet looked like a little girl's.

“June, eh?” Brandon asked. “A good friend of yours, is she? Your girlfriend? You Chinese like two chopsticks stuck together?”

Clinton gave him a fierce look. “I’m an American, same as you.”

Brandon snickered. “Yeah, you look it.”

“Korean American,” Clinton said. For a moment he felt ashamed, as if he’d backed down. “I was born here,” he added.

Just then, Clinton heard feet pound the floor beside him, and at his elbow appeared Mae Jemison Harris, who was his fellow G.A.S. trainee and also sort of his friend. She wasn’t very big either, and Brandon was sneering at her too, but she crossed her arms and said loudly, “And I’m African American, and everyone knows I’m the bossiest girl in the school. So get lost.”

Wow, Clinton thought. He looked back. Around Mae, their arms folded, stood a semi-circle of middle school girls, all thrusting out their lower lips and looking mad.



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“Need girls to save you, huh?” Brandon muttered, but then he stomped on the spilled noodles and walked away, with his two buddies hulking after him. Two noodles trailed along, stuck to Brandon’s shoe.

June sat on the bench, not turning around, her shoulders shaking in her blue jacket. Clinton threw a desperate look at Mae, who smoothly slid onto the bench beside the smaller girl. A couple of Mae’s friends went around and sat on the opposite side.

“Don’t worry,” Mae said. “We’ll get you something else for lunch.”

June looked up at her. “Why they hate me? What I do?”

“They’re just ignorant,” Mae said, patting June on the shoulder.

But Clinton thought he could see steam coming out of Mae’s ears.

Clinton caught hold of Mae’s arm in the hallway on the way to science class. “What was that all about?”

“Coronavirus panic,” Mae said.

“What?”

“Don’t you pay attention to anything but video games and basketball?” Mae asked. “It’s that pneumonia epidemic in China. It’s spreading.”

Clinton hitched up his backpack and matched his pace to Mae’s. “I can’t help it if my mother’s not a nurse.”

Mae stopped and glared at him. “You’re the one who didn’t even want to let your sister get vaccinated,” she said. “I bet people would love a vaccine for this new disease.”

“I just don’t know that much about it,” Clinton said. He tried to look humble. “You already convinced me about vaccines. But how do we stop those eighth-graders from picking on June?”

Mae shook her head. “I don’t know. I guess our country just likes to pick on foreigners these days. It makes me so mad.”

Clinton was surprised to see tears shining in Mae’s eyes. He drew her into a corner just as the warning bell rang for class. “What’s going on?”

“You know my mom sometimes works as a nurse on cruise ships? Now she’s stuck on one in a port in Japan and lots of people are getting sick. I’m staying with Grandma, and she’s freaking me out with bad news and rumors. I don’t know if they’ll even let my mom come home.” She gulped, swallowing a sob.

“Wow,” Clinton said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Maybe we can do something. Maybe we can ask Selectra for help.”

Selectra Volt was their teenage guide from the Galactic Academy of Science, a secret society to protect scientific integrity and the search for truth. She had already sent them on more than one science detection adventure. Though sometimes a bit ditzzy, she was cool. And she came from the future.

Mae shook her head, crying more openly now. “We can’t just call her. It’s not like we have her phone number or anything.”

A second bell rang, but Mae just stood there crying. Clinton wasn’t sure what to do. Mae was never late to class; she must be really upset. He took her arm. “Selectra’s not going to come visit us in a school hallway, that’s for sure,” he

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said, and he pulled Mae down the hallway and into a janitor's closet. He pulled the door shut behind them, except for a crack. At least this way, passing kids wouldn't see Mae crying. "Come on, Selectra," Clinton said in the darkness.

He didn't really expect their guide to answer. But all at once the closet began to shimmer with pink and green sparkles, revealing a mop and bucket and shelves full of unused science supplies. Selectra Volt materialized, as outlandish as ever in her green minidress, with pink pom-poms hanging around her neck and her short, straight hair sporting stripes of green and pink. Clinton supposed this was the fashion of the future. Selectra carried a purse of some transparent material hanging nearly to the floor.



"I was just thinking of you two," Selectra said, looking around. "But why do we have to meet in a closet?"

"Because we're in school, Selectra," Clinton said. "You know how we're supposed to keep you secret?"

"Oh, that," Selectra said, as if secrecy had suddenly become unimportant. "But listen, I may have a special mission for you."

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Mae wiped her eyes and put her hands on her hips. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“We don’t do that!” Selectra said in a shocked voice. “But we do notice that some people in your school, in your country, are getting nervous, or as people in your time say, whacked out, about this new epidemic, Covid-19.”

“Covid-19?” Clinton asked. “Are you sure you’re talking about the right disease?”

“Oops,” Selectra said. “Haven’t they named it yet? Anyway, we don’t want foolish reactions the way we saw with Ebola or the Filovirus Frenzy of ’38.”

“The what frenzy?” Mae said.

Selectra bit her lip. “Uh, whoops, that one’s in the future, I think. That’s it, actually. We need some agents to be prepared for that worldwide... um... you know I can’t tell you about the future.”

“I think you just did,” Clinton said. “Anyway, we get to go on an epidemic mission? Cool!”

“Precisely,” Selectra said, hauling on the long cord handle of the purse until she could reach it. “Here are your supplies. These are special masks, which will protect you against airborne pathogens.”

“Against what?” Clinton asked.

“Germs in the air,” Mae told him, wiping her eyes.

“But you still have to wash your hands any chance you get,” Selectra said. “Look, here in the X-PA, you can play this song as you wash for a full twenty seconds.”



She paused. “Why do they call them seconds? Seconds come first, before minutes and hours. I just can’t adjust to the way you count time here on... never mind.” She handed them the masks, which felt light and rubbery, sort of like wet rice paper for making Vietnamese spring rolls. Looking doubtful, Mae plastered hers against her face, where to Clinton’s surprise, it seemed to disappear.

“I can breathe and talk just fine,” Mae said, sounding surprised.

“Just don’t try eating through it,” Selectra said.

Clinton put on his own mask. It felt cool and damp as it melded onto his face, and then he hardly felt it. “Is this what you use in the future?” he asked.

“You know I can’t tell you anything about the future,” Selectra said. “And here’s your X-PA.” She handed Clinton the Expedition Personal Assistant, which looked like a modified smartphone.

Clinton took the X-PA and nodded at Selectra’s bag. “What’s that still in there?”

“Oh,” Selectra said, flustered. “Those are your full-body protection suits, but you only need that if you’re going to see the Ebola virus, which I don’t think you really need to do. At least not yet.”

Clinton perked up. “Isn’t that the one where people spurt blood from their ears and everything? I want to see that!”

“They do not!” said Mae, who kept track of such things through her mother the research nurse. “And if they did, you would not like it!”

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Selectra wrinkled her nose. “One problem with the body masks is that they get kind of ... hot.”

“I don’t care,” Clinton said. He exchanged glances with Mae, who gave a little shrug. Clinton accepted the two thin, rubbery, translucent suits from Selectra and stuffed them into his backpack. “Okay, what’s the mission? Are we catching bad guys?”

Selectra formed a “No” with her mouth and shook her head. “You’ll be meeting a lot of good guys. Just learn, and come home to be the voice of reason.”

“Clinton, the voice of reason?” Mae sounded incredulous, but Selectra was already twinkling and fading away.

Mae crowded close to Clinton to look at the face of the X-PA. “Does it say we can visit my mom?”

The X-PA in Clinton’s hand had a dial for languages and a drop-down list of places and people to visit. It was much more limited than usual, and the places were numbered. “I don’t see Japan,” Clinton said.

The first place read, “Miller Farm, Knox County, Ohio, 2014.”

Mae took the X-PA and scrolled through the destinations, but then she sighed and handed it back to Clinton. “Okay, let’s go.”

Clinton held the X-PA in the air, looped it in a figure eight around them, and pressed the button.

Clinton’s head whirled, and he steadied himself on his feet. He and Mae stood on a dirt driveway in front of a neat wooden house with a tall barn beside it.

“Look, a buggy,” Mae said, pointing. In front of the barn stood a black, wheeled carriage that looked big enough to carry four people.

Mae said, “I think it means we’re in Amish country.” When Clinton looked blank, she added, “They don’t like cars or other modern stuff, and they’re very religious. I bet they have a horse.”

“We could check the barn,” Clinton suggested. Somehow, he was reluctant to knock on the door of a house full of very religious people who didn’t like modern things.

“I don’t think—” Mae began.

But at that moment they heard a car coming up the driveway. A red Prius pulled up and stopped in front of them. The window rolled down, and a friendly-looking middle-aged woman whose blonde hair was beginning to gray looked out at them.

“Not to be rude, but you don’t look Amish,” the woman said.

Mae stepped closer. “We’re students,” she said, with that serious manner that always seemed to impress adults. “We’re on a project studying epidemics.”

“You are, are you?” The lady turned off the car and got out. She put on a white coat that had a stethoscope sticking out of its pocket, and took a clipboard out of the back seat.

“Have you had your MMR vaccines?” she asked. “Up to date on your baby shots?”

While Clinton tried to remember, Mae answered confidently, “Yes, we have. We have to get them to go to school, and besides, my mother’s a nurse.”

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“Oh, really? So am I, a public health nurse.” She looked them up and down, and then said, “Right, then you can come with me. I’m investigating the measles outbreak here among the Amish. Counting cases, checking on people’s health, tracing contacts, the usual.”

“Tracing contacts?” Clinton asked.

“Yes, certainly. When we find someone with measles we have to figure out where they’ve been, who else has been there, how the infection may be spreading. Usually that means a lot of time on the phone, but—” she shrugged— “the Amish don’t use phones.”

And with that, she strode up to the door and knocked. Mae and Clinton followed and stood at her sides.

Footsteps echoed inside, and the door opened a few inches. A man with a chinstrap beard peered out. “*Ja, wie is hier? We hebben de mazelen in huis.*”

“That’s why I’m here, to see about measles,” the nurse said. She stuck out her hand. “Janet Woodley, public health nurse for this district, and these are my trainees. May we come in?”

The door opened, and the three visitors entered a dark kitchen with a wooden plank floor. Around the table sat his family, eating a lunch of potatoes and sausage. But none of them looked that hungry. The man’s wife, Mrs. Miller, wearing a long dress and a kerchief over her hair, scraped at her plate. Three boys sat in a row, slumping, their eyes glassy. A girl who looked less than two years old sat crying in her high-chair.

“We are trying to feed them,” Mr. Miller said. “But they all have fever and the light hurts their eyes.”

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Ms. Woodley got right to work. She asked the boys to open their shirts and summoned her “trainees” over to see the scattered red blotches of measles on their skin. She shone a penlight into their reddened eyes and saw them flinch from the light. Then she handed the clipboard to Mae. “Take notes,” she directed, and she began to ask the family their ages and who else they had seen over the past two weeks, whether they had attended the Lunder wedding.

“How do I spell these names?” Mae muttered, scribbling as fast as she could.

Ms. Woodley pulled out her stethoscope and listened to the family’s lungs. When she got to the last one, the angry toddler Lise, she frowned and kept moving her stethoscope around.

“Mrs. Miller,” she said, her voice turning gentle, “I’m afraid Lise may have pneumonia. Infection in the lungs. I’m sorry, Mrs. Miller, but I think she will need to go to the hospital.”

The mother gave a little moan of distress.

“Will you come with me in the car?” Ms. Woodley asked. “To hold the baby and comfort her? Or should I send the ambulance?”

Mrs. Miller stood up. “*Ik zal komen,*” she said. She rested her hand on the head of her eldest son and spoke to him in her language, which the X-PA told Clinton was called Pennsylvania German. It wasn’t too hard to understand, even without the X-PA’s translator function. She told him to help his father and care for his brothers. “*Help je vader en zorg voor je broers.*”

The boy ran out of the room and came back with a blanket and change of clothes for the baby, which Mrs. Miller placed

in a bag. Her husband gave her a hug and kissed the baby.

“Stay at home,” Ms. Woodley told him. “Rest and drink lots of fluids, all of you. We’ll be sure to send word about Lise, but please stay home. It is important not to see people who have not been vaccinated.”

“We will do,” Mr. Miller said, bowing his head.

As they left the house, Clinton tugged on Ms. Woodley’s sleeve. “Will the baby be all right?”

“I hope so,” said the nurse. “We don’t have medicine for the measles, but they can watch her breathing and keep her hydrated.” She shook her head. “This outbreak started with a preacher who came back from the Philippines, which is having an epidemic. And some of the people in this community avoid vaccination because some years ago, a couple of kids got sick after their vaccine. Of course, kids get sick all the time, so why not after a vaccine? But the MMR got a bad reputation, and people think of it as too modern anyway.” She turned to Mae. “My notes?”

Mae handed over the clipboard, and asked, “Is the measles spreading fast?”

“Very fast,” the nurse answered. “We have 292 cases already in this community. Ten in the hospital. Measles has an R-naught of about fourteen, you know. Now, I’m sorry I can’t take you on more visits, but we have to get to the hospital.”

She opened the back door of the red car, and Clinton saw that a baby car seat was already buckled into the middle of the back seat.

As Ms. Woodley helped the baby’s mother put her into the car seat, Clinton and Mae backed away. A horse whinnied

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from the pasture, and the X-PA vibrated in Clinton's hand. He looked down at it. The face read, "Return to base." He showed it to Mae.

"What?" she demanded. "Only one trip? Unless—Oh, Clinton, do you think there's something wrong at home?"

Clinton felt a little shaky as he pressed the travel button and the countryside faded out around him.

About the Author

Pendred Noyce is a doctor, advocate for science education, and author of fourteen previous books for young people, mostly about science.



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