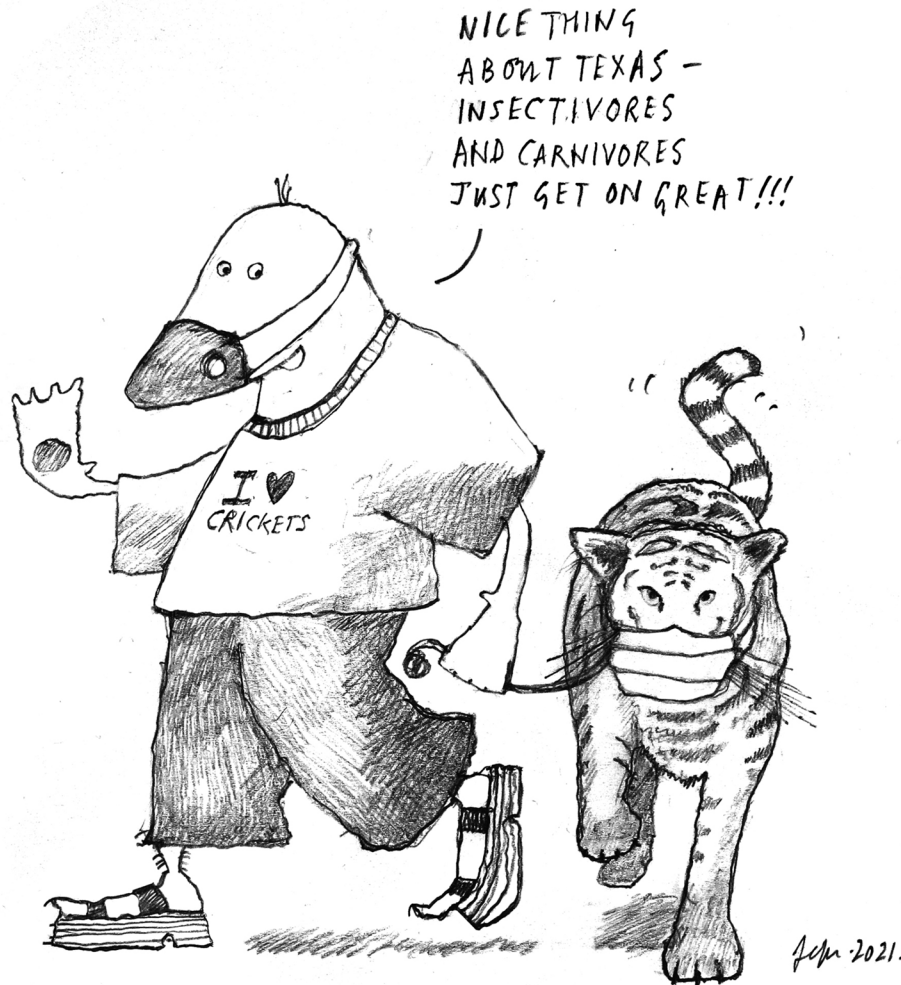


## STICKY WICKET

## Corona XXXVIII – breaking news

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs – [www.peterjeffsart.com](http://www.peterjeffsart.com)

Hey there, you in the future. Not your future, *my* future. There is so much happening right now, but by the time you read this, it will not be happening right now. My breaking news is your ‘that old thing.’ It’s one of the problems with time travel. Not the biggest problem – that seems to be what happens when we go back in time and kill our own grandfather. Which I would never do, and you shouldn’t either. You can’t even step on a butterfly. That happened in Ray Bradbury’s story, *A Sound of Thunder*, in which a hunter named Eckles pays to go back to the late Cretaceous to kill a T. rex (who would have died a few minutes later and thus would not affect the time line, a precaution that Time Safari, Inc. arranged). But when he sees the beast, he loses his nerve, and runs off the proscribed path. Upon returning to the present, he finds that things are changed – words are spelled and pronounced oddly, and an evil, populist regime, outed in his previous experience, is now in power. Upon

inspection, he finds a crushed butterfly in the mud of his boots. This story, as interpreted by the people who developed chaos theory, gave us the term, ‘the butterfly effect.’ Hmmmm. I wonder if a time traveler in 2016 crushed a butterfly in the distant past. That would explain a lot.

But me talking about the breaking news, today, shouldn’t have too much impact on your time-line. At least, I don’t think so. (Do let me know if anything changes; xylophone is still a popular coffee flavor, yes?).

The big breaking news I’m talking about is, of course, the successful capture of India, the tiger, who is now safe and sound in Houston. Remember India? In the state of Texas, one can legally own a tiger, it seems, and this young tiger, nine months old and weighing one hundred and seventy-five pounds, had been spotted walking around a neighborhood and was staring at a rather panicked

caller. Now look, I have absolutely nothing against tigers, and indeed, I am very fond of my dear friend, Professor Tiger (she of the very sharp teeth). And I once was able to play with three baby tigers who were absolutely adorable. But really, you should not keep a tiger in your house. Anyway, we're all very happy that India is safe and healthy, and is no longer being kept as a pet.

I don't really expect that anyone is talking about India (the tiger; ITT) anymore where you are, in the future. But the news of India (ITT) so captivated us yesterday, that we almost missed the announcement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear a mask or socially distance, indoors or out. Wait, what? Did I get that right? I was looking at pictures of India in his really cute collar.

Without the story of ITT, this announcement would have led to massive confusion, especially since I *still* have to wear a mask to go into any commercial establishment or at my place of work. And lots of people would be very concerned that taking off their masks would put a huge number of people at risk, and besides, we *know* that many unvaccinated people are going to say that they've been vaccinated and therefore can do anything they want to. Of course they will. But fortunately, I don't think anyone was listening to the announcement. Because, well, ITT.

Okay, I'm being a bit sarcastic. We, here in your past, are all talking about the mask thing, and there is indeed a lot of confusion. So let's talk about it. First, if you are not vaccinated, your risk of getting the virus remains extremely high – and will remain very high until you do. And many people with immune deficiencies will remain at risk even if they are vaccinated and must continue to take all precautions. But it is now clear that the protection afforded by the vaccine renders the risk of infection so low, and the risk of transmission if infected even lower, that we may actually be able to slowly return to a semblance of normalcy. I suspect that this will be one of those 'new normals' in which we will continue to carry masks and will be conscious of our surroundings for some time to come. This 'new normal' thing was first said by the tech investor, Roger McNamee in 2003. He said that "the new normal is a time of substantial possibilities if you are willing to play by the new rules for the long term."

There is no doubt that the Terrible Pandemic (TP) has been a new normal for the past year. But I also have no doubt that the second part, the idea of substantial possibilities, has both a light and a dark side. Yes, we have learned a lot, and indeed, some of the possibilities coming out of this are very positive. As one of my colleagues, Professor Mouse, said today, "COVID slowed us all down so that we could take a hard look at where we are and think about how we can do something about what we don't like." But I am very afraid that there are some people in power who see this as an opportunity to wreak havoc while the world is distracted. And some of this is looking very bad. We are seeing the consequences of bad conduct around the world, and I think a lot of it is a consequence of terrible people seeing 'substantial possibilities.'

If it is really true that we are getting out of this (and for some countries, it is going to take a lot more help to make this a reality), it is tempting to forget the past year and move ahead. Rip off your mask, go to a party, go to the movies! Get on a plane, have a nice meal in a restaurant, organize a conference, have a festival! And no more virtual meetings! Of course, we can't wait.

But it may be good to stop and think about what we've learned, and not to forget those lessons. In the past year we have called out inequality and injustice, we have forged a public awareness of the value of science, and we have found new ways to interact around the world. We have gained a visceral understanding of the threat of pandemic disease. But we have also learned the very real dangers of lies and misinformation, dangers that continue to exist. We have stoked distrust and started conflicts and wars. We have inflamed hatred and bigotry that must continue to be called out for what it is. There are huge parts of the world population who are continuing to fight this TP and will have to fight for many more months (I hope it is only months). And we have lost so very many people.

So, breaking news. We are not out of this yet. We may never, really, be out of this. Stay vigilant. Be alert. You may be out of danger of infection by this TP (I very much hope you are, and if not, I hope you will be soon), but there is so much work to be done. This isn't just a new normal. I hope this is a new reality. Let's get to work. Welcome to today, whenever that is.