

The Cure Conspiracy
By Huckleberry Huber-Rees

It was March 6, a warm, sunny, cloudless day, though it quickly turned to a disconsolate one, when the hundredth patient ever to be treated for Covid-19 in the United States entered the ICU ward at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City.

“This is a very important moment, you know,” said Doctor Strickland, the chief respiratory doctor at the hospital.

“I know sir,” said Jason Rilken, his assistant.

“We have no guidelines, no rules, no leadership from the White House,” said Doctor Strickland, his eyes narrowing.

Doctor Strickland was a short, round man, who always wore suspenders, was nice to everyone, and was regularly in a good mood. Jason could tell this virus was serious, because the Doctor wasn't in a good mood today.

“I fear that if things stay the same, the whole country could take a very dark turn,” he said.

“I know sir,” said Jason. Jason had just gotten out of medical school at the time, and was super excited to try to tackle this challenge. He was tall, about 6'4", with brown hair and round glasses.

Jason awoke the next morning to some bad news. Doctor Strickland had contracted Covid-19 from the hundredth patient. By the time Jason got to the hospital, the doctor's condition had grown worse. He had to be intubated and put on a ventilator, and he was deteriorating fast. Jason was devastated. Doctor Strickland had been his mentor, his teacher, his friend. “Please take care of him,” Jason said. He had an asthma patient to see, so he had to leave.

Jason himself had severe asthma as a kid, and was fascinated by it. His curiosity led him to want to become a respiratory doctor. After his appointment was over, he finally had ten minutes to grab lunch. As he was eating a burrito bowl, his phone rang. His ice cream truck ringtone rang and rang. He picked up the phone. He had a feeling he knew what this was about. His stomach tightened, swirling like a whirlpool in the middle of the ocean.

“Doctor Strickland has died,” the doctor treating him said. “I'm sorry.”

Taking charge. Jason hated it. As a kid he took charge of the event planning committee at his school. He planned a great ice cream social outside, with ten different flavors of ice cream, games, everything you could want! He got the ice cream at the store and brought it to school to put in the freezer the day before the social. The principal had given him specific instructions for what to do with the ice cream when he got it: “Put it in the freezer and flip the switch on the side of it to turn it on,” he said. But Jason was so excited he forgot to turn the freezer on.

The next day- the day of the social, he didn't notice the ice cream had melted, and started to carry the containers outside for the party. He walked outside carrying it all, super excited and happy. This was going to be such a great time! He was so excited that he also didn't notice the root in front of him while he was walking, and he tripped. Right there, for everyone to see. The lids of the ice

cream containers came off and he fell into them. All the melted ice cream covered him. He was humiliated. He felt so bad about letting everyone down. After that he changed schools, and never really tried to take charge again.

Now, since he was the assistant to the late Doctor Strickland, he was in charge of the Covid-19 ward in the hospital, amidst a global pandemic. He felt that he didn't have enough experience to do this. But this was nothing compared to what would happen next.

A week later he got a call from the President. "I want you to be a part of my Covid-19 task force," he said.

"Well sir, I'm honored, but I don't think I'm the most qualified for the job," Jason said.

"I do," said the President.

"B-but," Jason stammered. "I expect you to be in D.C. by tomorrow. A plane and car have been prepared for you," the president said.

"Y-yes sir." Then he hung up.

That afternoon, he boarded the plane to Washington. Jason arrived in D.C. and met the rest of the task force. He thought that the people would be professional viral experts, but really they were economists, oil company executives, and union heads. Jason was flummoxed. It seemed like the President cared more about the economy than the virus. He then realized how conflicted everyone was. No one was working together, everyone was arguing, and cases and deaths were growing fast. He knew he needed to talk to the President about it, but he didn't feel like he had the authority to. If the President got mad and fired him, he would just get replaced by a new car company executive, and that's the opposite of what the country needed.

Jason went to Doctor Strickland's funeral that day. He grew up in D.C., so the funeral was held there. It was at that moment in the motorcade when things really came into perspective about the pandemic. He had been mean to his staff, his friends, and his family. He really understood what it felt like to have lost someone to this virus, and realized that a lot of people had been affected by the pandemic, not just him. That gave him a lot of motivation. He realized how selfish he had been. But that realization also brought the cognizance that a lot more people could be affected by the pandemic if he didn't do something fast. At the funeral, Jason spoke about how much the doctor had meant to him, about their friendship and how he taught Jason to not only be a good doctor, but a good person. He realized he had forgotten that.

Jason drove to a lab in western D.C. and met with the scientists about potentially finding a vaccine.

"We are way behind," said Albert Guzman, the head scientist at the lab. "Have you found anything that might work?"

"No. We are currently attempting to experiment with antibodies, but so far, we haven't been able to do much, since our funding from the World Health Organization is limited," Albert said.

"I see," said Jason. Then his pager went off.

"The president requests your presents in the Oval Office," he read on the screen of the pager.

“Presents?” said Jason. Then he realized the President probably meant presence, and spelled it wrong. He bid adieu to the scientists again and left for the White House. He walked through the halls of the big building everyone with a worried look on their face. ‘I wonder what’s going on?’ he thought. He moved towards the Oval Office, and when he got there the entire Covid-19 task force was there already.

“I have decided to cut the funding for the WHO,” said the President. Everyone was silent for a solid thirty seconds.

It was Jason that broke the silence. “But why, sir?” he asked.

“I have decided to stop giving those no help LOSERS money,” the President replied.

“Sir, they’re the best professionals in the world. I don’t think they’re losers.” said Jason.

“Well, you’re not the president are you?” said the President, his face reddening like a lobster.

“No sir,” Jason said. “NEVER question my authority again,” said the President, slamming his fist on the table.

“I won’t sir,” said Jason.

“Alright, then,” said the President.

Jason walked out of the Oval Office faster than a dog chasing a squirrel. He was mad. Really mad. He drove to all seven labs in Washington D.C. funded by the WHO. Only three of the ten labs in D.C. weren’t funded by it. Tears welled in his eyes as he drove. For all seven labs he visited, he always got the same response upon giving them the news. An eerie silence. So much tension in the air you could cut with a knife.

WHAT? How could he do that? they all said. He knew the same feelings would be shared at all the other labs around the country, as they would be notified soon too. Jason felt like he had let everyone down, just like how he had let everyone at the ice cream social down when he was a kid. He couldn’t convince the President. Each time he would say to the scientists, “I’m so, so, sorry.”

Jason was so overwhelmed by everything. He knew keeping the country safe was in his hands now, and he was prepared to do his job. Then the next morning the President said something unbelievable. He suggested that you might be able to cure the Coronavirus by injecting hand sanitizer into your arm. Jason had to read it over again. He was not looking forward to meeting with Purell executives for the rest of the day. The next morning Jason went to a little café called Capital Coffee and thought things over.

Jason had been at the White House for three months. Case numbers and deaths were still going up and he wasn’t getting anywhere. He saw states fighting over ventilators, PPE, everything. Then he thought about what Doctor Strickland had told him the day he died. He had said, “ We have no guidelines, no rules, no leadership from the White House. I fear that if things stay the same way, the whole country could take a very dark turn.”

Then he realized what he had to do. He had to be a leader. He had to be a source of inspiration. He had to stand up to the President. At that moment, Jason got a notification on his phone. He couldn’t believe it. It read: Case number hits one hundred fifty thousand in the United states.

He ran out of the coffee shop and drove to the White House. As soon as he got there, he ran to the Oval Office and spoke to the President.

“Sir, I need more actual viral experts on the task force. The country is in crisis!”

“The economy is what's important,” said the President.

“Sir, I beg to differ!” said Jason. “Sir, I feel like you're not taking this pandemic seriously enough. People are dying every day. I'm trying to tell them to stay six feet apart, wear masks, and not have any physical contact with others, and you are going on rants about how, *“You can't be a politician and not shake hands.”*”

“People come out—when I leave, I'll be shaking hands with people. They want to shake your hand. They want to say hello. They want to hug you. They want to kiss you.”

“I ask you, Mr. President, how are people going to listen to me with you contradicting everything I say!”

“Get OUT of my office, the president said.

“No Jed, I am tired of just letting you push me around!” yelled Jason.

No one ever called the president by name. Fifteen seconds of solid silence.

“Jed Bartlet, your handling of this pandemic has been disgusting. Your entire oversight has been saddening and pathetic. As a scientist, and I'm speaking for scientists everywhere when I say this, your constant disbelief in science has been offending and heartbreaking. The reason you are disbelieving is because it proves that you are wrong about things frequently, and that is the number one thing that you are afraid of in life.”

“Lies. All lies,” the President said.

“I believe that the death of 64,000 people is on your hands.” Jason said. With that, he exited the Oval Office.

Jason didn't even stay at the White House. He just wanted to go home. He drove to his D.C. apartment and watched the President talk to reporters in the Rose Garden on TV. He knew that the President was going to talk about him, and he was right. The reporters showed the clip of what the President had said about him.

“People are tired of hearing Rilkens and all these idiots. Every time he goes on television, there's always a bomb. But there's a bigger bomb if you fire him. But Rilkens is a disaster.”

Jason sighed, turned off the TV, put his shoes on, and walked to the Washington Monument. When he got there, he walked around the park. Then people spotted him and began clapping. About twenty people started clapping for him and yelling his name. It was just what he needed. Motivation. Confidence. He remembered Dr. Strickland and deep down knew that he would keep fighting and never give up.

Then Jason got a different idea. Instead of going to the White House, he would go to the official White House lab. When he arrived he noticed something suspicious. No one was doing any work. He asked the head scientist about this, and the man immediately got defensive and said that the people there were working incredibly hard, and that Jason just wasn't paying any attention. He apologized and left, but he was still skeptical.

There were records about the experiments that the scientists had been doing and the progress they had made, so Jason checked these. He was shocked at what he found. They hadn't done or found anything! This was the official White House lab! These scientists had everything possible at their disposal- money, the top equipment in the world, and lots of people, so Jason got extra suspicious.

The next day it was reported by the Center for Disease Control that the case numbers in the U.S were above 150,000. Jason visited more labs that day and noticed that all of them hadn't found anything either. He was really confused. How had nobody learned or discovered anything? He checked and not ONE lab in the entire U.S. had found anything. He checked the records for the whole U.S. and saw that a lot of the labs reports had been blacked out. He was very confused. Why were they blacked out? Who blacked them out?

He asked the President if he knew anything about this, and he said 'no' and that he wasn't really worried. Jason could not understand this. How could the President not be worried? Scientists' research about a vaccine was being suppressed in the middle of a pandemic! Jason was really worried about it. He was going to try to ask the scientists about it, but then the President reported that he had Covid-19, so he had to stay at the White House for the entire day because he had to talk to the press about it.

He also saw that the President had his head speech writer construct a speech about how good he was doing, and how the virus was only mildly affecting him. Jason knew just by looking at the President that it was actually severe. The President was airlifted to Walter E. Reid Memorial Hospital that night.

Two days later though, the President tweeted that he was being released that night, saying, "I will be leaving the great Walter Reed Medical Center today at 6:30 P.M. Feeling really good! Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life. We have developed, under the Bartlet Administration, some really great drugs & knowledge. I feel better than I did 20 years ago!"

Jason was disgusted by it. He saw that tweet as an insult to anyone who had died or knew someone that died from the virus, or anyone who had been affected by it. That day, he got an email. When Jason first read it, his jaw dropped and he almost passed out.

The email was from Doctor Strickland. It read:

"I have not died. Never did. We found a vaccine for this virus in late January. I have been friends with the President for thirty years. When we found the vaccine, we realized that with the election only a year away, we could unveil the vaccine right before the election and make him look really good and fuel his reelection. I informed him of you being my assistant and you being inexperienced, and we hatched a plan.

The plan was that I would fake my death, and you as my assistant would take control of the hospital, and then be selected for the task force. You're probably wondering if we had a vaccine, then why did the president get COVID? Well, we knew you would get suspicious of what we were doing at some point and it would be extra suspicious if the President didn't get COVID-19, what with him not wearing a mask and not social distancing.

I'm sorry. I know I betrayed you. I know the blood of so many people is on my hands. The President doesn't know that you have gotten this email, but I thought you should know the truth.

The email ended there. Tears streamed down Jason's face and he broke down. He knew it. He knew something fishy was going on. He never expected something like this to happen though. He got into his car and sped to the White House. He ran up the marble steps and into the Oval Office. He spotted the President reading a magazine.

"YOU!" he shouted, and swung his fist into the President's jaw. His fists thrashed on the President's face like waves hitting the shore, the President's nose snapping like a twig, The Secret Service surrounded him, pushed him through a glass door and drew their guns. "Stand down!" they said.

"You MURDERER!" Jason yelled at the President. The Secret Service arrested him for threatening the President, and the Supreme Court sentenced him to ten years in federal prison without parole.

"Reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one's ability to persuade."

-Ruth Bader Ginsburg