

OOPS!



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Dispatches
from Canada

That one person who brings a cough to every gathering

BY STELLA RIUNGA ROP

He is a ubiquitous presence at any social place. He is found in banking halls, places of worship, weddings, burials, courts of law ... the list goes on and on.

His presence isn't immediately obvious until, half an hour into the wedding/sermon or whatever, a gut-wrenching cough fills the place.

This cough is not the kind that can be discreetly covered up with a handkerchief, no. It cannot be quieted with a few sips of water. This is the kind of cough that has been resting at the bottom of the lungs, waiting to be summoned and dredged up like some sort of hibernating demon. It's the kind of cough that tells you "Before the mists of time I was, and I have seen things and gone places no

human eye has perceived." (If you are a fan of *The Lord of the Rings*, like I am, think of the Dead Marshes, en route to Mordor.)

In the times of COVID, and more recently, Ebola, this was the kind of cough that sent people running for cover, inviting silent curses and evil glares. The question is "Why did you come here when you're coughing like that?"

You see, the owner of this cough—The Patient—as we shall henceforth refer to him, is not one to be deterred by something as trivial as a hacking cough. He has been carrying it around long enough that it has become part of him. He is to be commended for

his composure during and after each cough episode, in the way that he shifts back to normal as if nothing has happened, as if his unfortunate neighbours are not sending silent petitions to the heavens for protection from whatever plague he is carrying.

In fact, he has learnt how to use this cough as a sort of punctuation, a pause before he speaks and a clever way of drowning out annoying and opposing voices in heated discussions. What you need to know is that you have nothing to fear, it is not the cough that is infectious, but the fear that it causes!

Please, stay home if you are sick!