

Futures

Press play

Suspended for safety. **By Marissa Lingen**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Of course no feeling person wants their child to grow up in the middle of a war.

Generations before mine attempted to solve this problem by preventing war. We all see how well they succeeded at *that*. My generation instead took the ingenious solution of pausing the children.

Not all of them, of course; we didn't have the resources. Only perhaps a third of the children were frozen in the first months of the war, their parents weeping but resolute. They had to be three months old before it was safe, but there were tiny pods for the three-month-olds, full-size pods for lanky eighteen-year-olds, everything in between. We kissed our children goodnight and put their lives, their childhoods on hold. And then turned to face life in wartime without them.

A few of us cracked under the strain, missing the sticky toddler kisses and the late-night adolescent talks. But the pressure to keep them safe was intense. Most of us cried in the

shower, squared our shoulders, persevered.

Got showy volunteer jobs. Planted victory gardens. Supported our troops.

Our troops, of course, didn't have the money for pause. They sent their kids to their parents when they were deployed. They worked double shifts and managed the best they could. *Their* kids saw the casualty count, read the news reports on their feeds, grew up surrounded by adults keeping their heads down and doing the best they could, and losing friends.

The war lasted longer than we expected. They always do. Dragging on is what wars do. But finally, with much fanfare, we signed treaties, sang songs, kissed each other and 'pressed play' on our children.

They emerged sleepy, not just in the moment of awakening, but for days, weeks. Establishing new routines is hard for all of us – one of the things, I found, that had made raising a five-year-old easier, was that I had been used to raising a four-year-old and just kept on, day by day. Which sounds obvious until you're

not doing it. Until there's a gap of 16 years, and suddenly you're once again living with someone who's learning to tie her shoe laces.

And that was nothing compared with the disconnect people had when they'd got divorced and lived peaceful, separate lives ... until it was time to press play on the kids and share custody again.

At five, we'd got my daughter to the point where she understood what a joke was, and even laughed at a lot of ours. After we pressed play, we realized how many new words we'd picked up, or how the meaning of words we'd already taught her had shifted. The war words were the worst – 'jacket' and 'projection', coming out of our little girl's mouth like they were nothing.

She wanted a banana. So we gave her one, and only afterwards did we remember that Cavendish bananas had gone extinct while she was paused. We were so used to the red ones. She was five years old, and bananas were supposed to be yellow.

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The best universities – awkwardly mothballed for the war, but universities were often underfunded in wartime anyway – creaked back to life. They soon learnt that they needed an additional year for most degrees – not to teach remedial versions of their subjects. After the sleepiness wore off, the paused children had as much recall as after a holiday, if not more so. But almost everyone needed a crash course in contemporary history – and also in how washing clothes worked now, what advances had been made in buying transit passes, who had ruled their country and how.

Their rebellions were incomprehensible to us, and our reactions were incomprehensible to them. They took so many risks we couldn't even imagine. We couldn't hold them close enough to stop them.

And then the first waves of paused children were adults. Fully fledged adults. Adults with

jobs and partners and, eventually, children. Adults who could vote.

Adults who could vote us into another war.

Of course, the members of that generation who had never been frozen remembered. But the poor overriding the rich when they've set their minds on war ... again, check history on how well that goes.

They didn't know what war would be like. They'd never lived through one. We were all nervous nellys, *their* war would be over in months.

They were fearless, and we were too exhausted to stop them.

Every generation has to learn for itself, but mostly they learn in parallel, each one on the next rung of the same ladder. But when I looked into my daughter's eyes as she explained why we needed, no, really needed, to be the aggressor in yet another war, I felt that we were not

even climbing in the same direction.

But by then it was too late.

We went back to wartime footing – even among the privileged, the casualty counts, the austerity measures, the patriotic ads on transit, the patriotism plots in every entertainment. And I, like so many others, couldn't take it. Not again.

I'm all right climbing into my chamber to be paused. My daughter smiles down on me and kisses my forehead. She wants me to be safe – and no feeling person wants their elderly parents to have to live through a war. It'll be better this way.

I wish I believed that she'll ever press play again.

Marissa Lingen has published more than 100 short stories in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed* and *Tor.com*.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Marissa Lingen reveals the inspiration behind *Press play*

This is a pandemic story.

Come on, you know it, I know it, it was not like I was subtle. It's not like the stuff I've published that is 'strangely topical', I wrote this in the middle of the pandemic, which, unless the schedule at *Nature* slips considerably, will still be going on here in the United States whenever this piece is published.

But also... as a species, this is not our first disaster. One of my mother's friends asked her if she thought it was the End Times, and she wearily pointed out how many times humans have thought that. (All the times. The answer is, humans have thought that basically ALL the times.) We've had all kinds of stress for people to respond to as people respond under stress.

It is really, genuinely hard to raise little kids during a pandemic. Or a war. Or any kind of upheaval. Hats off to those who are doing it now.

