

Mitch Album



human
touch

a story in real time

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Mitch Albom

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Chapter Three

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The Series

“Human Touch” is a new serialized story of hope during the coronavirus pandemic, set in the moment we are all living through together. It is being written by Mitch Albom in the present, one week at a time.

A new “chapter” is released every Friday at www.humantouch-story.com. An audio version is available at Audible.com.

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Illustrations by Marina Van Mechelen.



Week Seven

Little Moses is walking in the clouds. Up ahead, he sees children playing. He tries to run their way, but the clouds are too soft. If he pushes his feet down, he bounces up. Like that time his Mama took him to the trampoline place and he kept falling over.

“Little Moses,” he hears a voice say.

He turns to see a thin Haitian man with a short beard. His forehead has many lines and his eyes seemed weighted down by the baggy skin beneath them.

“Can I play with the other kids?” Moses asks.

“*Poco*,” the man says. Not yet. He is speaking the language they speak in Haiti, Creole, which Moses remembers but doesn’t hear much anymore, unless his Mama uses it. “*Premiermant, fauk-ou feh yon bagay*.” First you must do something.

“*Kisa?*” Little Moses says. What?

The man is suddenly behind him and touching his head, turning it so Little Moses can see a long line of people walking his way. Then behind them another line. Then another, and another. He and the man are lifting into the air and looking down on more people than Little Moses has ever seen in his life. He feels the man’s hand sliding down his cheek, then he feels the man’s finger in his mouth, rubbing against his teeth and gums.

“Oooh!” Moses yells.

His eyes open.

He is in bed.

His Mama is sitting next to him.

“Bon jou, bel ti gason mwehyan,” Rosebaby says. Hello, my beautiful boy.

Little Moses blinks. She removes his hand from his mouth.

“You are too old for sucking your thumb.”

Little Moses smiles. He always smiles when he sees his Mama in the morning.

“Do I have school today?” he asks.

“There is no more school,” she says.

“Why?”

“The sickness. School is finished for now.”

She pulls the covers away and tugs on Little Moses’ red pajama tops.

“Anyhow,” she says, “It is Saturday. Get dressed and I will make you breakfast.”



“**OK, GREAT,**” Aimee says into the phone, “see you in half an hour.”

She hangs up.

“Saturday lives on,” she tells Greg. “Everyone’s in.”

“I’m gonna shave,” Greg says, rising.

“I gotta find my gym shoes,” Aimee says.

Because of the virus, the state of Michigan is no longer permitting large gatherings indoors. Which means the corner’s weekly get-togethers, with seventeen participants from four families, are technically against the law. But walking outside is still allowed, provided everyone practices “social distancing.” So Aimee has organized a walk.

“Ava! Mia!” Aimee yells. “Come downstairs!”

Ava clomps into the kitchen.

“What?” she says.

“Get dressed. We’re taking a group hike.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“The families are getting together, like usual, but we’ll walk instead of eat.”

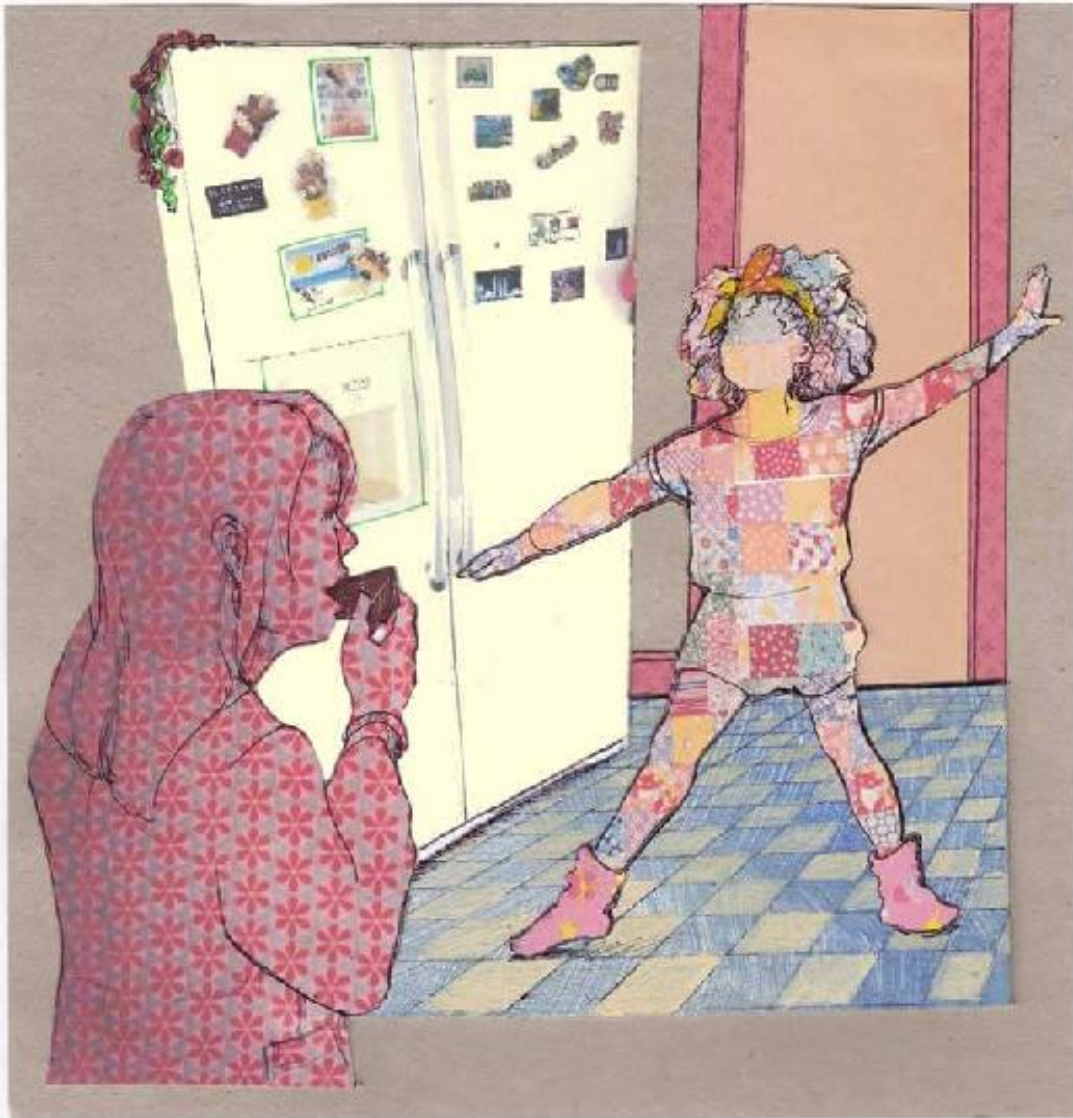
“Eating is the best part.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Are the other kids coming?”

“As far as I know. You just have to keep six feet apart, understand?”

Ava grunts. She opens the refrigerator and removes half a brownie. She thinks back to kissing Troy at the cider mill. She feels a rush of guilt. Troy texted her yesterday to say he was sick. When she asked “How sick?” he wrote, “I feel like crap.” Of course, she has no plans to tell her parents. They wouldn’t know what to be mad at first.



“Maybe we shouldn’t do this,” Ava says.

“We have to keep our traditions going,’ Aimee says, wiping down the counter. “Otherwise, the virus wins.”

“*The virus wins*. You sound like a TV show.”

“Do I?”

“Fine. I’ll go. If I get sick, it’s your fault.”

“Ava. Honestly. A little less attitude, OK?”

Mia slides across the floor in her pink socks, her hair a wild mess of curls. She sees the brownie in Ava’s hands.

“Can I have a bite?” she asks.

Ava thinks about germs. What if she’s carrying this virus and infects her sister?

“Sorry,” Ava answers.

“Mom!” Mia says.

“Ava,” Aimee says.

Ava jams the remaining brownie into her mouth and chews quickly.

“What is *wrong* with you today?” Aimee says.

Ava shrugs.

“You’re *mean*,” Mia snaps.

OLD MAN RICKETTS RUNS a hand through his thinning hair. He has been reading the same newspaper story for the last 10 minutes. It says that two people in the county jail have tested positive for the virus. They were removed from the population and put in isolation, but given the proximity of the cells, the fear is it could soon be widespread.

“*Goddamn it*,” he mumbles to himself. He raps a fist on the table top. “I *told* them.”

He carries his coffee cup to the sink. This house is where he, Charlene and their grandsons live. It’s attached to the rear of the cider mill. It was ample space when Charlene and Ricketts were alone. But three years ago, when Buck and Daniel moved in after

their mother's death, it became quite cramped. They had to share a single shower and jam around the kitchen table. Ricketts suggested they move, but Charlene said it was only for a few years, until the boys were grown, and anyhow, she loved this house.

"We'll manage," she said.

Ricketts looks at his watch. In half an hour, they're supposed to take a walk with everyone from the corner. Charlene is in the upstairs bedroom, changing. Daniel is in his room playing video games.

Ricketts hears the roll of car tires on the driveway. He peeks out the window. He inhales deeply and steps outside. A police car. He's been expecting it. The driver's door opens and a portly officer in a blue overcoat steps out.

"Jimmy," Ricketts says.

"Mr. Ricketts," Jimmy answers.

The rear door opens and Buck emerges. He's wearing the clothes he had on when he took the snowmobile last week.

"Hey, Pops," he says.

Ricketts nods at his grandson. "You all right? Not hurt? Nothing like that?"

"I'm OK," Buck says.

"Good," Ricketts says.



Buck and Officer Jimmy start up the path, but Ricketts holds up his palm.

“Stop,” he says.

Officer Jimmy tilts his head, curious.

“He can’t come in here, Jimmy,” Ricketts says. “I’m sorry, Buck.”

“Mr. Ricketts—”

“I read about the jail. I goddamn told you that would happen. You put them in like cattle, they’re gonna spread disease like cattle. Now there’s a good chance he’s carrying the goddamn bug, and Charlene’s got asthma. And she’s 78. It could kill her.”

“What?”...Buck stammers. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I’ll make arrangements at the Kingswood. You stay there until we know you ain’t got it.”

“The motel? Pops! Come on!”

“Mr. Ricketts, he’s just a minor—”

“Don’t give me that crap, Jimmy. If he’s just a minor, why’d you run him in like a goddamn dangerous criminal? A goddamn joy ride, that’s all it was. He didn’t break anything. It’s Moritz and his stuck-up wife. They think they’re teaching him a lesson.”

“Mr. Ricketts, it was Buck’s third offense—”

“Jimmy. Listen to me. I meant what I said. He can’t come in.”

All three stand in place for a moment. A car drives by the cider mill and slows to read the “New Hours” sign. They wait until it passes.

“You want I should run him by the Kingswood then?” Jimmy finally says.

“I’d appreciate it,” Ricketts says.

Bucks face collapses.

“Really? I just got out of *jail*, Grandpa!”

“Buck, I’m sorry, but—”

“Thanks a lot! Thanks a whole freaking lot!”

He bolts up the street, his arms flailing as if swimming through the air.

“Hey!” Officer Jimmy yells.

“Let him go,” Ricketts says, fighting his emotions. “Give him a few minutes. Then, ah...then catch up to him and take him to the motel. Can you do that for me, Jimmy?”

“Yeah, Mr. Ricketts. I got it.”

Ricketts looks off to the woods. His heart is racing.

“GODDAMN IT!” he yells.

CINDY CHECKS her phone. Ten minutes until the walk. She takes off her plastic gloves and washes her hands for the fourth time this hour, using liquid soap by the kitchen sink. Rosebaby has already laundered all the clothes they wore yesterday, as well as every towel and sheet that Sam has used this past week.

Cindy dials Sam's cell. This is how they communicate. She has not gone in their bedroom since Sam told her he had the virus. She instructed him to put on gloves and grab her a week's worth of clothes, then leave them outside in the hallway. Rosebaby washed all of them for good measure, using gloves herself. Cindy has been living in the guestroom ever since.

"Yeah?" Sam croaks, answering the phone.

"Aimee invited us for a walk," Cindy says.

"A walk?"

"We're not allowed to get together anymore. Not inside."

"Oh. Right."

"Should I go?"

"Just don't say anything."

"I know," Cindy says. "But you'll be all alone here."

He coughs hard. It sounds painful.

"Doesn't matter," he wheezes.

"Sam—"

"Just go. Take the walk. It'll—"

He stops to cough again.

"Uch," he says.

"What?" Cindy says.

"Take the walk. Just tell them I'm working."

"Sam. It's been eight days. If I ask Greg to get you—"

“Do NOT ask Greg anything! Jesus, Cindy. I’m sick. Can’t you just do what I want and not give me a hard time?”

“OK, OK.” Her voice softens. “I’m sorry.”

She thinks about how long it’s been since she touched her husband. Eight days. Eight days without a kiss goodnight, without a hand on his cheek, without leaning into him as they watched TV, without intimacy in bed, without a bed at all. Cindy feels like a visitor in her own home.

She wipes her eyes with a tissue and throws it away, then instinctively washes her hands again.

“Rosebaby? Little Moses?” she calls. “Are you ready?”

Rosebaby appears in the kitchen, wearing her coat and hat, a scarf around her mouth. She is holding Little Moses’s gloved hand.

“We are going walking!” Little Moses announces.

“How is Sam today?” Rosebaby asks.

“He’s good, I think.”

Rosebaby’s eyes narrow.

“Honestly, I don’t know how he is,” Cindy says. “It’s eight days now.”

“I’m sorry,” Rosebaby says.

Cindy gathers herself. “But...We’re not saying anything to anyone, understood?”

“All right, Miss,” Rosebaby says.

“All right, Miss,” Little Moses says.

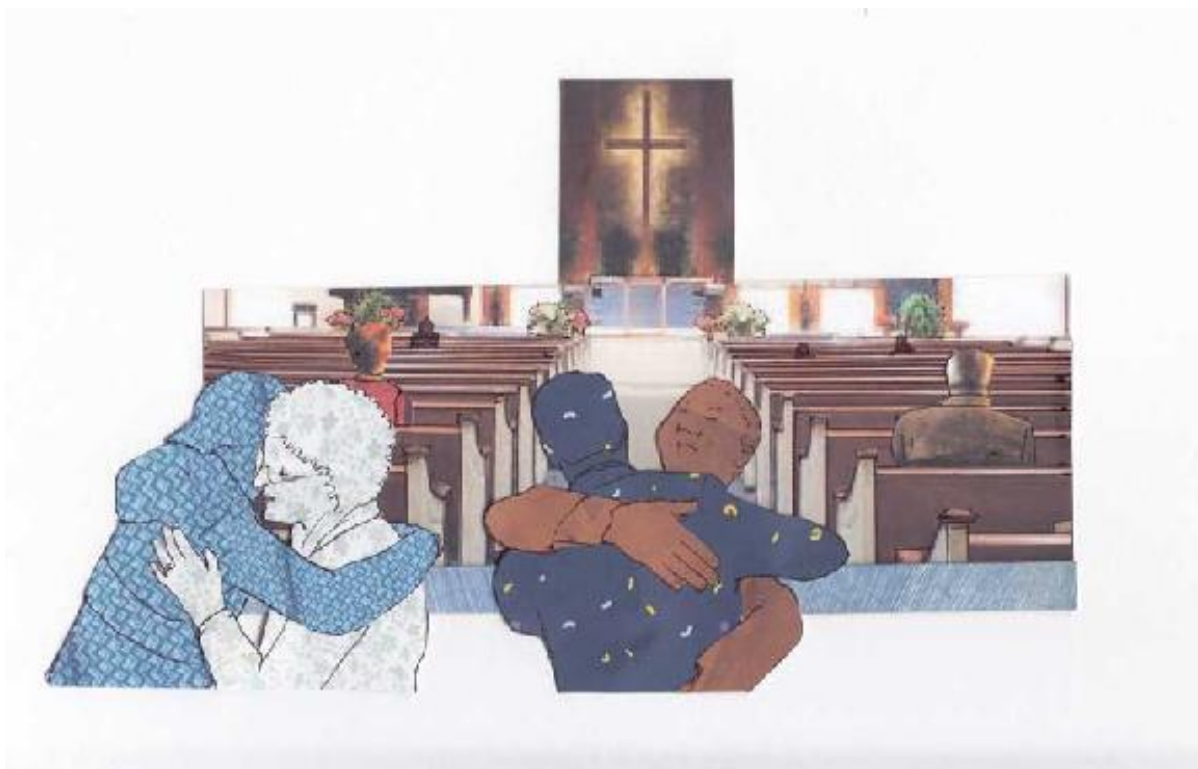
Cindy opens the front door. Across the street, she sees Aimee, Greg and their daughters on their corner. Diagonally across, she sees Old Man Ricketts, Charlene and Daniel – no Buck – approaching the curb. And coming off the lawn of their two-story colonial is

Pastor Winston, Lilly, and their three kids, with the twin girls holding hands.

Cindy, Rosebaby and Little Moses walk to the intersection. They wave at everyone, the grey asphalt squaring them off.

North, south, east and west. Together, yet totally apart.

“Let’s go this way,” Aimee announces.



SUNDAY. Pastor Winston inserts a piece of scrap paper into his Bible. He has chosen the passage of Jesus and the leper for today’s sermon. The story of a healing touch will resonate in these times, he believes. He is searching for optimism. Earlier, he had scoured the Sunday newspaper, as he often does, but he couldn’t get past the death numbers from the virus, which were now nearly

100,000 worldwide. In America, half a million people were infected, and more than 25,000 had already died. Many were old, but some were not. Some were young and healthy and were still gone in a matter of days.

When Winston read that, he felt a shiver. Was he wrong to be conducting services? It was already against the law. Churches were supposed to be closed. But his faith has convinced him this is not the time to turn away from the Lord. It is time to turn towards Him.

He puts the Bible on a chair and stares up at the cross.

“In your name,” he whispers.

Soon the church bells are ringing. Normally, before Sunday service, Winston will greet the congregants as they enter, shaking hands, thanking them for coming. But today he waits on the pulpit and allows Lilly to give instructions about where to sit, encouraging people to keep a safe distance. It is not difficult. Only thirty-four congregants came last week, and this week it appears to be fewer than that. When his watch reads 9:30 a.m., Winston steps to the lectern. He smiles and does a quick count. Twenty people? Maybe?

“Good morning,” he begins. “The grace of the Lord be with you.”

“And with you,” the small crowd answers.

An hour later, as the service is concluding, and the congregation has sung “Rejoice, Ye Pure of Heart”, Pastor Winston encourages his flock one last time not to lose faith.

“When does the Lord need to hear from us if not now?” he says. “When does the Lord need our belief if not now? Hard times are when we are tested, but being tested is how God sees our bond is true.”

He watches a few heads nod. He clears his throat. “Now, before we disperse, is there anyone we as a congregation can pray for today? Anyone special we can ask God to watch over?”

A middle-aged man with a brown sportscoat and a thick mustache stands up.

“My father, George Anthony Tensiloni. He’s fighting cancer, Pastor.”

“Thank you, Stan,” Winston says. “Let us pray for George.”

A slender woman in a paisley dress stands up next.

“My niece, Laura Beth. She’s traveling home from Spain. She was stuck there when the virus hit. We’re all worried for her.”

“Let us pray for Laura Beth,” Winston says. “Anyone else?”

He sees Rosebaby rise. Little Moses is sitting next to her. *God bless those two*, Winston thinks, *they never miss a Sunday*.

“I have someone,” Rosebaby says.

“Who is it, Rosebaby?”

She pauses, lowering her eyes. “Mister Sam. We must pray for his recovery.”

A few congregants look at one another. The man with the mustache blurts out, “Sam Lee? He’s sick?”

Rosebaby casts a furtive glance, then quickly sits. Winston pauses. He had wondered why Sam wasn’t on the walk yesterday. Could he have the virus? But then he’d be in the house. *And Rosebaby and Little Moses are in that house*.

“Um, thank you, Rosebaby,” he says quickly. “We will pray for Sam and everyone in need. May the Lord be with all of—”

Before he can finish, an older congregant named Hannah Marie rises and declares, “Pastor, I know the Lord is with us. I re-

ally believe that! I am not afraid of this plague!”

She turns to the woman next to her and hugs her. That woman hesitates, then hugs her back, then turns to the man behind her and takes his hand. Others do the same. Winston wants to yell at them to stop, but the words get caught in his throat. *After all, he brought them all together.* Before he knows it, half the congregation is clasping hands and hugging.

Winston falls back in his chair. He wonders what, in the Lord’s name, he has done.

MONDAY. Greg hurries to the operating room. The hospital is a hive of medical personnel, racing from bed to bed, covered in scrubs, gowns, face masks, eye shields, hair nets, gloves and booties. An antiseptic parade of the faceless. Pale blue. Pale yellow. Everywhere he looks.

“What do we got?” he asks, entering the OR.

“Cardiac arrest. Fifty-two year-old male.”

He sees several staff members missing masks or eye shields.

“Where’s your PPE?” Greg says.

One nurse looks at another.

“It’s a cardiac arrest.”

“Look, people, we have to assume everything is the virus. Get covered. Right now.”

Greg thinks on how quickly the ER has changed. Almost everyone coming in now has the virus, or is afraid they have the virus. The hospital is telling people to stay home, even if they’re symptomatic, unless they truly cannot deal with things. Because if they

come here and don't have the virus, they're liable to leave here with it. *What a twist*, Greg thinks. *You can rush to the ER and leave sicker than when you arrived.*

His pager goes off. It's Aimee. He ignores it. The surgery begins. Sure enough, the cardiac arrest patient is a virus case as well. His breathing is unsteady, his oxygen way low. He'll need a ventilator to survive.

"I hear we've got five left," a nurse says.

"Four now," Greg says.

Later, when he gets a chance, he strips off his gloves, washes thoroughly, and calls his wife.

"Greg," she says, her voice frantic, "Mom has a fever. It's 104."

Greg feels his temples pounding.

"Where is she?"

"Downstairs. In her room. Greg—"

"How close did you get?"

"I took her temperature. I don't know. How close do you get? She wasn't sneezing. I made sure—"

"She doesn't have to be sneezing."

"I thought you have to be sneezing. Or coughing."

Greg bites his lower lip. The reports he read this morning say the disease can be spread asymptotically. Just by breathing. This means anyone, even those appearing healthy, could be infecting others.

"Aimee, you can't go back in the room. Not without masks and gloves and distance."

"Jesus, Greg, she's my mother."

“I know. I know. Just keep her hydrated. Use Tylenol for the fever. And keep the girls away from her.”

“Greg, shouldn’t I call an ambulance? Can’t you take care of her there?”

“Aimee. It’s no better here.”

He gazes around at the buzzing bodies in their pale blue outfits. He sees a doctor leaning against the wall, staring at the ceiling. The man looks utterly exhausted.

“I’ll get home as quick as I can.”

“When?”

The doors burst open and another gurney is pushed in. Nurses are yelling.

“I don’t know,” he says.

WEDNESDAY MORNING. Lilly knocks on Winston’s door.

“Yes?” she hears him say from his office.

“Winston,” she says, sliding inside.

She leans against the wall. Her face is pale.

“What is it, honey?”

“Can you come out?”

Winston closes a book.

“Why?”

She swallows.

“The police are here.”

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON. Cindy opens her front door.
“I’m going for the mail,” she yells to Rosebaby.

She walks down the driveway in her hooded sweatshirt. She notices something strange on her lawn. Something stuck into the ground. As she draws closer, she realizes it’s a sign. She steps out in front of it. It is painted yellow, with large black letters:

“CHINESE VIRUS LIVES HERE! STAY AWAY!” it reads.



WEDNESDAY NIGHT. Little Moses quietly opens the door to Sam's bedroom.

He hears harsh snoring, as if Sam is gasping for breath. He stares at the lump of Sam's body under the covers and how his head is dug into a pillow. When Sam rolls over and his wheezing abates, Little Moses lifts himself into the bed. He remembers something his Mama said this morning.

"Poor Mr. Sam. He is sick and all alone. No one to hold him. No one to comfort him as he suffers."

Little Moses wedges himself against Sam's back. He hugs him. He feels the heat of Sam's body and sighs. The Michigan moon shines through the window. Little Moses closes his eyes and thinks of clouds, and wonders if the man in his dreams will tell him what to do next.

END OF CHAPTER THREE

Pay It Forward

If you're enjoying "Human Touch" so far, would you consider, if you're able, adding a human touch of your own by donating any amount to help my hometown city of Detroit battle the wave of coronavirus that is overwhelming it? Our citizens are struggling - and dying - in high numbers. "DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!" focuses on first responders, seniors, poor children and the homeless.

Thanks, as always,
Mitch Albom

DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!

You can donate to help Mitch Albom's hometown of Detroit through SAY Detroit, a 501(c)(3) charity he founded in 2006, right now at www.humantouchstory.com.

The **DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!** project will devote 100% of the proceeds to fighting Covid-19 in the following ways:

- By creating a mobile testing center in Detroit
- Feeding 2,000 homebound seniors weekly
- Continuing education for more than 100 impoverished children

- Helping to operate a quarantine center for homeless citizens
- Funding the creation of reusable, washable masks and mask protectors for first responders
- Feeding medical and hospital personnel on the front lines through the purchase of food from local Detroit restaurants at risk of closing

Also by Mitch Albom

Tuesdays with Morrie

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

For One More Day

Have a Little Faith

The Time Keeper

The First Phone Call from Heaven

The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto

The Next Person You Meet in Heaven

Finding Chika

About the Author

Mitch Albom is the author of numerous books of fiction and nonfiction, which have collectively sold more than forty million copies in forty-seven languages worldwide. He has written seven number-one New York Times bestsellers – including *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the bestselling memoir of all time, which topped the list for four straight years – award-winning TV films, stage plays, screenplays, a nationally syndicated newspaper column, and a musical. His most recent work is a return to nonfiction with the New York Times bestseller *Finding Chika*, a memoir about a young Haitian orphan whose short life would forever change Albom's heart. He founded and oversees SAY Detroit, a consortium of nine different charitable operations in his hometown, including a non-profit dessert shop and food product line to fund programs for Detroit's most underserved citizens. He also operates an orphanage in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, which he visits monthly. He lives with his wife, Janine, in Michigan. Learn more at www.mitchalbom.com, www.saydetroit.org, and www.havefaithaiti.org.

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