

## In Light of the End

She first heard of the virus from a friend at work. He said it was going to burn across the world like the fires of the month before. While her colleagues exchanged pressured concerns she hung back, unconvinced – she was certain that there were immovable constants, unswayable by human disease.

The following days brought more stories of the spread. Pockets of the world succumbed rapidly in incendiary bursts while others smoldered. But outside her office window, things were the same as they had always been, so she worked on.

Here and there signs of something different began to emerge: face masks, empty shelves, closed businesses. Information lapped in at her in waves, but she couldn't resolve it into a complete understanding, and she wondered if anyone, even among the governing voices, entirely grasped what was happening to the world.

Then the order came: stay home. Hospitals were to be overrun, supplies were low, and distance was the only thing that could slow it. So she sat in her apartment and watched the palm fronds dance softly and birds dip against the sky. She continued to work, and things were mostly the same.

A week became two, then three, and the silence around her grew. People began to filter off the street outside her window until only the drifting homeless remained. Days ebbed into nights with her at the window immersed in the ballet of the birds and the trees. At night she'd watch the steadfast city lights twinkle on and reach out hopefully to caress faces before defeatedly being swallowed by the dark.

Weeks became months and she stayed in her apartment while stillness settled like ash. She knew that somewhere there was bustle, movement. Somewhere the fires were still burning and people were fighting them, but around her the world stood still. She stopped getting dressed in the morning and withdrew from the news. Friends and loved ones grew complacent in isolation as life crystalized into discrete moments from which they couldn't escape. The chair next to the window sagged and grew thin under her body, and in the stillness she sensed that the constants were slipping away.

Then one night in summer a wind began. It started up from the West and drew turbulent eddies across the sky. It penetrated her brain and agitated her mind such that she could almost see her thoughts turning end-over-end like the coils of a snake. Their repetitive hypnotism lulled her, freed her from active cognition, and she found that by standing among the blowing trees she was temporarily released from herself. For three days she idled aimlessly, unable or unwilling to find direction amidst the gusts.

On the morning that they ended, she awoke early, bathed, and put on a silk dress. She smoothed her hair and tinted her lips the color of poppies. From the small apartment she stepped onto a clear street that mirrored her freshly scrubbed mind, and aimed her footsteps towards a fixed spot of blue water. She was shaded from the early morning sun by eucalyptus and oak, and in the silence no leaves rustled, and no animals cackled out to each other from the bushes. She reveled in that stillness, so deep that her hem forgot to partner her steps.

Her heels hit a metronomic beat to drive her, passing bushes with leaves of lacquer and flowers without fragrance. She stopped to stretch up and disturb a palm frond's rest and watched it sway like a watch on a chain, back and forth, with a weight magnified in the calm. She continued on.

She saw no one as she walked and sensed that she too was invisible as she moved through this new world free of constants to frame her in place.

Suddenly she stopped at a crossing where a cat was cutting a seam across the asphalt ahead, dragging with it the edges of the stillness through which the city broke free. Families released from their houses joined her in procession to the sea, the men in soft linen suits and the women in dresses like petals of bougainvillea, all rippling in a gentle breeze. The children were clean and fell in step with their parents, little hands nestled in firm grips and even the leashes pulled in parallel to the water as the dogs swayed in time.

Again, she felt lulled. The stillness had given way to movement, and in the movement there was synchrony. She imagined them all as cells of a much larger being, signaling silently to form the whole.

At the water's edge they billowed out blankets, unfolded chairs, opened baskets. Small rumbles of conversation broke out along the shore and grew into a baseline hum. The children began running, chasing each other in dips and furls, mirroring the seabirds above. She heard laughter, and as the sun grew brighter, she became aware of the feel of the sand under her toes. She dug them down to feel each grain impress itself upon her skin, reshaping the texture of the world.