



sudowriters

Fever Dreams

SUDOANTHOLOGY VOLUME ONE



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INTRODUCTION

The following stories were written and refined between March 18 and April 8, 2020. They share a common theme, a question really—one that's been on all our minds since we were told to stay home, stay six feet apart, and wash our hands for twenty seconds. When we, the authors, first asked ourselves and each other this question, we were coping with sadness and fear for the world, worried about our families and wondering what would happen next. It seemed like everyone else felt the same way. So in addition to following a theme of *What will life be like after COVID-19?*, we challenged each of our stories to bring their readers a little bit of hope. The tales that emerged aren't overly happy or optimistic—that rarely makes good fiction—yet they remind us that new worlds still await.

Sometimes, hope is made of the mere idea of the future.

~ Thea Boodhoo

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PRAKASH HAD ALWAYS WANTED to do that thing. The one you see in movies, where someone goes to the airport, looks up at the big board, and then decides where to go. And here he was, the lines at the handful of open counters empty and a half-full departures board before him. He thought about how long it'd been since anything in his life had been his choice, or felt safe. Even standing here felt like a risk, though they said it was okay now, that the virus was in retreat.

His fists were tight and clammy. He checked his watch and scanned the concourse, looking for someone. He smoothed out wrinkles in the shirt he wore—his own touch soothing him a little. He'd ironed it just that morning at his

hotel. When he'd checked out, standing six feet back from the counter, three months after arriving, two and a half months longer than he'd expected to stay, the front desk clerk had given him a smile and a nod. He half-smiled back, as if he'd forgotten how that worked, then fixed his expression with the gravity that 'going outside' demanded. Now that smile was creeping out again.

He'd met Ritu online. They were both in the States on business when the orders came down to shelter in place. By then the borders were closed anyway. Ritu had been in Boston pitching pharma companies on her company's rapid gene sequencing capabilities. He'd been in New York meeting with software teams embedded at his banking clients. But they hadn't known each other then.

When it started happening, the WhatsApp groups had exploded with chatter, fostering video chats among families and neighbors, offering cooking lessons to far-away bachelors, and providing introductions between someone's uncle, to another's cousin, to yet another's friend, nephew, or niece—all trapped abroad in various states of limbo. Ritu's chachi's sister in Delhi had got to talking with Prakash's masi in Bangalore in a group coordinating homemade respirator mask production. The aunty network never went down, even when all the streaming slowed the Internet to a crawl, and introductions were made.

A shy hello (Ritu messaged first) led to long exchanges of timid messages, which led to a phone call, then another, which led to video calls late into the night. Ritu showed him how she jury-rigged her room's coffee maker to make masala tea and told him of her life in Delhi. Of the samosa walla she always visited on her way home from work, the one at the corner of the Vasant Vihar metro station. She'd heard he'd been forced closed along with all the other

vendors, of course, but her mother revealed that he secretly made deliveries to her parents. They wouldn't be the same delivered, though, she said. Nothing was the same anymore, he said.

At first, Prakash boasted of his mid-level executive position at Reliance. He demonstrated how he used the clips from a coat hanger to cinch his room's curtains tight, keeping his room at least partially dark. Later, when he knew her a little better, he confessed that he'd attended AIIMS hoping to become a surgeon, but couldn't cut it and dropped out. His parents were placated with his executive job, but he kept wondering...if he'd stuck with it, become a doctor, maybe he would have been useful in all this, instead of just sitting in a hotel room waiting for the world to come out of hibernation. We all have our roles to play, she said. You couldn't have known.

They talked each night. She teased him, making him laugh until he forgot his loneliness; forgot how far he was from his family and friends. He shared the makeshift contraptions of paper cups and plastic cutlery he invented, allowing them to steam idlis in each of their microwaves. But most of all they talked about "someday". Someday they'd no longer be imprisoned in the Marriott and the Raddison. Someday, they'd open the airports and gas the jets. Someday, they'd be able to go anywhere they wanted. Someday, they'd meet.



He checked his watch again. She was fifteen minutes late. His heart sank. Perhaps he'd gotten the time wrong. Or her connecting flight had been delayed. He swiped his phone open to check.

Then he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned. He recognized her immediately.

"You look just like you do on FaceTime," he said, his whole being smiling.

She gave a little curtsy. "I get that all the time."

He shifted from one foot to the other. Should he take her hand? Kiss her? Ask first? He tried to imagine how it'd go in a Bollywood movie while she looked on, her eyes kind and bemused.

Then she reached out her hand, and he took it. Later he would be surprised that he hadn't stopped to wonder if her hand was clean, if she'd used sanitizer. He simply took it and held it like he hadn't been waiting months to do just this. He felt her warm, soft palm and her neatly trimmed nails. They tightened their grip on each other, and turned to look up at the board.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"We could go anywhere," she said. "Anywhere at all..."

They paused, then spoke together: "Home."

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I WATCH you picking sweet red tomatoes in the late morning sun. Your garden has grown so beautifully. I like to think it's because you actually listened to me occasionally, but of course you're so capable and smart, you could figure it out all on your own.

I watch you picking up your phone. Texting the friend you've only seen in two dimensions for so long, the friend who lives a neighborhood away. I watch you both hesitate at the door with big awkward grins before you finally hug each other. Come try my tomatoes, you say. She brought cookies. She never baked, before. You both laugh.

I watch your smile crumble when you step into your backyard together and she says, "Your grandma would have *loved* this garden." And I watch her tentatively hold you

when you slump and then hold you tight when you start crying into her shoulder.

I don't seem to have a shoulder.

I watch you picking up the pieces of your career, putting it back where it goes. Well, not exactly back—your old job doesn't exist anymore from the look of things. But you've always been creative. I watch you copying and pasting pieces of your resume into something new, something that fits the way things are now. All that virtual reality I said was bad for you—it's a top-line item now, isn't it? I was wrong about one thing, I guess. I'm entitled to that one mistake.

I watch you driving to the airport. The traffic isn't what it was before—but it's picked up a lot the past few weeks. There's a man in the parking garage elevator, and at first you shake your head and say, "It's okay. I'll take the next one," then he waves you in with a smile, and you remember it's safe now. You make small talk about the traffic. He hopes it stays this way because the air is so clean and his daughter has asthma.

I watch you stand in the airport lobby, just looking. Looking at how much has changed. You take a numbered ticket as you walk into the waiting area, just like the sign tells you to. Someone standing carefully six feet from you says, "Feels like the DMV now, doesn't it?" You nod. "Yeah, it does. It makes sense, though, I guess." When your number is called—and it doesn't take as long as you were afraid it would—you walk through bag check and security alone. Everyone still gets a mask at the gate, and the moment yours is on, I see your shoulders relax. You always did keep all your tension there.

I watch you picking up your luggage and waiting to be picked up. Your sister cries when she sees you and leans

across her iced mocha to hug you in the passenger seat. She pauses to make sure her jacket doesn't touch the paper straw. On the drive, you talk about your grandmother, who sounds so familiar. I feel like you both get a few things wrong about her, though.

Maybe you just don't remember when she used to wear red heels and hairspray, when she danced all night to the song you just silenced on the car radio.

I watch you gather the pieces of your family in a big park, filled with cherry blossom trees and standing stones. I can't tell you which mountains those are in the distance, but the landscape feels like home.

I recognize the people around you, but I can't remember their names. Some look happy, and some look sad, but they're all feeling the same thing.

Loss.

Gratitude.

And I watch them all gather around a small hole in the ground where someone with a smile I could draw from memory, whose tears make me wish I had that shoulder again, places a jar. Cookies? No. Not cookies this time.

The thought makes me want to giggle, but a light spring breeze and the soft, sudden chirp of a sparrow drown me out, if I make any sound at all.

I listen to the people gathered tell stories of a friend, a mother, a sister, a manager. The tea they drank with her, the walks they took with her, the advice she gave them, the faith she had in them. Surely all these stories aren't about the same person? No one could fit all that in one lifetime.

What a lifetime it would have been, though. It sounds like one I would have enjoyed.

You tell your story last. How she gave you your love of gardening, how watching those tomatoes grow kept you

sane when the only place you could go was your backyard.
“I’ll think of her every time my hands hold sun-warmed
soil,” you say.

I like that, though I’m not sure why.

And as the crowd disperses into car-sized groups, each
carrying more stories and laughter and tears away with
them, I start to wonder why I’m here.

You leave last. I almost go with you.

But I’m not quite sure who you are.

I’m forgetting, forgetting. Drawn to the spring breeze
and the sparrow’s nest.

Not forgotten, though. That, if nothing else, I still know.

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KENZO HELD the diploma in front of his mom. “Touch it. It’s real paper,” he said. He was glad the school hadn’t opted for digital-only documents.

She pressed her gloved hands together and shook her head. “You don’t know how many people have handled it,” she said with a frown that quickly broke into a smile. “You’re a doctor now.”

“No, mom, it’s a public health degree, not medicine.”

“Close enough. I’m proud of you.”

The last time she visited his dorm was when he moved in, shortly after she divorced his dad. It was like pulling teeth to get her to come out for the graduation.

Luckily, shelter lifted for thirty-seven-two—the latest

COVID-37 variation. Kenzo was lucky enough to dress in the colorful gown and receive his diploma by hand. His classmates wouldn't have cared if they'd been forced to do a virtual walk. But Kenzo was sentimental. It was important to feel the heft of an object in one's hand—a sheet of paper, a ring, a totem as evidence he'd studied hard.

"You didn't have to drive here," he had said when his mom arrived. "Planes and airports are safe. They monitor everyone's temperature. It's not like it used to be."

"Still safer to drive," she said.

"At your age, driving long distances alone is worse."

His mom bunked with him in his dorm even though the school offered a private room. To her, the time right after shelter lifted was the riskiest. People were apt to be careless. Had the cleaning crews isolated themselves? Who else was allowed to enter the guest rooms? Better to stay with her son.

After unpacking, she went to wash her hands in his private bathroom, humming Hey Jude for an egregious seven minutes of hand washing. During that First Shelter, running water was a constant in their house. His mom washed everything using no less than two cleaning methods.

"I'll help you pack," she said.

"Going to the graduation party tonight."

"Do you have to? They really shouldn't schedule such a large gathering so soon."

"It's our last chance to see each other before we leave."

"Don't stay too long. Just say hi."

"There were only two cases on the campus. It'll be safe." During shelters, the school transformed into an isolationist fortress: all classes were conducted in VR, robots delivered food straight to his dorm, strict visitor screenings were enacted, and temperatures were checked at every

door. It was the reason the school required even grad students to live on campus.

"They care about the herd. Not about you," she said. "Not like your mom."

"You still don't trust me," Kenzo said. "Are you going to hover over me when I'm living in my apartment, too?"

"I'm your mom," she said quietly, slumping down on the couch. "Fine. Go. But don't hug anyone."



Everyone remembers the first time they find out their parents weren't perfect. For Kenzo, it was when his mom told him about the virus.

He sat on his bed, legs dangling above the floor, hands folded in his lap. It wasn't an ordinary flu, she had said, followed by unfamiliar words—pandemic, contagious, COVID, shelter.

He found it odd how distracted she was.

"When will I go back to school?" he asked.

"I don't know." She managed a smile. "But I'll be with you. I promise."

I don't know.

Those words echoed in his head. His mom led the operations team for an events company. Thousands of people relied on her. She was always well prepared—always knew what was going to happen before anyone else. It was her job.

Only later did he learn she was exhausted, that his parents had started staying up all night watching TV and scrolling through the doom feeds on their phones, debating what to do during that first pandemic.

Nothing will happen to you, she said. Then she stroked

his hair and tucked him in. But he couldn't sleep that night. Visions of replicating monsters swirled in his mind.



When Kenzo returned from the party, his mom was asleep on the bottom bunk, her phone on her chest playing a K-drama episode. He tiptoed over and gingerly turned it off.

She had started packing his things without his permission (of course)—half-filled boxes strewn across the floor. Move out was tomorrow anyway, so he might as well finish. He started with his closet, folding clothes, and digging through the sediment of his college life.

In the deepest corner, he found the box labeled "HOME." When he opened it, Milo, his old stuffed beagle, stared up at him. The poor thing had an eye missing and its fur permanently matted and darkened, a result of scrubbing him daily with soap and water. Four-year-old Kenzo didn't want Milo to catch the virus during First Shelter. The rest of the box was filled with childhood trinkets. He'd brought it freshman year in case he got homesick.

A red notebook was squashed at the bottom—"Shelter" written on the cover in child's handwriting. The pages still smelled of the old Richmond house—faint ocean and the sharp incense that his mom burned to remind the family not to go outside. It's funny how objects can absorb the aroma of a place. It would never forget First Shelter.

Now he felt bad for arguing with her. After all, worrying was the way his mom said "I love you."



When kindergarten was canceled for a month, his mom was

concerned. How could they take care of him and manage full-time jobs? When the local Italian restaurant closed, they mourned the loss with the aging owners, who took it as a sign to sell the place for good.

Others soon followed.

When First Shelter extended another month, then another, and then crept into the next year, his mom put on a brave face. But it changed her. She stopped laughing at his dad's corny jokes. She put up the "No Entry" sign at their door. She instated the seven-minute hand-washing rule.

At night, he heard his parent's hushed voices swell in concern and tears through the wall. Their world had shrunk. It was just them now.



It was Kenzo's idea to write the daily schedule in the notebook.

Just like at school, he drew boxes to represent an activity for each hour of the day: music, math, outdoor play, reading time. His lines weren't quite straight and he couldn't spell all the big words. But it was his way to bring order to the day. When he showed it to his mom, it was like a light turned on inside of her.

The schedule propelled their family into action rather than reaction. That's when Kenzo got obsessed with microbiology, drawing pages of viruses and spiky shaped blobs. His mom gave him an old Polaroid camera to cultivate his creativity. He and his dad ran in circles around the house pretending they were in the Boston marathon, complete with a trophy ceremony.

The year trundled along in fits and starts. His mom

apologized for not being fully present: for being glued to her laptop. Their cramped dining table was a makeshift office and play space, heaping with plates of food and Kenzo's drawing materials.

To this day, Mom *still* felt guilty for getting laid off despite her efforts, and for Dad getting let go shortly after. Maybe this was why she still hovered over him: to make up for those years of "neglect." Her work ethic never absolved her of her responsibilities.

Coronavirus mutated, eventually becoming an unwelcome yearly guest, still more deadly than the flu. Second Shelter slapped them in the face the year after COVID-19. By Third Shelter, it had become routine.



Kenzo turned to the last page, and a polaroid slipped out. In the grainy photo, his mom leaned against the window sill sitting alongside moving boxes, the San Francisco fog acting as a natural light box illuminating her face. Dated September 14, 2023. It was probably the last photo he took before they moved out.

He was devastated when they sold the Richmond house. Moving to the burbs severed him from his closest friends just as they started to meet up again in real life. They must have lost a lot of money since the real estate market had plummeted. His mom and dad fought a lot. The move had exposed deeper cracks in their relationship.

His mom was excited to move. She made it a game to pack his toys and books into boxes, telling them they would find a much better life than the packed city. It felt like she relished abandoning everything.

Her solemn face in the photo revealed something new. His mom didn't sell the house because she detested the city: She sold it to forget.

To build a new foundation. To reset. It was why she never talked about that First Shelter. She thought it had hurt him. But the truth was, Kenzo loved that house. It turned out to be the happiest time of his childhood.

He was never good at talking about his feelings. He wanted to write it down instead. Though it didn't seem right to send it via email, where it would be lost in digital clouds.

He reached into his desk and plucked out a pen and paper:

Dear Mom,

I don't want to forget that First Shelter.

I don't want to forget how we cuddled in bed after breakfast, reading my favorite books over and over.

I don't want to forget the home-cooked meals we made after the restaurants shuttered their doors. How you taught me to cook.

I don't want to forget our walks, how we made a game to give the stink eye to anyone who broke the six-feet rule by coming too close.

I don't want to forget when you bought that whiteboard and tried your best to homeschool during your busy schedule.

I don't want to forget the sunny days picnicking, lazing in a patch of green in Golden Gate Park.

I don't want to forget how quiet the city was, how we could sit on our stoop and not see a single person for hours. How the air was so clear without the pollution of traffic.

I don't want to forget the time we had together, holding our collective breath, watching over each other.

They call us the Sheltered Generation. They mean it as a pejorative term, but that's far from the truth: I'm strong because of the shelters. Because of you, I know how to live in uncertain times.

I don't want you to forget, either. That's why I want you to have these notebooks. So you can remember those glimmers of happiness.

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SHE WOKE in a stranger's bed the morning the governor announced the order to shelter in place. She'd been out at the club with friends the night before. The pickings had been slim, what with everyone losing their minds about some crazy flu. She'd almost given up and gone home when a guy she'd admired from afar started dancing with her. Instead, she went home with him.

She'd tried to leave when she got the alert on her phone, but her roommates texted to tell her they didn't want her bringing germs back to their apartment. Her hookup shrugged and made pancakes and offered to let her stay. While she showered, he braved the outside world to forage for more supplies at the grocery store and pick up a duffle

bag of her stuff. He said her roommates had left the bag in the hallway with a roll of toilet paper as a peace offering.

He thought it would only be a few weeks. Then things would get back to normal. She suggested they pretend it was an extended spring break staycation. They played video games and stayed up late talking. They cooked and ate and sat on the balcony imagining stories for the few couples and dog walkers who roamed the otherwise empty city streets.

By the end of the first week, she'd started coughing, and he'd been laid off from his hospitality sales job. She emailed her coworkers to tell them she'd be offline, and he made her soup to soothe her sore throat. They switched from ironically watching and poking fun at pandemic films like *Outbreak* to consuming reruns of *Grey's Anatomy*, which she could follow with her eyes closed while lying on the couch.

Between episodes, he reported on the neighbors. The guy they'd thought was a barista had started taking conference calls from the sidewalk and appeared to be a programmer of some sort. The knitting lady across the street had finished the shawl and given it to her neighbor with the adjacent balcony. The two women now chatted across the divide each night. He sensed sparks.

He kept her water bottle filled and encouraged her to drink, the only thing they knew to do besides monitor her temperature. When she couldn't sleep from the pain, he curled up in the armchair so he'd be close if she needed him. She floated in and out of consciousness, wondering if she'd dreamed this stranger who cared enough to stay by her side when her parents were thousands of miles away and her roommates had abandoned her.

Then, just as she started to get better, he started to get worse. He took her place on the couch, and she moved to

the armchair. When he woke up in the middle of the night, struggling to breathe, she called the hospital and tried not to panic.

They told her to keep him home and give him acetaminophen for the fever. She scribbled instructions on a scrap of paper and wondered if there was anyone else she could call. Who was his emergency person? If she asked, would he know that she feared waking to find him dead?

She thanked the nurse and hung up, then retreated to the balcony to cry. Below her, the programmer gestured emphatically as he insisted he could still hit the ship date, earning him a smile from the man with the broad shoulders walking his pugs. The one they'd nicknamed the Witcher.

Around her, the city began to howl. She wondered if they'd all gone mad, but Google said it was a new daily ritual. A way for everyone to show their appreciation at the hospital shift change. She scrubbed the heel of her hand across her cheeks and let the noise seep into her bones, giving her strength.

She lost count of the days and nights worrying and listening to every labored breath, hoping for an improvement. Once he could make it to the bathroom and back without wheezing like a man four times his age, they thought he might be getting better.

He washed his face and brushed his teeth and joined her on the balcony to listen to the howlers. She draped him in blankets and snuggled close to keep him warm. The next day the band of pain around his chest returned.

He fought for breath another week while she alternated between attending video meetings with coworkers and combing the internet for remedies that had worked for others with similar symptoms. The only answer seemed to

be time. So she waited and worked and listened and counted the good days, waiting for a trend to form.

She suggested it might be time for her to go after he'd been steadily improving for ten days. They were sitting side by side on the balcony, again, watching the programmer flirt with the Witcher from six feet away. An older couple with bandanas tied across their faces swerved into the empty street to keep their distance.

Her roommates had fled the city, and her grandmother had died in her nursing home. She wouldn't be able to attend the funeral, and she wasn't even sure she had an apartment to return to. But he didn't need her now, and she knew no other way to be sure she didn't overstay her welcome.

He set his hand on top of hers, and she turned to look at the profile of his face. Dark circles still shadowed his brown eyes after so many sleepless nights. He shook his head.

She snuggled into his side and rested her chin on his shoulder. They'd sheltered this storm together. The world was falling apart. But, when in their lifetimes hadn't it been? Together they added their virus-ravaged voices to the uproar.

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THAT LITTLE HANDHELD heater had been good to him.

Dr. Boylen Sagana kept it on his desk, like how people used to keep knick-knacks or fancy little miniature paperweights to show how cultured they were. But the heater was honest with its chipped orange paint and scuffed finish. The size of an old credit card, if you could remember those things. Boylen savored the memories alongside its visual dichotomy. Beaten dents and sharp angles versus sculpted furniture adorned with tasteful antimicrobial cushions.

You're doing it again. You're losing yourself in the past so you can delay the future.

So let it be, he thought, and memories unfolded like an unscrewed chassis. Hands reduced to cold bone. Frigid skin that felt like construction paper. When it was that cold, he

had held that little heater between his two palms for a precious minute or two, passed it to his sister, who then passed it onto Mother. That's what they called her, anyway. Boylen had scavenged its parts, had rebuilt it over the course of a few months as they huddled together in those early years, abandoned house after abandoned house.

That was before the Government found him. Given him a chance in the basic income program. Everything must end, Mother used to tell him as they parted. So something new can begin. Go now. I hope you remember our time together with some fondness.

"Director Sagara, you've been quiet today," Alina said as she rippled into view in three dimensions. She had run his organization's operations for years. And in the course of her brilliance, Alina had figured out how to detect and counter Boylen's personality quirks. She smiled, but he detected a pensiveness in the way she tightened her shoulders. Dammit, how did she always know? "That means your speech must not be going well."

Nostalgia disappeared just as quickly as Alina had materialized. In its place, Boylen's chest tightened with the weight of the decision before him. He sighed openly. It felt like freedom.

"We can't go back from this," he said, scrolling a wall of his speech with a flick. He pressed his lips into a thin line.. "Yes, the data supports it. Yes, the science is in place. But this is such a *massive* step."

"Just how long have you been staring at that busted-up, old heater?" Alina said through a smile from one of their Collectives in the mountains. She had always loved the views and wanted to be posted anywhere there were craggy peaks. I like how small they make me feel, she told him once. The insignificance makes me work harder. "Exactly.

Doctor, what we're about to do isn't about feelings. It's about facts. Risk mitigation. What's right for the world."

Boylen rubbed the stress from his old shoulders, breathed through the pressure on his chest, sighed as projections and models swirled in his mind. The world needed his Collective to open up. Because climate change eroded the tundra and unleashed Earth's deadliest, most ancient pathogens. Death had become seasonal. The world's governments couldn't cope. Humanity was dying off.

His bright office was perched atop a glass-and-tile building, slung low in the rolling hills outside Oxford, Ohio. It was the first such structure Boylen had designed himself, along with the other live/work communities that blended tastefully into landscapes throughout the country. Traverse City, Michigan. Taos, New Mexico. Camden, Maine. His architectural marvels were nestled in meadows and forests and mountains—self-contained communities designed to halt the spread of pathogens—and built to house those he personally plucked from the rolls of the basic income program.

Members of Boylen's Collective lived in generous, yet isolated live/work studios and matched with high-paying jobs all over the world. They had the lowest-latency connections in the country and a community R_0 that was under one. Just last year, they were found to have double the life expectancy of the average American.

"Precaution and risk," Alina said. She spread her hands in a knowing gesture. "One must follow the other, just like you taught us. And now, there are millions of us in the Collective. Cas13 enzymes swirl in our blood—treating new diseases in real-time—while we're backed by a vast library of primed T and memory B cells. Each of us is an economic and immunological powerhouse, blended together like some

sort of superorgan. Just like humanity evolved from nomadic living to inventing the city, it's time for *us* to evolve. We need to rejoin the world, Doctor. We need to get our hands dirty. Or else our hands might be the only ones left."

He paced through the speech he'd written for his address the Collective, avoiding Alina's avatar by a healthy radius. Walking within ten feet of live photons just wasn't done. It was a habit that would be tough to break. *If* you follow through, the sentimental part of him felt. *After* you follow through, the rational side retorted.

Boylen remembered when they found him at the edge of O'Hare's cracked and weed-infested runways. Smiling eyes above dirty masks. The smell of sweat on worn plastic suits. His hands had been shaking, wringing the heat out of the little heater like a dry rope, and then the paper was in his hand, covered with words set in a tasteful serif. *You qualify for a new benefit from the United States Government*, it said in three languages. *You will be part of a pilot program for early evaluation.*

Just a boy, shown compassion, given an opportunity. The end of his old life. The beginning of something new.

Boylen felt his apprehension fade. Excitement tingled in his fingertips, buzzed inside his teeth. Time to return the favor.



He had to tell himself to stop biting his lip. Anxiety made his limbs feel sluggish and blunted his sense of time. Breeze from the opened roof danced over his bare scalp. It smelled of moisture and anticipation. So many people in one place still felt dangerous. Subversive, even.

Boylen would never forget the combined gasp over virtual. When he dropped the Collective's physical distancing restrictions, unsealed the partitions, allowed more than six people to inhabit the same space. In every community across the country, crowds were gathering just like the one in front of him. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen so many people all together. Out of iso. Next, into the world.

Two young lovers circled each other in a pensive dance. Boylen knew they were assigned to different living groups by the color of their uniforms. Red for Level Two, Partition XB. Grey for Level Ten, Partition SW. It would be the first time they had met outside of virtual. Uncontrolled smiles. Widened eyes and wrung hands. Boylen's heart quickened at the sight.

A live serological meter on his sleeve spiked after he took a deeper breath. Boylen imagined he could feel his lymph nodes swell as antibody production ramped up.

Would this be the last thing Boylen achieved? Would this be his last contribution to the world? However his life would end, it was the end itself that was inevitable. Only then could something new truly begin. He rubbed the old little heater between his hands and slipped it into his pocket.

His tongue ran alongside the back of his lip, up and over the little indentations left by his teeth. Be the example. Swallow your apprehension.

A cell of people stood to his right, frozen in shock. He ambled over with a cracked smile. Boylen let the emotion take him. He hoped Mother would be proud.

Time to shake some hands.

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I DREAD GOING OUTSIDE. I can't wait to go outside.

My older sister Nala works through the crowd, handing everyone a slip of paper. I open one eye slowly, then sigh, not sure if I am disappointed or relieved. The number scrawled on it is easy to remember, so it ends up crumpled in a pant pocket. 600/600.

Dead last.

All six hundred of us are packed into the hotel lobby, staring at the airlock that long ago replaced the gridded, gilded doors that now hang on the wall like a prized oil painting. Singapore has always kept its heritage in plain sight. Even the white marble pillars remain at each corner of the front facade, though everything else has been replaced by thick glass.

It was supposed to be clear, but the humidity of the

outside kept it perpetually fogged up, preventing us from seeing any more than the occasional trails left by leaves that brush up against the enclosure. The younger ones make a game of it, stealing peeks at the outside world.

Nala rotates the handle of the airlock. Collectively, we steel ourselves.

The outside comes in.

“It’s not the virus,” we repeat together, as the water – it’s just water – settles onto our arm hairs and the surface of our eyeballs. It is not the virus making the air so heavy that it feels like I am swimming in it. It’s just the water. Invisible, odorless, and tasteless. Vital for all known forms of life. We’re literally made of it!

The children who rolled their eyes when they were being taught this exercise now embrace it. “It’s not the virus. It’s just water.”

Then the smells hit me. They’re as invisible as the water but somehow more invasive. The mass of our bodies recoil together as if we are one organism.

I want to hold my breath. It’s in me, I want to scream. But I know that they are just smells of durian and jasmine and wet orchid flowers. The virus never smelled.

As I watch each person leave through the airlock—one meter apart, a habit more than anything else—to a world of laughs and happy crying, the smells go from scary to intoxicating. I want more. The chattering starts as whispers and then becomes so loud I want to plug my ears, all up against the background of a constant, patient drizzle. A drizzle that has gone on for decades.

When the lobby is empty, Nala comes for me. She grabs my hand. “We made it,” she says, though I imagine her saying it more suggestively than she actually does.

We walk through the airlock together, though I can only

manage a few steps before I am flooded. The pictures of Singapore I have seen do not resemble anything close to what stands before me. In the photos, the buildings stood tall against an almost artificial-looking blue sky, the rainforest canopy only coming up to their first few floors. The balconies contained their own plants, separate from one another, designed by each occupant. Now, the buildings look like tree trunks in a rainforest that covers the entire sky, to the point where I'm not sure if it's even blue anymore. And though I trust the balconies are still there, I can no longer see them.

"Home," Nala says, pulling me through the thick, wet brush. It's weird to be from a place you have never visited.

"I don't feel at home," I say. The parks—which are everywhere there isn't a clear road—are already filling up with people and dogs and birds and other flying animals—or are those frisbees? I point back at the hotel. "That's home to me." There is a flagpole above the entryway, though the flag itself is long gone. The signage remains: R A F F L E S H O T E L.

"That's home to me too," Nala says. She motions in the open air. "But this is all our home too. We have multiple homes. This is like our... foster parents'."

Singapore has adopted a lot of us; our building had over one hundred countries represented in its first generation. It was a country uniquely prepared to face the pandemic. Most importantly, it had the intense humidity that stopped the virus in its tracks. Humanity migrated with desperation to the equator after that fact had been discovered.

"That used to be our whole world," I say, pulling Nala down the cracked road. "And our parents'. And their parents'."

“And maybe our children’s,” she says, squeezing my hand.

I take a deep breath, the fear of the virus gone completely. I brush droplets from my skin. It’s just water. But the cultural stigma is more deeply rooted.

“We are family only by building,” she reminds both of us, “not by blood.”

We continue walking like we used to, past gnarled tree trunks instead of the white marble pillars of the hotel lobby we used as a track.

“It’s funny to think that we could walk forever now,” Nala says.

While humanity went into a multi-generational quarantine, Singapore used assiduous land reclamation to make itself wrap around the Earth’s equator like a rubber band, so that it could support the whole population.

“We could,” I say, laying my hand on a root as thick as my whole body to catch my breath. I’m not used to this level of exercise. “Let’s start with the Marina Bay Sands.”

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