

## Diary in the Time of Corona

I woke up this morning and decided to write. Why today? What's different about today than yesterday, or the day before?

I have no answers to these questions. It's Day 25 of the quarantine. The sky is dull gray and it's raining, my windows streaked with wet wavy lines that make them look like etched glass. Today is not so different from yesterday, except yesterday it wasn't raining.

And yesterday we went to the supermarket. That place fills me with terror. The aisles are not wide enough to keep the required six feet social distance. In the produce section it's inevitable that two or more people will end up inspecting the bananas or the lettuce at the same time. When that happens we move apart as far as we can but we don't walk away, as if the lettuce or the bananas or whatever are a territory we refuse to surrender. We do avert our eyes, ashamed to look our adversaries in the face.

Upstairs in my bedroom I hear the rain against the roof, a soft, steady patter. The marsh is enveloped in a fine mist with ochre and green grasses and a few trees yielding small mauve flowers. I'm waiting for phone calls from the dead: my father, who passed away nineteen years ago and my mother, who passed away three years ago.

Why do we want what we cannot have? Or is this the nature of grief, that after the sharp stabbing pains of loss a knot of slow sadness begins to form and

wind itself around our hearts, once in a while tugging so hard we're reminded sharply once again of those who are gone?

Maybe that's what writing is for: not the documentation of what we have but the recovery of what we've lost.

I'm reading a book by Lydia Davis called *The End of the Story*. It's a novel about a woman writing a novel about a brief but intense love affair that ended thirteen years earlier. She can't finish the novel because she can't find the right way to end it, or so she says. But we know she can't finish the novel because finishing it will end her connection to her lost lover, and she doesn't want to experience such pain and grief all over again.

The rain has stopped and the sky has shifted to a softer gray. The yellow and dark greens of the leaves are startling and bright in the thin light.

Lydia Davis is a descriptive writer. She paints vivid pictures of the natural world: sound of ocean waves, piquant scent of eucalyptus, aggressive jade plants. But in her obsessions and delusions and isolation from friends she is not the best companion for me right now.

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Day 26. I am a witness to the pandemic. Everyone is a witness. But I'm not risking my life like the nurses and doctors and other workers on the front lines. I feel like a coward.

Today is sunny, with a cloudless sky of soft, washed blue. When you are quarantined weather becomes very important, like a prophecy or a sign of progress, or stagnation.

On fine days I could go outside for a walk but usually I don't want to. On the days I've gone for walks there's an unspoken tug-of-war on the sidewalk when others approach: who will be first to step out of the way. My husband and I are always first to move. We agree we tend to give a wide berth earlier than necessary. Still, each time we veer into the street so walkers can pass I feel we've offered a consideration that was not reciprocated. This gives me a feeling of victimization that makes me even more irritable than I already am.

On a recent walk I couldn't help noticing that everything in my neighborhood reminded me of the virus. Small shrubs with crimson buds. A mask in the middle of the asphalt, awaiting asphyxiation. Street signs that say Dead End. I never realized there were so many dead ends where I live.

When I'm overcome with anxiousness I prepare a meal. Before the time of corona I was a reluctant cook, and we often ate dinners at the local trattoria. But of course that's no longer possible.

I don't have the patience or creativity to be a decent home cook. But now I find comfort in assembling a dish or two. I experience a sense of accomplishment in completing what feels like a meaningful activity. Food is no longer readily or easily available. If I'm missing an ingredient I won't run to the supermarket wearing with my mask and disposable gloves. With every trip to the market comes the risk of

additional exposure. Grocery shopping demands enormous amounts of energy. So I try to plan ahead, which isn't easy when you're anxious all the time.

Today's side dish is quinoa tabbouleh with scallions, tomatoes, feta, and fresh lemon. Even writing the word "fresh" refreshes my depleted spirits.

Before preparing the tabbouleh I looked out the window, my gateway, my connection to the world outside my home. My attention was drawn to a single orange-breasted robin stepping across the grass. I watched for a while, since now I have time for such contemplative activity. The robin began to peck at the ground, circling and wandering, circling and pecking. I had the idea he was searching for food and not finding any. I turned away.

Things I never noticed before. The whiskered tips on the scallions, like a man's white-gray beard. The amount of plastic and paper towels I waste even though I claim to be pro-environment. I think of my mother growing up during the Great Depression with barely enough food and not enough money. I have coats in the closet, sweaters in the drawers, a stocked refrigerator. Was I really so clueless and ungrateful?

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Day 27. Be mindful, stay in the present. I am trying to be present but the news on the morning radio announced 40,000 Americans are dead from the virus. How is this possible? The future has become our dystopian present.

Last night we visited with our kids on Zoom. Such interactions are one of the challenges of this particular moment, the physical separation from loved ones. These meetings in cyberspace reinforce the sense of enforced isolation: my adult children isolated in their homes within an hour or so of mine. I miss them. They might as well be living on the moon. I've heard stories of doctors and nurses sleeping in their garages so as not to expose their families. This is worse than my experience, much worse, because their lives are in imminent danger. Nonetheless, their experience does not erase the pain I feel as a mother and new grandmother who can't touch or hug my children.

In my home state of New Jersey, 40 percent of more than 4,200 coronavirus deaths have been linked to long-term care facilities. My mother was a dementia patient in one such facility for six years. I thank heaven I do not have to worry about the virus killing my mother in a nursing home.

The past seeps into the present. The present is the future, for the time-being. I'm reminded of the words of T.S. Eliot: "Time present and time past/ are both perhaps present in time future/ And time future contained in time past." Perhaps our sense of separation between past, present, and future was always illusory.

My brother contracted the virus a few weeks ago and was ill with a fever that spiked as high as 102.8. Mercifully he is recovering well. Past, present, and future, they are merged into the nightmare of the virus.

I just read about a 25-year-old woman, a Latino grad student studying marriage and family therapy, who died of complications from the virus which she

likely contracted while working at a clinic for Latinos in one of the corona hotspots in Queens. I am overcome. I can't write anymore.