



## Exodus

*Cora Womble-Miesner*

I don't know until Sunday that I will be leaving New York on Wednesday. And I don't realize until Monday that I won't be coming back. It's March 2020. Everything is abrupt. I become sentimental about a place I haven't even left yet because I know I won't have time to say goodbye. I have just two days to pack my life into a couple duffle bags and lug the rest of my belongings down to the curb on Flatbush Avenue, where I rent a room above a sushi restaurant that I only ate at once.

The subway now is near-deserted. The remaining passengers are spaced out and wary, like pieces on a chess board. No one makes eye contact. The streets start to empty out. "It seems like New York before gentrification," I overhear a man say. "Just the right amount of people."

My last shift at the cafe I don't know yet that it's my last. This is before the masks, so I stand face to face with a line of customers, who assume I'm sterilized because I wear a pair of latex gloves. The gloves are for my benefit, so I can take them off after work and feel clean. A guy comes in during my shift and asks why we won't give him his cappuccino in a ceramic mug. "Doesn't that sort of imply you don't wash your dishes properly?" He says, smirking. I tell him, it's not about you this time. It's so we don't have to touch your spit. We put the chairs on top of the tables so the customers can't sit down anymore.

Two days later I get an email that the cafe is closing indefinitely as the city shuts down. It's hardly a surprise. I've already bought a one-way ticket to San Diego, the city where I spent the first 22 years of my life.

The morning of Wednesday, March 18th, I walk to Prospect Park and find that spring is arriving in New York City. Pink cherry blossoms and swans tugging at the reeds in the pond. It's hard to remember that everything is about to change forever. My flight is at 4pm.

When I land in San Diego I wonder if my parents will hug me at the airport. Of course they do. This is not New York. People are not quite scared yet.

I clear space among boxes of records and holiday décor to create a room for myself in my parents' garage. One of my walls is a cluttered tool bench. I place a large, flat piece of wood over six overturned milk crates. On top of that, a mattress pad. This is my bed.

"You know you're not supposed to be living here," my father gently reminds me. He forgets that I lived here before, illicitly, prior to moving to New York. I know to make

myself scarce when the landlord stops by.

I take long walks with my parents and I see San Diego with the eyes of someone who's been gone. Growing up, this was my default image of a city. Now it is familiar and unreal to me, like running into an old companion I didn't expect. It is a city of wide intersecting freeways, cacti giantesses, hummingbirds dipping their needle-noses into nasturtiums. The landscape is dominated by canyons, deep gouges that civilization couldn't suture. The sun, every night, is extinguished by the ocean.

In a box of old belongings, I find a journal that chronicles my life at age 20. It sounds miserable. I have both a yeast infection and a temperamental boyfriend. One night, after he throws a plastic floss container into the sink, shattering it into pieces, I have a dream that he steps on my head and crushes it like a melon. I never would have remembered this if I hadn't written it down.

Overhead there is a near-constant hum of helicopters. During the day and into the night. My only guess to their purpose is that they are surveying the parks, where we aren't allowed to go. Even the entrances to the canyons near my house are blocked with caution tape that resembles party streamers left behind. Pale blue surgical masks lie discarded in the gutters, marked with the tread of shoeprints.

My boss at the cafe calls to ask me if I'm planning to return to New York. *Probably not*, I tell him. I've fallen back into San Diego easily, like inserting the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle. He tells me that he walked his dog past a hospital in Fort Greene and saw workers loading bodies into refrigerated trucks.

One afternoon my parents and I walk from Morley Field to the suspension bridge at the end of Spruce Street. Then we walk back. San Diego did not remain untouched in my absence: I note where a fence has been erected, where a tree was torn down. Businesses have replaced each other and gotten lurid paint jobs. I know I've changed too, but I can't say how. I feel like I've lived a dozen lives while I was away, I feel like I've never left.

All of a sudden it's April and raindrops drum like fingertips on the roof of the garage. I didn't close the door all the way. I am startled by a grey smear of movement in my peripheral vision. I am used to sharing the space with mosquito hawks and moths. Every object I pick up has a tiny spider crawling across it. This visitor is the size of a tomcat, with a pointed face and black watery eyes—a possum seeking shelter from the drizzle. When we look at one another in surprise, the creature politely turns to leave, dragging its bare rat-tail behind it. *Wait*, I want to call, *don't go just yet*. But I'm alone once more. I sprawl on my milk-crate bed to write in my journal.

