

“Apprehension”

Elizabeth Li, Marymount Secondary School

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Today I headed back to school to pick up textbooks for home learning—it was only then did I realise that this danger was very real.

Dad made me wear a pair of purple glasses, one of my sister’s, in addition to a surgical mask ‘to prevent spit from landing on my eyes’ before we set out — even though I never wear glasses. He’s one of those over-cautious people who have a thing with dirt. Even so, he had got to be overreacting. What are the chances of me getting infected in the eyes with a disease-ridden droplet out of hundreds?

It got a bit creepy as an eerie silence fell over the mall. Normally, the blinking shop logos would be casting shadows over a stampede heading towards the railway station with heels clicking on the pristine marble-like floor, black skirts swishing in tandem with leather handbags, some barking orders on their phones. Today the herd was reduced by half and more. People walked fast and spoke in hushed whispers, hardly breaking through the silent spell. It is a pesky disease that will blow over in a few months. There’s no need to look like you’re marching to a funeral, right?

The double-decker bus, with a grumble of its engine bound to wake up everyone in the neighbourhood, took a sharp right turn up the slope. Stylish housing complexes that were lined prettily along the road came into view. It was in no way what I was expecting. I leaned towards the windows on my right, and squinted at the empty, cracked sidewalks, memories of Philippine maids and lots of dogs with silly grins, desperate men in suits waving at taxis flashing in my mind. How could the scene in front of my eyes be taken from the same neighbourhood months ago?

My leg muscles ached in every stride I took uphill. Dad and I were the only people out there as far as I could see. Crunches of the asphalt accompanied our hike as cars raced past us. We were welcomed to my school with a ghastly gale that dried my eyes out.

Once upon a time, the corridors were filled with pounding footsteps, boos and yells for the teacher to postpone the quiz, frantic shuffling of papers in the lockers when the spokesman started

collecting homework. The chilling reality was that apart from a few janitors in blue uniforms, striding to the elevator with classroom keys dangling and clinking from their belts, I saw nobody.

By the time I finished lugging my bag weighed down by files filled with biology worksheets and maths test papers down the spiralling staircase, my shoulder was almost pulled out of its socket. I nodded goodbye to the reception lady at the foyer and shifted, wrapping my arms around the bottom of the paper bag more securely.

Walking down the driveway and squinting through a pair of ill-fitted, foggy glasses, I noticed that tiny purple flowers and waving dandelions were in full bloom on the front lawn. Dad's rigid figure waited at the side gates and, as I walked towards him, I couldn't help but cast one more glance back at the vibrant lawn and the V-shaped building.

The classical architecture with wooden arches and doors was spreading its arms as if beckoning me to return to its embrace. I mentally shook my head and lifted the bag higher in my arms, turning my back on the only place that I had dared to call home. A refreshing breeze flattened the comfy cotton sleeves of my sweater against my forearms. The black, gold-tipped school gates loomed ever closer and Dad straightened up when he saw me. Lips pursed in a grim line, I vowed to myself silently, "This isn't the end. I will step inside and breathe the cool, unscented air of the valley again. No matter how long it takes."

As much as I would like to pretend otherwise, I just could not shake off the feeling that something horrible was on the horizon. It was as if we were all holding our breaths, waiting for the virus to sweep through the city, and whoever survived would have to pick up the remains.

29 March 2020

Longing

For the past few weeks, I have been trying hard not to go insane in my room. My day goes like this: wake up before nine to prepare for any online lessons, read, lunch, lessons again, read, work on the most urgent piece of homework, revise one or two subjects, dinner, read until I sleep.

The thing about online learning is that you can never get the momentum and determination you used to have from learning at school.

At school, everything I saw reminded me of what I had to do next. The tidy, small handwriting of the spokesman on the blackboard only served as a painful reminder of the next maths quiz. I went over a mental checklist of data-response questions and tests that had yet to be completed every time the geography teacher brushed past me in the hallway. My student diary and study schedule notebook carried my success and reputation as a studious and capable student. I had slid the bookmark around day by day so many times that the upper edge of the diary is now worn and wrinkled. The unravelled and loose plastic book wrapping come from when I used to shove the diary in my backpack hurriedly so that I could catch the bus arriving in ten minutes. I don't know what I would do without these books.

Online learning would have sounded like a dream several months ago. There would have been no need to crawl out of the bed at six before sunrise (in winter), no need to trudge my way up the staircases in Quarry Bay Station where I had only scrambled eggs for breakfast, no need to force my bleary eyes to focus on the worksheets about the Hong Kong economy with a jolting and shaking bus seat under me.

But when I have to spend my entire day in my room hunched over the laptop on my bed, frantically trying to keep up with the chemistry teacher's nonstop monologue and head turning to choose between the laptop screen (which is playing the experiment video) and my actual stack of notes, it doesn't sound like paradise anymore.

The icing on the cake is the fact that I hate confinement. I love open spaces, lots and lots of greenery, and the wind tugging at my hair. It's precisely why I have to come to adore my school so much, with its wild flaws and all. What I cannot stand is being trapped in a small cubicle all day, or a box whose walls I can touch at the same time with my arms stretched (a.k.a. my room). I don't feel good these days. I feel numb and insensitive to my surroundings as if there's a woollen blindfold over my eyes. For me, time passes too fast to keep track of.

Maybe attending school was a chore to be done to stop parents' grumbling for many, but I really did love going to school.

Whenever the geography teacher scowled and pointed to whoever was unlucky enough to be chosen to answer the question, my heart would pound and my breathing would speed up. I almost never dared to look up into her eyes directly, because to her it would be a sign that you wanted to be picked. On the rare occasions, when I had to face her barbed comments on my answer whilst

standing in front of the whole class, I would like to think that I took them on as a champ and did my best to respond—even as my ears burned under her expectant, exasperated gaze. As I strode upstairs, joining the herd of students running up and down the staircase to change classrooms after class, I always felt a buzz in my bones. It was one of the few moments when I felt I was truly alive, living.

My eardrums might disagree with me, but I loved the lively chatter of my classmates even when they were discussing Korean pop stars. I had often looked up from the maths supplementary exercise worksheet on my desk to catch hyperactive girls shrieking and hugging each other in joy at the release of a new album from their favourite Korean band. My reaction to that was usually an amused smile mixed with a wince of pain for my sensitive ears.

Probably one of the things that I miss the most was how my friend and I debated tough questions in Chemistry class. Usually, I only got a few seconds to shift in my seat and start taking out highlighters and coloured pens in the laboratory before Marie plopped down at our table and started bombarding me with questions. I leaned towards her and glanced at the pile of extra exercises that she received from her tutorial class, as Marie gestured with her hands and rushed out a lengthy explanation behind her confusion. I flipped through my notes and got to one page regarding the theory involved, and pondered. Marie joined me in questioning the given answer with an ashamed grin. Our duo almost never got anything right on the first try. Sometimes, I would have to spend one hour before bedtime poring over online articles and jotting down notes, then type a long response to Marie on my phone. It could get very troublesome and time-consuming when I looked up chemical reactions on the search engine, which only spewed out lengthy, complex explanations. But if not for Marie, I would know a lot less than what I do now in Chemistry.

For sure, I sulked when things got so busy that I had to work hunched at the table, under the dim light, until I was able to succumb to the darkness the moment my head hit the pillow. Now, with only four concrete walls keeping me company, I wish I could get that sense of urgency and purpose back in my life again. I don't want to admit it but I have been taking a lot more 'study breaks' and 'off days' than usual. The size of my room is getting to me and I rarely feel uplifted or energised when I wake up. The moment I open my eyes, I already can't bear to run my mind over the list of subjects that I should study today. I keep munching on chips and sweet biscuits, flipping over pages of 'The Fifth Wave', telling myself that in fifteen minutes I will go back to that blasted table. Fifteen turned into thirty and soon hours passed without a single movement on the textbook.

I complained about my laziness to my friends and Mom, but they just say that it's normal to feel depressed and not up to anything in lockdown. The more rational part of me argues back that it isn't acceptable if I want to achieve better grades than last year's. I can't help but feel like I am letting everybody down with my slacking off.

I wonder if I had been living in a dream before or I am living in a nightmare now.

I had just finished reviewing the photos on my phone as I am writing all this down. I lingered over a photo that I had taken when I was drenched from the heavy rain after school, struggling to hold the umbrella upright with the slippery handle, whilst reaching into the pocket to retrieve my phone to check for the time of arrival of the bus. I remember how I had been texting and complaining to my sister about my umbrella, which couldn't combat the blast of rain and icy drops of water tracing their way down my hair until they landed on my collarbone. Cool, moist cotton conformed to the shape of my toes all too closely. It was a beautiful picture: trails of raindrops running down the cobalt umbrella of the girl in front of me. The school building appeared glaring white in the downpour with tree branches on either side of the road snaking their way to become the picture frame.

It's been over two months since I last attended school. Looking at that photo taken last summer, I would rather wear a thousand pairs of wet socks to experience that perfectly ordinary, annoying school day again.

30 March 2020

Surprise

It was chaotic today.

Dad rushed around the house, rifling through drawers and cabinets for the sheets of paper with the flight club account passwords, spending hours unmoving in front of the computer. I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from asking him to pass over the laptop so that I could study past online assignments for the Geography Quiz on Wednesday. I feel sorry for Dad since this is the second time that he had to rearrange tickets in the UK this month. We originally planned a trip later this week for me to do farm work at a donkey sanctuary for gaining work experience. But because of the local government issuing the travel alert, I had to draft the email to call off my dreams.

This time is for my sister's unexpected return. Vic is studying at a UK university as a first-year student. She had refused to come home when coronavirus cases first started popping up in the UK with a direct hit to her campus, as she thought a Hong Kong on lockdown would just be another prison. But when her friends had started lugging moving boxes and suitcases out of the building one by one, until only one remained, the loneliness was more than she could bear. The first thing that I heard when I walked into the living room, rolling my aching shoulders from another grilling Geography lesson on Zoom, was that Vic was finally coming home, according to Dad whose usually stern face was lifted into something that resembles a happy face.

I may never tell Vic this, but I am secretly glad that she is coming home. We had been very close growing up. Mom loved buying twin sets of everything: princess dresses, dolphin plush toys, picture books for us. Vic once locked herself in the bathroom, refusing to come out simply because I was planning on staying a night at our grandparents' without bringing her. I used to go to her with any problem (cough, maths, cough) I might have, and run away with my tail tucked between my legs when she told me to piss off. Having chips and soufflés after school together was our thing back in the days, just hanging out and listening to her spill the beans about her failed chemistry exams until Dad got mad at us staying out for so long. Though I may never admit it to her in person, Vic was the one who understood me the most.

Ever since she had left for university in September, I have been speaking less often, spending most of my time in my room. Mom and Dad tried to lure me out with chips, wildlife documentaries and epic movies. Even though I knew I was behaving remarkably similar to a grumpy badger in its den, I just couldn't bring myself to step out of my room. I didn't see the point in doing those things when I had my books and a comfortable bed all in one place. I overheard my parents talking with Vic on a weekly video call. They think it was because I miss her, but no. This is just who I am when Vic isn't around to drag smiles and light banter out of me.

If there's anything good about this pandemic that had robbed me of my spirits and school life, it is that I will get to see my sister again.