

THREE WEEKS

Emilia wakes up startled. Her breath's erratic and she's sweating. It was a nightmare. She closes her eyes and tries to listen to the sound of her roommate's breathing to synchronise hers, as she has done before, but this time she meets only silence.

She's alone. She's been alone for the last three weeks. Her roommate left for her parents' house as soon as classes were cancelled, a couple of days before quarantine became mandatory.

Resigned, she opens her eyes again and sees the cold blue light of sunrise filtering through the curtains. Lately the sun is coming up earlier, signalling the transition from winter to spring. It must be cold and dark in Chile, Emilia contemplates, while standing up from the bed.

The room feels hot and oppressive and it makes it hard to breathe. A mental picture of her taking her skin off appears in Emilia's mind. She opens the window and leans on it as far as she can without falling off it. The air is crisp, and the sudden change of temperature stings her cheeks, but she doesn't care. The pain is welcome. The cold always has made her feel alive. When the feelings threaten to overwhelm her, she puts her hands in cold water. In extreme cases she steps into the shower. The shock of it brings her back to her senses, as if waking up from a dream.

A sting in her chest makes her cringe and she soothes it with her right hand. Emilia knows it's a physical manifestation of longing, of her need for somebody's presence. It makes her feel like a failure. Before the pandemic Emilia was always on her own and she loved being with her thoughts while listening to music and penning on the typewriter. She used to feel superior, intellectual even, because she didn't feel the need for a social life, something that everyone else seemed to build their lives around. She looked at them all with contempt.

Now she doesn't feel superior at all. On the contrary. Emilia feels inferior, inexistent or incomplete in a world that doesn't accept broken things. She thought she was alone because she chose to, but now wonders if it had been her choice after all.

Just a month ago Emilia used to go to classes and socialise, and that was enough to fill the cravings she didn't know she had. Emilia realises now that she wasn't just alone. She was lonely. Her classmates had never talked to her with any other purpose but that of making inquiries about the classes they all attended. In quarantine nobody checks up on her. She doesn't have anyone with whom to share comments about the lack of freedom that makes her feel anxious and hopeless, like a deer falling into a trap, even though she knows how necessary it is to maintain social distance. There's no one with whom to converse or laugh and make plans for when all is over.

I want to go home, Emilia whispers. Her voice sounds strange to her ears and her unused facial muscles are stiff. Home. She can't picture a place. The word feels empty, lacking the consistency of meaning and seems wrong as it rolls out of her tongue.

The college dormitory isn't a home. She can't make it hers enough to let her guard down or to diminish her awareness of every movement and sound in the building. The house she grew up in is in another country, another continent, another hemisphere even, and it stopped giving her the warm thoughts a home is supposed to inspire. Suddenly Emilia feels drained and her body is too heavy for her to carry. Sometimes she feels breathing is too fatiguing. Filling her lungs requires a strength she doesn't possess and she won't breathe until she feels dizzy, the darkness of the room consuming her.

Emilia gazes upon the garden noticing the daisies in bloom. It shocks her to notice that the world has kept spinning while everything around her seems to be frozen in time. A sigh escapes her. Emilia closes the window and goes back to bed. There's no point in getting up during quarantine.

SIX WEEKS

The mask she must wear doesn't allow her to enjoy the smell of wet earth after a night of rain, so she presses both her hands flat on the grass. Nature gives her energy. It's Sunday and Emilia is going on her weekly outing to the supermarket, which is five minutes away from the college dormitory. It's a nice walk along the trees, the green grass and a football yard. She wishes her face were bare to feel the breeze on her cheeks.

Emilia reaches for her tote bag and takes a piece of paper with the list of things she has to buy: toilet paper, rice milk, carrots, frozen veggies, tofu. For the last two weeks she has been trying to create a routine. She wakes up early, takes a shower and dresses even though she has nothing to do, and eats wholesome food at adequate hours. She reads the news in the morning and changes to fiction in the afternoon to distract herself. After that, she watches movies and listens to music or even writes. Nothing Emilia has felt happy with so far, yet analysing her thoughts, writing them down and making them real gives her a sense of daily purpose. The constant craving for home is dimming as well. She still can't picture a place, doesn't know what this word means for her, but it makes her less melancholic than it used to do.

The supermarket is almost deserted, as it has been since the quarantine started. Emilia is surprised about this. In her country, according to what she has read, seen on social media and what her mom has told her, it is the exact opposite. Supermarkets are constantly crowded as if food might disappear in the blink of an eye while coronavirus spreads with every breath. She takes a basket and makes her usual round through the aisles. She adds biscuits as a treat. It doesn't take long and soon she finds herself in front of the cashier paying. There's a plexiglass barrier between them with a paper stuck to it that says they're currently accepting card payment only.

She pays and makes her way back. Normally Emilia would walk briskly, but now she takes her time, watching her steps to avoid cracks on the pavement, a game she loved as a kid, enjoying the sunbeams that caress her face. She picks daisies on the way. It's weird but she feels drawn to some of them, as if they call her. Small, big, with missing petals, with an excess of petals, it doesn't matter – she takes them to her room. They keep her company.

Outside the college residence, Emilia's looking for her keys when the main door opens and a guy with whom she has crossed paths with a couple of times steps out. Seeing her, he holds the door.

Hey, he says. He appears to be smiling under his mask, but Emilia can't tell for sure.

She feels awkward. Almost every student has gone back home and on the weird occasions she has seen someone in the building they didn't say anything. She isn't prepared to make small talk.

Thank you, Emilia says and crosses the threshold.

Went to the supermarket?

Yes, she says and instinctively lifts the bag with the groceries to show it to him. The need for conversation is making her anxious and her face feel hot and sweaty. Emilia opens her mouth to say something, anything, but he is quicker and says: Well, see you.

Emilia stares at his back. Her head starts to hurt. She was so happy to be outside but now the pain in her chest makes her feel old and tired. She walks to her room feeling numb and unaware of her surroundings. Languidly puts the shopping in its place. She leaves the daisies on her desk.

TWELVE WEEKS

Made coffee. Wanna come?

Emilia smiles as she reads the text and replies: On my way. She puts on her flip flops, takes the keys, and goes out of her room in the college residence. Jakub's room is one floor above, so she takes the stairs.

Since Jakub held the door for her, they crossed paths a couple of times before they introduced themselves and had a proper conversation. He's staying at the college dorms because he has a lot of siblings and wants to properly keep up with his studies during quarantine, which is impossible with the twins' screams, Jakub complained once.

The next time they saw each other, he invited her to his room, with no ulterior motive, cross my heart, he said, to have a cup of coffee or tea. Jakub's passionate about coffee.

He has a shelf with different brands from around the world and he explained the differences between them that first time. Emilia remained quiet, too nervous to talk, worried about saying the wrong thing and ruining the blossoming friendship but enjoying herself immensely. She has never really liked coffee but she didn't say. Instead, she accepted a cup of Colombian coffee and drank it all, sugarless. To properly notice the quality of the coffee you can't spoil it with anything, not even sugar, he said and laughed. Jakub offered her sugar after the first sip, but she said it was alright, and it really was. She felt happy. Even the most tasteless drink would've felt first quality in her mouth then.

The door is ajar. Emilia gives her usual two knocks and lets herself in. The smell of coffee is strong in the room, but she also notices a hint of cinnamon and mint, and smiles. He has made tea. Hello, she says. Emilia always marvels at how seriously he takes the preparation of hot beverages. Her kitchen utensils are basic, barely the essentials, but he has different jars and teapots, even a scale to weigh the coffee beans.

I won't ask if you want coffee, Jakub says and hands her a cup of tea.

Tea is great, thank you, Emilia says while blushing.

Just last week Emilia came clean and told him that coffee wasn't really her cup of tea, trying to make him laugh. She was nervous. Even though she knew she had nothing to worry about, her hands were shaking. He stared at her.

Why didn't you tell me before? he said.

I don't know. I'm sorry.

And here I was trying to show off. Such a waste of delicious coffee in an undeserving *paladar*, he said and laughed. He then made tea, mixing different nice-smelling leaves.

They made small talk but Emilia couldn't stop thinking about what he had said. It was a waste on her and his coffee wasn't cheap. Maybe Jakub truly was upset and was tolerating her until she left. The fear of going back to her loneliness made her shaky and her mouth watery. Emilia was afraid she was going to throw up.

I'm really sorry, she said after a few moments of silence. She was staring at her empty cup and didn't dare to look up.

What for? he asked

For not telling you I didn't like coffee. I'm really sorry. Your coffee is expensive and I was thoughtless. But I'm gonna pay you back, I promise.

Jakub laughed, not in a mocking way, but friendly, as if she had told a hilarious joke. He told her she was being silly and she didn't need to worry. She had been putting up with him and his obsession for weeks so they were even.

What have you been doing? he asks while taking his usual place on the bed. Emilia is sitting in the chair by the desk.

Finished the novel I was reading. It's really good, I'm sure you'd like it, she says.

One day you'll convince me to read a book, but that day is not today. Do you need more daisies, then?

Just a few.

For weeks Emilia's been putting the daisies she has picked between the pages of books with quotes that have made her feel something or that are deep and beautiful. Jakub saw her picking them once and, without any particular comment, joined her. Now it's something they do every couple of days, depending on the speed with which she reads. It's one of her favourite moments. She feels happy and relaxed outside, even though they still have to wear masks.

At first, Jakub was rough and careless, ending up with ruined flowers in his hands. It made Emilia laugh and she showed him how to do it more tenderly. You'd think picking daisies is an art, with all the care and skill you must have apparently, he said sullenly. Maybe it is, she said.

Emilia smiles at the memory. Both joke that they have to thank coronavirus for their meeting, but she secretly thinks of quarantine as a blessing in disguise. It opened her eyes to her loneliness, to the importance of social interactions and of friendship. It also showed her that home isn't always a house, a building or a room. Sometimes it's spending time with a person one trusts, drinking tea and picking daisies.