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Screens

In the morning, there is the news. The tv displays numbers of the dead, a daily reminder the world has changed irreparably, the fabric of society ripped at every edge. I glance down at my phone because one device is never enough. The headlines crash into one another until my eyes glaze over. I shut the tv off and place my phone down, giving myself a moment of respite before I log on for the day of work ahead.

In the afternoon, I wonder how many times someone can tell an acquaintance they are "hanging in there". I see their grimace through the screen as they recognize the empty platitude. I don't even want to say it, but I can't stop the words from tumbling out of my mouth. What else is there to say? If we spoke the truth, the horror and the exhaustion and the salty faces and the panic of the feeling of an oncoming sore throat, no, is it sore or is it just dry? Let me take a sip of water and one to three vitamins and a cup of herbal tea and ok, yes, now I have decided that it was actually just a dry throat, not necessarily sore and my temperature has not risen since I took it when I woke up this morning, so I am probably fine. If we spoke of those moments, we would be on the computer for even longer than we already are and we would probably lose our jobs. So I say "I'm hanging in there" and my coworker agrees, nodding her head within her little black box that frames her face, one that has become so familiar I am not sure I would recognize her without it.

The days bleed into one another, never changing, but somehow getting worse. Friends occasionally text, the conversation always closing with "see you when all this is over", as we wait to figure out what that even means. Months ago it was different, my inbox flooded with friends checking in on each other, wishing one another well and singing out the crucial call to "stay safe!" almost daily. We have now moved on to a "no news is good news" policy. My best friend used to call in tears, she never expected to see so many die in her first year as a nurse. She now leaves her stories within the walls of the hospital, so they can no longer follow her home and take up residence in her apartment alongside her.

In the beginning, it was something far off, just a news story. We were consumed by the arrogance of thinking globalization would not spread deadly disease, as if technological advances spared us from the undeniable truth that we can not outrun a virus. A year later, we are submerged in the reality. We cover our faces in public and nurse our wounds in private, ghosts of the lost following our every move.

The mail arrives and I see bills from the lawyer, bills from the nursing home, bills from the cemetery and a sympathy card that begins with "I am so sorry for not getting this to you sooner". In a world overrun by screens, death is the only thing that brings us back to paper. It is so final that a text message, an email, a phone call or Zoom meeting simply will not suffice. This is not due to the gravity of the situation, but rather because a life is lost and the people want their money (excluding the long lost relative extending sympathies, who solely wants some company).

Evening comes and I tap through pictures posted by those without

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a care, empowered by leaders who fear an economic collapse. *Reopen! Reopen!* They urge. *It is what the country needs. The elderly and the sick, the workers risking their health to make a living in these "unprecedented times" are a small price to pay to keep this nation moving along as it always has.* That last part is what they don't say, but is heard in the echoes regardless. Drinks clink together repeatedly, a short video that plays over and over, some clear liquid splashing over the edge of a glass, onto the dark oak table. I can taste the pleasant sting of a drink made by expert hands and realize it has been almost a year since I have drunk something not poured by myself. The shame of pining for a drink at the bar floods me in the following seconds, because what kind of person am I to be upset over something so frivolous when there are people dying and dead and even more fighting to stay alive? I am just as bad as the people uploading their night out for those still stuck inside to see. I sit with a thumb hovering over my phone, questioning if the worst has already happened or it is just around the corner. The numbness of another day blurs any edge of concern pointed towards either scenario.