

The Virus

by John Olson

It all felt so tentative, he thought. The whole set up. Running water. Electricity. A vast network of instant communication. Food in all the stores. It was the latter that gave him the most concern. He'd never really been hungry. Even in his poorest days, in his early twenties, when he was going to school and scraping to get by, there was always a little extra for cigarettes and beer. Dinner might consist of spaghetti noodles and a can of mushroom soup heated and poured over it. Mushroom soup made a nice sauce. So no. Hunger had never really been an issue. But he'd felt its pangs often enough to know how bad it could get. And what if all that food were gone. The truckers finally done trucking. The whole network of production and delivery down. Wasn't this everyone's fear? Was this why so many were panicking over a flu virus? Everyone had grown up with these things. Their loss was unthinkable. Even a disruption in service was intolerable for some people. People on a farm, people with a house and a little acreage, had the option of growing food, if they weren't already doing that. But in the city it was all done by truck. Trucks and the infrastructure that made trucking possible.

The virus made things especially interesting. The wildfire smoke that had distressed two summers in a row and plagued the city with heavy layers of dark choking smoke had been visible, had had a smell, and had been fully evident. But a virus is invisible. It's more like radiation, like the X-rays that had just been taken at the dentist's office. You don't feel a thing when that cone-like apparatus is aimed at your jaw and you sit under a lead apron and hear a little blip when it takes its shot. People can be cooking in a microbial invasion and not know it. They might not yet be sneezing or have a sore throat or even feel a bit under the weather. They might be feeling fine. And leaving a trail of viral potency behind them, a completely invisible, undetectable film of nastiness. On doorknobs. Keyboards. Magazines. Money.

Now he had a dilemma. His English translation of Proust's *The Fugitive* had arrived at the library and was ready for pick up. He'd been reading it when another person put it on hold and he couldn't renew it. So he took it back and put it on hold again. He didn't think it'd come in this soon. Now he had a problem. Had someone with the virus been reading it? Ten people had already died. Died in his city. Just a few miles away. How long can a virus last on a surface? This one: a few hours, or several days, depending on the environment.

Well, of course, in this environment the virus would be living in Paris in the early part of the 20th century. It would have to speak French and know how to negotiate the extremely treacherous arena of the French aristocracy. It would have to be cultured. Most microbes are cultured, but that's a different kind of culture. French culture doesn't occur in a Petri dish. It occurs in opulent rooms with champagne and chandeliers.

And so, he decided, he'd let the book sit there on the shelf for several days. If there were any viruses or microbes involved with Proust's highly contagious prose, they would perish. They would go the way of Swann, and Albertine, and Proust himself, leaving, as we all inevitably do, the narratives we've been pushing, the questions and pursuits, all the insights gathered along the way, gathered and consolidated into a paragraph or two in the obituary column. But the story, the actual story that we lived, that we created, that essential story, that deeply personal narrative gets misplaced, disarticulated from a conclusion no one actually reaches. Because it was there all along. The conclusion was there from the beginning.

