

The Days, the Weeks

by Josef K. Strosche

The stream of flight is long and slowly moving. My eyes follow the gravel layer on the far side of the highway, up the embankment, to the dozen or two dozen boulders there, drawing my attention to the precarious position of the people below walking, for the most part single-file, from my right to my left, heading south, and it's at first funny and then shameful when I think that the swift death from a landslide would be a blessing to this sorry lot. An indirect blessing it would indeed be to me even, as I could then strap on my rucksack and start running, maybe even finding an abandoned bicycle down the road somewhere, and get to wherever it is I'm going all the more quickly.

Mom tugs on my arm and says, look at her, boy, nodding in the direction of a woman not much older than herself. She's hacking into a soiled glove held against her mouth, struggling not to fall to the ground while attempting to sit down onto an upright suitcase. I feel Mom's stare beaming up at my face, maternal pedagogy not yet extinguished, and make to help the old lady. Just then a younger woman around my age, likely her own daughter, drops her four bags and braces the woman from behind, gently placing her to rest. We don't hear their words, though we don't need to, as they're doubtless not unique ones, not ones we haven't already heard a mildly sick woman speak to her ever weakening mother or father along this route, words meant to comfort and distract from the fact that the next break that elderly being takes will be their last on this earth.

My thoughts turn to Mom. I offer my standard elbow and she hooks her little arm into mine. We trudge forth at her pace. It is a remarkable pace for this old, shrunken creature. On some level it makes me proud. I'm proud to be her son, to be of her genes, I think. It's also a thought that gives me hope, a hope that those genes are somehow special and will leave me, like her, untouched by the virus. That hope, though, is nothing I need or want. I'm healthy. Neither of us can explain why, and frankly I'm relieved

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there is such little talking amongst the ranks of our march. Mom says it's because I ate sweet potatoes all my life. I think she's joking, but it's hard to tell. Truth is I don't want to know why I am seemingly the only healthy adult male in this group of over two hundred. Lord only knows what they'll be demanding of me should they realize it.

From the south a vehicle is approaching. The sun is close to its high point above us, the wind calm, and the temperature pleasing to arms in short sleeves. The white lacquer and the chrome finally stop glistening enough for me to make out that it is a van occupied only by a driver, the postman. He stops far ahead of us at the front of the line, gets out, and talks to a small group. Unwilling to pause, they force him to creep at their side, backpedaling. When he's finished he resumes his high perch and accelerates toward us. Midway through the line, he calls out a refrain, walking a straight path against the human traffic. I recognize my name at twenty yards and tell Mom to wait there for me. After informing him who I am I get a response I can't make out. A white mask covers his mouth and nose, white gloves his hands, and I have to shake my head at myself for instinctively offering him my right.

A delivery? What is it? He shrugs and disappears to the rear of the van. I hear a commotion and out comes what looks like a portable wardrobe chest, the kind one finds backstage at a theater, with black vinyl panels held together by shiny, silver metal hardware. He rolls it to me. Over its wheels' heavy thunder I again ask what it is. He muffles an unintelligible sentence behind the mask and refers to his clipboard, lifting a page and returning to the first one. Says here *archive*, he tells me. I go to take the clipboard from him, planning without any thought to snatch it away like I would from my son or an incompetent subordinate, but stop my hand. Show me, I say. And there is the order, black on white: one item, for me, an 'archive,' to be sure. I thank him and he motors away, back south.

They're all staring at me and wondering, some aloud to one another, what it is I've arranged to be brought to me. What is

it? Mom asks. I tell her nothing and advise we keep moving. But she won't let it go. Isn't it heavy? How are you going to bring it along? Are you sure he said nothing? Aren't you even going to open it? It's not that heavy. It's on wheels. He had no details. I'll open it when we stop tonight.

The group waits its agreed-upon two hours after dusk to stop and rest for the night. I've made it a point to fall back to the end of line, gradually, over the course of the afternoon and evening. It's all I can do to convince Mom that this was intentional and not a result of the chest's burden.

She won't let up, so I agree to open it before going to sleep. Its three silver latches pop open without much of a struggle. The wheels offer aid to the hinges, the two sides able to glide apart from each other and open up the inside. We look at its shelves and their contents for a few seconds without speaking. I glance over my shoulder and am not upset that four or five people have taken a mild interest in my delivery. Who sent it? Mom asks me. I have no idea. A nonchalant sigh is all she has to say. She pats me on the back and tells me goodnight, though I doubt, she says, you'll be sleeping much.

My wife and I are in our mid-twenties, the archive reads to me, on vacation, long before our son was born. It is one of my most treasured memories but one I haven't reviewed in quite some time, so I decide I'm starting to like this archive. She's gorgeous. Almost better than I remember her at that age. For a second I want to think she's even a little thinner than I recall. We walk along a winding path that leads up to our hotel, the brown leaves of the oaks that line the path falling in the breeze, and I stop and kiss her. Our kiss is something I've forgotten since her death. I wonder how that is possible. Yet it's something I recognize instantly, like the sight of a long-lost relative or the feel of my hand inside an old baseball glove. It is exactly as I once knew it.

We're in the forest and she mentions how much she loves it in the fall. Did you ever get to see it in the spring? I ask her. When she says no I'm puzzled to find it switch over before our eyes.

The browns and the oranges and the reds and the yellows shift in unison to a wall of bright green. She smiles and laughs, kisses me on the cheek as thanks, and it's then that I know this isn't real. I leave her, clap shut the archive, throw down my meager breakfast, and take Mom up to our old position midway through the line, leaving the archive behind to witness the sunrise alone on the highway.

When the postman returns, again just before noon, I don't stop for him. Sir, he insists. Sir. I keep on walking. Mom is digging her elbow into my side. Son, she says, why are you being so rude? Answer the man. I don't. Finally he pulls down his mask and barks out, Sir! It gets the attention of many. Some even stop. I lead him back to his van and huddle next to his shoulder, ordering him to keep his voice down. I apologize, he says, but you need to take this package, or it's my ass. I refuse. It's not optional, he explains. And where is the other one? I tell him and his face sort of sinks. He looks back behind us, off into the vacant distance of thinning highway and sunshine. Did you review it? I did. Well, he says, scratching his scalp beneath curly, balding hair, I suppose I can go back and pick it up. That's really my fault anyway. I never told you that part. Sir, do not under any circumstances leave another package behind. That won't be a problem, I inform him, because I won't be accepting a new one. Ever. He shakes his head and smiles. You're a tough sell. Look, you know what they say about the messenger and all that, so you don't need me telling you not to shoot him. And if you think, he says with a hearty laugh, that I enjoy driving my ass into this throng of diseased and dying humanity to deliver your mystery packages on top of all the food and supplies I got to run out here twice a week already, then you've got it all wrong. All I know is, these are your archives, according to the order. You need to review each one, confirm that you did so with your signature, and take receipt of the next one. Beyond that, I don't care. I just hope there aren't that many left. Doesn't matter how good the overtime pay is. Every time I sneeze or cough my wife screams like we all got the plague.

And if I refuse? Again his face collapses. It wouldn't be good, sir. That's all I know. You've got to understand, this shit just trickles down to me, so I really don't know. Look, sir, just review the things, will you? They can't be that bad. And they aren't that heavy. You're a big guy. Just be a sport and remember to review them so you can sign my sheet and everyone will be all right. How'd that be?

That night I'm forced to relive the day our son was born. All of it. It was the happiest day in her life, which made it automatically the happiest day in my life, except this time when I sit down next to her in the hospital room, late at night, and run my hand through her hair she asks me if I know why she'll never see this tiny baby she holds in her arms graduate from college. When I look at her I notice she isn't smiling, like she's supposed to be, but is instead grave. Suddenly she's wiser and therefore stronger, but still I ask her if we couldn't just escape together. Right now. Flee them all, you and I, young and healthy and alive as we are at this very instant. Secure a spot just for the two of us and continue enjoying what we've always had together. When she doesn't answer but just stares at me with those piercing, knowing eyes, directing my attention to an image of my mother, I feel stupid. I know again that I've been fooled.

Next morning the thought crosses my mind of snapping Mom's neck, making sure she's dead, and then running down to the sea to drown myself. I feel this thought making me sick, so I drift out of our arm lock and vomit into the switchgrass on the sloping side of the highway, far enough down where no one can see me. I blame it on breakfast. The bread was moldy, I insist to her.

By mid-morning I'm sweating, my thoughts racing, knowing that he'll soon be there with the next one. What if, I wonder, I could infect us? Find the sorriest bastard in the crowd, dream up some worthy excuse for Mom, and put us in a position to breathe his deadly breath?

She nudges me in the side and says, look there, boy, and points her finger at a man. He's younger, probably not even yet

forty, and is reaching his end. We stop and take a good look. Gaunt, his T-shirt hangs from his shoulders like a curtain. He wears shorts, revealing legs devoid of muscle, just bone and skin. He coughs with his eyes closed, leans against a boulder, and runs the back of his hand against his thick beard. Others walk past and say nothing. Help him, Mom tells me. He's all alone. I look at her after she says it, at her taut skin, her strong forearms, the same ones that used to guide me this way or that over fifty years ago. I see her standing there strong and proud, at ease and at peace with her eighty-five years, and cannot for the life of me fathom that the man I see in front of us is real.

I tie Mom's handkerchief around my face and lay the man down flat on the highway's asphalt. He can only open his eyes for a second. Those in line continue to make their way around us in silence as Mom cuts through to hand me her water bottle. I let some trickle onto his blistered, pink lips, making sure he doesn't choke when he manages to open his mouth a thin crack. We wait there with him for fifteen minutes, me holding and watering him, Mom standing guard and offering instruction, until he expires. Mom agrees to pick up the pace in order to catch up to the group. I pull the handle of my archive with one arm and lock the other into hers, and we head off.

This night I'm subjected to a day I don't at first recognize. I see my wife curled in a ball on the couch in our living room and know by her shape and face that it can't be long before she fell ill. Come on, she says to me. She sits up and pats her hand against the seat to her right. Won't you join me? she asks formally, joking around. I do. I'm hung over, she says, letting out the deepest laugh I ever remember coming out of her. I smile and kiss her, tell her she's cute. Let's watch cartoons, she says. I refuse, but she persists, and we spend the next hour trying to focus our remaining brain cells on the colorful moving images drawn for little people a fraction of our age. Our son, now a teenager, walks in and catches us. He shakes his head in shame. All we can do is laugh and go on watching in mindless pleasure.

After I've finished the day's archive I don't go to sleep. I walk by the light of the moon to a supply cart a ways up the line, take from it a white cardboard box that used to hold canned food, and tear it into its individual sections, producing twelve pieces of poster board, four large and eight smaller ones. In my rucksack I find the pen. I direct a flashlight to my work area, careful not to wake Mom, and set about my task. Initially it strikes me as absurd, but I manage to fight through my negativity and write. I describe what I know of his symptoms: his frail condition, his cough, his palpable fever, his dehydration. I include also what I learned through my evening interviews of those who spent the most time just ahead of and behind him. I've come to learn his name too and that he'd been forced to leave behind a dead wife and baby girl yet unburied. I consider addressing my short case history to someone but can think of nothing that makes sense. Likewise, I do not sign it. I must make the journey back to him before the others rise and not wait till daybreak, as I'd like, lest I fall too far behind. The road is dark except for my flashlight's beam and that of the moon. When I finally find his corpse I can't tell if it always looked that way or if it has already begun to rot. A coyote howls in the distance. I laugh at myself for being spooked as I place the placard onto his sunken chest, hoping, though, that nothing feeds on the body before the officials can get to it, as I've instructed the postman to see to earlier when he delivered the day's archive, and start the two-hour walk back to the group.

