

## Letter from London

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It isn't easy to pinpoint the precise moment when a phenomenon shifts from being a background hum to defining our experience of the present. Not long ago, my partner and I spent the weekend in Brighton on the south coast of England. Brighton is best known for its seaside and progressive politics. But most recently it has been in the news as the first place where a novel coronavirus appeared in the UK, supposedly hosted by a man who had travelled to East Asia for work and come home via a skiing holiday in Europe. We had this knowledge at the back of our minds when we visited, but it didn't impact our plans or our experience, even when we were on a crowded train from London. I have a neuro-immune condition and viruses can wreak particular havoc with my health, but even so—there wasn't a tangible sense of threat yet.

It is only a short while later, but everything has changed. The virus is the only news; it is the primary topic of conversation, which is mostly fearful speculation in the absence of any real data, or any visible concern on the part of the government. In my mind that trip to Brighton is located firmly in the realm of 'before'. But perhaps I do remember the moment when we shifted definitively into a new reality; when discussions about the implications of this new virus began to influence my actions. A friend was passing through London on her way home to Mexico and we had planned to meet for dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant. As the day approached, the number of coronavirus cases was growing and we were beginning to hear more public messages about key symptoms and ways to prevent transmission. The situation was evolving swiftly.

Dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant no longer felt wise:

Ethiopian food is eaten communally, often from a large thali-like platter, using *injera* as an edible implement, akin to *roti*. But almost immediately, sitting around a table together inside any restaurant, or even at home, felt unwise. Then, on the day of her arrival, my friend sent a message to say that the person she was staying with had a slightly elevated temperature. We ended up meeting at an outdoor café, wrapped up against the cold and bumping elbows in bemused greeting. Afterwards my friend got back on the bus to where she was staying and the next day she flew home to Mexico. We wait to hear if she remains well.

And now here we are. My partner is self-isolating and I am temporarily living in the flat of a friend who stockpiled toilet paper and bottled water before leaving London to stay with his parents during what appears to be an imminent lockdown—another new entry into the public lexicon, along with 'coronavirus'. All plans, large and small, are cancelled for the foreseeable future. We see Italy's mounting grief in the news and we are afraid as much by our own government's insouciance as by the harm the virus can do. This morning a friend dropped some supplies outside the door, departing before I opened it. There are suddenly invisible membranes between us. In the space of weeks, everything has changed. The air is thick with anxiety: we are afraid and we don't know what is to come. Somehow we already know that we are already living through an event of historical significance. A friend speaks through tears on the phone. 'I don't think things will ever be the same,' she says.

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