

When She Got It

By Elizabeth England

Before it came, she was unstoppable.

She sliced through her days like an ice-cutter, breaking modest glass ceilings (they were more like plastic) and bypassing equators and border controls simply by staying put. She believed that to travel was to delay and to stall was to go nowhere. To her, tomorrow was today and today was next year. She was always ahead of herself and ahead of the curve until it came and stopped her world from spinning.

But even before it (and most certainly afterwards), in her immediacy and transparency, she was prudent. She weighed the pros against the cons and asked friends for advice; if she detected their equivocation, she asked for reasons presented lawyer-like in stacks of twos and threes so she could assess, decide and move on. As aforementioned, this was before it came and fogged the windshield of a collective future.

In short (though becoming longer by the sentence), there was a time (remember it?) when it was once a benign pronoun, referring to a specific or abstract modifier, not a virus killing over a million. This was pre-stasis and pro-movement. When getting ahead was the new getting behind not getting nowhere which is what it felt like to her when it came.

Before it was diagnosed and named, she was a bit yin but mostly yang and when the planets shifted, she was at her most edgy. She went in and out of popularity like the sun behind clouds on a mercurial day.

Regardless, she wore workout clothes beneath work clothes, dancing at clubs that were basements and basements that were apartments and apartments that were homes where the tempo of the music made the thin panes tremor. She shimmied with boys and girls she either knew or would know better soon, and when the sun rose, she didn't bother showering; who wanted to wash off the evening? Not her.

Her life (which she loved) was a pixilation of cheap taco or falafel dinners and splurgy movies with elongated seats that were First Class-worthy. When she did the math, which she didn't do often (as it showed her how superficial she was; why couldn't she be sated by simply being?), she spent all she made on

experiential vacations: sitting in a rocket ship at NASA, climbing a peak where people died (not Everest, another one) and roller skating in European cities where streets were called lanes.

When asked what she was, she mumbled 'artist' yet spent hours at an office learning codes and then better codes that would ultimately make her redundant. Still, numbers piling on top of numbers (cue: the lawyer-like stacks above) balanced the never-ending bleeds of color on her imagined canvases. It was easier to do arithmetic than to make art. It was easier to pay her bills than to live with her parents. It was easier to dream ethereal and live mediocre. She took classes on time-management but skipped the ones on self-care; if she could nail the former, who needed the latter?

And love. What about it?

There was a boy and then another and finally one who asked questions that she wanted to answer. He queried and she responded and then they switched roles until they knew everything there was to know about one another, or so they erroneously thought. They saw each other often which wasn't enough and yet, at times, it was too much. She said she wanted time for art, and he said he wanted time for Tai Chi and then they both apologized for admitting they wanted time away from one another. Love was the aspiration but maybe like was less stressful.

While they were deciding to be each other's everything or nothing, it was still rampant, of course, ignoring people's commutes, milestone celebrations, trips planned for years. It didn't care about any of that. Even schools weren't off-limits; it took each down like an axe fells a tree. Scientists, politicians, sociologists, psychologists, experts in fields that dealt with Latin multi-syllabic syndromes and outcomes tried to make sense of it, but it confounded even the smartest and most fearless. It was on a roll.

While she was obliviously balancing work-art-play-love (perhaps even over-stoking the oblivion to prolong its intoxication), when she was obliviously analyzing the this and the that of every decision she made (should she see the new Almodovar film even though she heard it wasn't very good? Should she try gouache even though she barely made time to use oils? Should she move in with the third boy even though he hadn't asked her to? Should she just *try* being gluten-free and see how she felt?) with a song-on-repeat fanaticism, the lights went out.

Snuffed, silenced, suffocated. A blanket tucked in so tightly that to breathe was a reminder that she was in fact not dead. Day-life, nightlife — or any external life really — ended: the finale of an unresolved series.

She listened for news on a radio with a weak connection, the in and out of tune-in kept her from knowing too much yet allowed her to know just enough. The take-away: she must stay inside and listen to herself.

Brushing her teeth, pouring water into the kettle, scrolling her phone, earmarking a book page, flushing the toilet, opening a door and then closing another. She wasn't that interesting. In fact, she didn't like her own company and at first, she waited for others to entertain her or at least teach her how to entertain herself and when they didn't (because they either had gotten it and were ill or dead, or, like her, they were getting to know themselves on their own terms in their own way on their own devices and platforms), she grew used to this new interior way of life.

She learned how to applique, solve for x (she had been taught years ago but had forgotten), play Suzuki drum on a pasta pot, make 3-ingredient meals, French braid, use memo notes, grout. She made dates to talk to people on the telephone and listened to their voices instead of looking at their faces. When the dates were over, she napped as missing people exhausted her.

She went on social media fasts and then binged; she gave up coffee and resumed the habit with heavy cream. She learned how to cut her own nails and hair. She told herself to read books and think about them afterwards. And then she taught herself how to think period.

Work was besides her point though she did what she was told and when she had questions, she unmuted herself to ask.

Months passed and then a flower bloomed and then a few more did the same and it was spring. When the sun finally shone consistently enough to warm the metal railings and the park benches, when the frost no longer came at night and jarred the tulip heads, everyone opened their windows and left them ajar. At first, she stood on her doorjamb and watched. She was hesitant and wondered where it had gone, but then she saw others wearing skirts and sleeveless shirts and flip flops and believed the Age of Aquarius truly had dawned.

She herself cracked a window and then a door; the air slithered in and (maybe it was just her) smelled like it had been through something destabilizing, a molecular breakdown perhaps but had miraculously come out the other side.

It was still here, of course, traveling to parts of the country and the world where it hadn't visited before or maybe it had; it didn't care. Repeat vacations were ok by it. It didn't need to pick an undiscovered place, curate an itinerary, buy outfits, renew passports. Impulsively, hedonistically, it travelled and had a voraciously good time anywhere at any time.

In her defense, it wasn't as feverish (oh yes it was) as the protests and the upcoming presidential election or if it was, no one seemed as concerned as they had earlier. In fact, the news began discussing literature, art, music, a future without it. Which meant that while it was losing network ratings, though lives themselves were still being lost to it, it was also summer, and everyone needed a break. A break from it. She needed a break from it. So, although she herself wasn't certain outside was to be trusted, mostly because no one trusted it a few weeks before so why now, she joined others in halter dresses and shorts, tanks and minis. She wore protection over her mouth and nose and let the sun do its thing on her arms and legs. She bought drinks in paper cups with straws and, like others, carried them around like a chalice, revered for being procured and enjoyed in celebration of what exactly she wasn't sure. Living? Not getting it? Not dying?

Walking the streets with others, some whom she knew (Hi, how're you doing?) and others she didn't (Hi, do I know you?), she gravitated towards the latter since not having a Before seemed more reliable than assuming there'd be an After.

Oh, right, the boy. She was in touch with him, of course, but didn't need to physically see him; after all, they were together in mind and spirit if not in body. They were mature about their connection and relied on the meta versus the concrete. She forgot his name and realized she didn't need to remember it.

Six weeks passed.

When the third boy asked her to get tested so they could have sex in person not on a device, she was flattered. He wanted to see her, and she wanted to see him; maybe they were in love.

She had the test and when the confirmation came on the slip of email, she didn't believe it. She waited for her breath to shorten, her taste or smell to flatten. She read the scroll of symptoms again and again and none applied. She felt fine so she *was* fine.

And yet, on a day like any other, when she was equal parts vigilant and equal parts aware, protected and careful, guarded and focused, eating apples not from a germey box store but from the local farmers market, on a day that was truthfully not an exciting or memorable day (she can't even remember it), on that day, she must've gotten it.

What day?

What did she do?

Who was she with?

Who gave it to her?

Wasn't she careful?

She was protected and careful.

When the horny third boy called, she told him she had it, so they decided to stay apart (though they weren't together really ever) until it went away. Days went by and neither called so the calling stopped.

She was still feeling fine (though this was dubious) when her boss announced a shut-down, a buy-out, a re-org, a lay-off, but she was spared any of it and still had a job. In fact, she was handed the reins on a project that no one (not even she) would describe as small.

The project entailed transcription and assessments of physicists, musicians and chefs; boxes of information would be arriving at her home soon. Her new workload was promised to be tedious and mounting, with charts and sheets and graphs and numbers that her boss said only she understood and could interpret (which both delighted and beleaguered her).

Everyone at work was trying to be more this or more that, raising virtual hands for assignments not in their wheelhouse. Everyone at work wanted to keep their job and maybe even take someone else's. Though she wasn't a suspicious

person (though she wasn't *not* a suspicious person), she wondered why a colleague Slacked her and said: How are you?

How was she?

The initial symptoms were incognito, stealth workers taking her down so slowly that at first, she felt like herself, which meant, good then not so good. When the not so good came on, she went horizontal and that was how she was. Gregor Samsa. Not a bug but not herself.

How was she?

When those boxes of papers were sent to her home from her boss who said only you only you, she didn't say, I'm not well. When she crawled to the door, only pulling herself vertical to retrieve the delivery, and then returning to all fours, she didn't say I can't decode, decipher or do any task stat. Instead, she curled up on the doormat, working fairly proficiently from her phone; who would know?

While she was fake-fine, her fingers and toes became furry and her tongue no longer could tell the difference between black tea or black coffee. She ignored those symptoms though she welcomed the fever (some would say delirium; she called it a bloom). Paintbrushes and charcoal, watercolors and oils, nothing was off limit. This was all in her mind of course, which she was losing, along with her ability to breathe those deep cleansing breaths that her yogi friends who called and left long messages reminded her to do. Those yogis and the colleague checked in all the time or maybe it was once in a while.

She was still pretend-fine but not fine at all (was she dying? On the doormat?) when she began furry-fingering the physicists, musicians and chef's papers. It was sheer, nylon-like with no elasticity and the cursive of the penmanship made her eyes stay awake. She had work to do, paintings to create, a boy somewhere to fall in love with; why put off until tomorrow what she could do today? As she was already horizontal and deserving of a rest, she'd attend to it all, the work-art-play-love, after a small sleep, a catnap, not out like a light which is what happened. Snuffed, silenced, suffocated.

Elizabeth England



Elizabeth England's stories have appeared in the *Nebraska Review*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Berkshire Review*, *Connecticut Review* and *New Rivers Press American Fiction Vol 16*.

She won *The OSU Journal's* as well as *Inkwell Magazine's* short story contests, where the winning story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her story "First Girl" was reprinted in the *Writers Studio 30 Anthology*, published by *Epiphany Magazine* in Spring 2017.

When not convening with her muse, Elizabeth counsels students and families on the college admissions process, throws heavy weights around the gym, and tries any new recipe involving sweet potatoes, kale, and chocolate (not together).

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