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How Long is a Piece of String

by Mia Sundby

"How weird it is," we said, staring wide-eyed and comical across the kitchen table, as I chewed on chocolate-spread toast and writhed at being home.

"Frustrating is another word," I sighed, a bitter smile on chocolate lips.

"I know," my mum said with a glance off out through the kitchen window. Quiet.

Unspoken words, already-spoken words. Possibilities eclipsed, futures uncertain.

"Look," she said, "the birds are out."

We watched the birds and pretended not to be scared.

"How boring it is," we said, playing board games for the second time that day.

"I quite like this bit," I grinned, and there was nothing else to do but play.

"How draining it is," we said, watching wearily as the news washed past in grim

Storms of terror and uncertainty, and boredom.

"At least we have each other," my mum smiled, gripping our hands. We nodded,

And my dad sloped off to make more tofu. Oat milk? A crossword?

"How lovely it is," we smiled, clanging pots and pans and hands, grinning and sheering at our neighbours, at the honking blue-lit ambulances.

"I hope this lasts," said my mum, and I agreed. It didn't.

"I was getting better," I whispered in the mirror, staring dead-eyed at my face, tear-smudged and staring back, hands shaking, heart racing, mind spinning.

"I was so much better," I muttered, slipping mercifully into sleep at 4am.

"How relieving it is to get back to life," everyone said.

"We were quite enjoying it, really," said my mum. I nodded, thinking of pubs.

"How wonderful to be back," my dad said, his jars of tofu and kombucha spilling out of the cupboards. "Maybe for you," my sister muttered darkly, packing her bag for work.

"How strange it is to be alive," I said, frowning at the calendar. When had it changed?

"How much longer will it last, do you think?" I asked my mum, as we watched a programme on Black Death.

"Longer." We agreed, flicking over to the news. Different masks, smarter science; same idiots.

"How lonely it is," I thought, waiting for New Zealand to wake up and give me my friend back.

"How busy it is," said my mum, shrinking back into the house with a mask and her bags of groceries.

"How normal it is to be back," I said, disbelieving somehow. We all agreed.

Time flies. Weeks race. Hours drag. Jobs change. Seasons go. My first Winter in two years. What are you doing New Year's Eve?

"How funny it is to be back inside." We said flatly, staring at the rain outside.

"The birds are gone," my mum frowned. "No, look," I smiled, "There's a robin."

'He looks busy,' I thought, wistfully.

Out again, about again. News and terror and shouting again.

It's December 2021, though I don't remember when or how, and I'm smiling at the wreaths and trees, bundled up in nets and tucked in doorways, at the piling receipts for presents for friends, who are scattered but always close.

I went for a burger and a pint the other night. It's silly, but a crystal sits in my pocket, a mask settles on my face, and hope flutters in my chest.

"How wonderful to be alive," I thought, "but why does it always hurt?"

I cried myself to sleep last night. My hands are toasty warm from the keep cup in between them. My tea is good. The homeless guys are on the street, but now they have two hot dogs thanks to me.

I haven't hugged my friends in months, but I see them every Tuesday.

It hurts, but in a good way.

"How long is a piece of string?"