

## Don't Touch the Carrots

I was still sleeping when everything in the world changed.

On October 9th, at 4:32 AM PST, phone screens lit up every pocket, and televisions were switched on in a tech tsunami. People weren't afraid immediately because things like this were in the news all the time. The sensationalist media had screamed fear-mongering choruses so loudly that we had become deaf. I would roll my eyes when my wife would flip to the all-news channel, that was only announced by buxom, blonde, right-wing hosts. The red rolling bulletins of written world news blinked every 5-seconds, making anyone who suffered from calm, measured reactions a little nauseated with political photosensitivity.

As a long-term, non-ironic flip-phone user, I receive only an MMS from the Emergency Government Alert System telling us to monitor the on-going situation and 'be vigilant with our personal health.' I roll over in bed to my wife, who only stirs briefly from the vibration of my device and rest a hand on her shoulder, 'just an automated alert, Tam. Must be a bad flu season.'

'M-kay,' she sighs, and goes back to sleep.

I like the absence of hyperlinking headlines on my phone. Being someone who works with words and texts all day, it feels unsettling to leave something un-clicked, like a task I haven't put a line of red pen through. And I don't like that my kids, and my dad, and my wife would call me on the same phone that screams things like, 'SHOCKING DISCOVERY AT THE SITE OF 'CRASHED' BOEING 737' and, 'FLORIDA MAN ARRESTED WITH 11 CHARGES OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY.'

So, when we get the messages, I don't do anything but flip my phone closed and tell my kids to wash their hands really well at school before they eat. After saying bye, we all head our separate ways.

I get into the car and put on the national classical radio station while waiting for the windows to de-fog. It had been a very cold fall season. The usual mild briskness that we expect

is replaced with frost and dense white clouds prophesying early snow. As the wipers on the windshield nearly match the cadence of Beethoven, I let my eyes relax.

*Class, emails, meeting, meeting, emails, groceries. Repeat.*

*C, E, M, M, E, G.*

The wipers swish twice, and I repeat my acronym again, but out loud. ‘C. E. M-M. E. G.’

I’ve been using mnemonic devices since I was 9. I used to memorize silly phrases, like, ‘keep ponds clean or fish get sick,’ to remember the taxonomic ranking- kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species. Now that I’m older, I find I don’t remember the phrases either, but anything put to a tune works pretty well.

‘Beautiful.’ The serene voice of the radio host interrupts, ‘That was Beethoven’s classic, Adagio, followed by Felix Mendelssohn’s, String Symphony No. 12 in G Major, played by the Munich Radio Orchestra featuring Henry Raudales. Now we will hear from our on-ground contact in Bangkok, Thailand for an update.’

Radio static fills the car, and heavy breathing takes its place. Alarmed, I shut off the windshield wipers to listen.

‘Yes... hello, Lisa. This is Tom MacElnett reporting live from Bangkok...’ More heavy panting.

‘Hello, Tom. Can you update the listeners here in the Pacific Northwest about the current situation? How quickly is the condition spreading and, who does it seem to be infecting?’

Another long pause, ‘Yes, Lisa, the situation here is at a crucial point. People are very concerned. There’s a lot of panic... a lot. Food and supplies are running out in the majority of stores. And for now, the condition seems to only be infecting individuals of South East Asian origin. There isn’t much more to say at the moment.’

‘Thank you for that. It is clear that the situation is worsening in the area, and of course the listeners here are concerned about spread as well. Do we know how this is transmitted yet? Are there any reports from the local Bangkok authorities?’

‘We’re not sure of anything, and...’ white noise overwhelms the tinny voice again, then a long pause.

The host clears her throat, ‘That was Tom MacElnett reporting to us from Bangkok. Thank you, Tom. Well, this is an ongoing, and troubling situation. As public health authorities have said, stay safe and be careful. And of course, stay tuned to KFEU for updates. Now we’ll head back to Classical Hour. Here is *Rêverie*, 68, arranged for violin and piano, composed by Claude DeBussy, played by Ami Oike & Takaya Sano.’

I close my eyes, as the music fills my car. My breathing slows down as the piano rises and falls. I look in my rearview mirror at our house. We painted over the gray with a peachy pink last spring – I hate it – but Tamara insists it’s beautiful. She says it looks the color of watered-down fruit punch, like the boozy umbrella drinks we had on vacation the previous winter. I think it looks like Pepto Bismol.

My eyes flick back to the stairs of our patio. Within the next half hour I know Tam will open the screen door (regardless of the weather), make her coffee and sit for a few minutes before she gets ready for work. I place a hand on my stomach and blow out for 11 seconds, then in for 7, and out for 11. My doctor says I need to pace my breathing and go for runs when I begin to get anxious. It will ‘calm the storm’ before it begins. I’ve been doing it, but it seems like bullshit. I’m still anxious all the time – just with a slightly better cardio system.

The alarm on my phone snaps my focus back to now – 8:00 am. Time to go. I turn on my wipers again to combat the sprinkling.

Swish, swish. ‘C. E. M-M. E. G.’ *Everything will be fine.*

Swish, swish. ‘C. E. M-M. E. G.’ *It always is fine.*

I head out the driveway to Camby Highschool where I teach history and biology. After parking I head inside, carrying my books through the crowded halls. Thumping the tomes on top of my desk, I organize my notes for class and mess around with the temperamental projector device.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

*Here they come. C. E. M-M. E. G.*

The students file into their seats making lots of noise. I wait a few minutes, watching the chaos of phones and pheromones settle down and then start.

‘Good morning. I hope you all had a lovely weekend. Today we’re beginning our unit on the 1940s in Europe. First off, who can tell me a little bit about the major event that took place during this period?’ I look around the room.

Several hands shoot up, ‘Mark, go ahead.’

‘World War 2.’

‘Right. And can anyone tell me what precipitated this?’ I scan around the room again – only a few volunteers. ‘Chantal.’

‘Hitler started up the Nazi party...’ she trails off.

‘Correct. Among other things, the losses in World War 1 drove Hitler, a charismatic speaker, to begin espousing Anti-Semitic, White Nationalist rhetoric blaming the Jews for such losses. And you’re right, he gained influence quickly.’

I stop and take a sip of coffee from my travel mug.

‘So, today we’re going to look at pictures from this time to really get an understanding that pushes past what we think we know. I’d like everyone to take out a sheet of paper while we’re doing this and jot down the number of each slide, then beside them, write a single word that you immediately associate with what you see.’

A hand lifts up in the front of the classroom, ‘Mr. Mitchell, are these going to be graphic?’

‘Tit-ties!’ A low voice laughs, followed by snickers from the teen boys around him. I shoot a look toward the back.

‘Really, guys?’

They go quiet.

‘I won’t lie to you, Hannah, they are uncomfortable, and yes, some are graphic,’ I pause. ‘War *is* graphic. Loss and suffering are graphic. But I think it’s important for each generation to

reflect on our worst times so that we can learn from them. You can certainly choose to look away, but I encourage you to be present.’

I turn out the lights and begin the slideshow. The black and white images begin a journey from the ends of World War 1, champagne bottles and smiling faces, to soldiers waving out of train windows, to the unsettled times of marking stars on arms and numbers on skin, to straight armed salutes and the emaciated bodies of the jailed, to plumes of people-smoke, and the shellshocked eyes of boys who weren’t boys anymore.

Twenty minutes goes by and a white picture ends the show. I flick the lights back on, ‘Alright. Thoughts?’

The class is quiet, until Josh speaks up, ‘Fuckin’ heavy, Mr. M. Nice way to start the day.’ He gives a thumbs-up

‘Okay. Yes, you’re right. Anyone else?’ Nothing. The silence is louder than usual.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

‘Well, saved by the bell, I guess. Please leave your papers on my desk.’ The kids get up, pulling out their phones as they leave. I collect the papers and sit down to reply to parent emails.

The school day passes quickly with a vanity meeting of the PAC (AKA. bored Botox mom brigade fighting for parental domination), and an upper grades assembly on overdose prevention. After a series of emails regarding late permission slips for our upcoming field trip, I collect up my things from the shared teacher’s lounge – a portal into the 1970s world of orange shag carpet and ‘groovy’ Bob Ross paintings – and go to my car.

Turning on the engine, a man’s voice comes through on the radio, ‘-ats right. We know so little, but we do know that protection is paramount. And it’s tough in a globalized world.’ The voice of a caller, mhmms their agreement. ‘I mean, there are flights in and out by the hundreds into every main city from Southeast Asian cities. Our law makers need to stop travel immediately.’

‘Yeah, I agree Adam. I think we have to protect ourselves. This is *our* country after all and we gotta’ look out for our own.’

‘Yes, absolutely. That was Amanda De Souza, a local caller, talking about what’s unfolding in what, this morning, *was just* Thailand, but now this deadly virus has been confirmed to also be in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and the Philippines.’

I look at myself in my rear-view mirror and use my hand to wipe my forehead. *In 7, out 11. In 7, out 11.* I grab my bag and remove the stack of crumpled student papers to fish out my pills. I swallow two and drive to the store. The afternoon radio guy goes on about safety and symptoms and closing down the country.

When I get to Country Grocer, I sit in the car and watch how people are acting. Are other people worried? I try to call Tam, who doesn’t answer.

*She’s probably fine. She’s at work, just on the phone.*

People seem to be leisurely milling about with their carts, putting bags into trunks. Though there are a lot of people carrying toilet paper?

*In 7, out 11. In 7, out 11.*

I get out and grab the list from my pocket: Milk, cheese, carrots.

Inside, things seem normal. Kids whine at their parents about chocolate bars, people stand around reading labels, and picking out cereal. My heart rate slows down a bit at the sight. *Things are okay.*

I grab my first two items out of the refrigerated aisles. I’m careful to only use my pinky finger to open up the door. I’ve done this since I was a kid – the designated filthy pinky, which makes my other digits available to touch my face. Next: produce.

I freeze in place when I get to the department. There’s an older Asian couple picking out yellow onions. Carrots are between the rows of lettuce and onions, sitting above the beets. I pretend to look at the bags of croutons an aisle away and watch them. The older woman smiles at the man as she puts back what he placed in the cart. He laughs at her and coughs, then grabs a hankie from his pocket, and wipes his nose. *Please don’t touch the carrots.*

She shakes her head and taps a finger on his nose. *Please don’t touch the carrots.*

Suddenly a tall woman comes up behind me, ‘Fuckin’ foreigners, eh?’ she mutters to me as she passes by, clearly having noticed me staring at the couple. The tall woman leans in front of me and takes a box of Cheezy Croutonz! and I can’t see if they grabbed carrots before walking away. I bring my hand to the little bald spot at the back of my head and pluck out 8 hairs.

*Can’t do carrots. What else is like carrots? Yams are close enough.*

I select 8 yams from the other end of the produce section, pay, and leave.

In the parking lot, I take a few deep breaths. *Finished.*

As I come up to my car, I notice that the paper bag I’m holding is wet on the bottom – condensation from the milk. Using my knee as a table, I try to get the keys out of my pocket, while holding my wallet under my arm, but as I do, the bag rips. ‘Shit!

The jug lands on the pavement without bursting, but the yams roll away. I open up the trunk and put the items inside, along with the 6 yams that have scattered near the car.

*Good thing they have peels. Two missing.*

I look around the parking lot and see one near the shopping carts. As I grab it, I hear a voice behind me, ‘Hey you!’

The small woman from the couple is standing by my car, smiling and holding the missing yam out to me.

‘Oh...’ I stand there looking at her. ‘I, ugh...’ I don’t move.

She looks at me, and then at her husband. ‘T’sokay, I put here,’ she calls to me from across the lot and drops it in the open trunk.

‘... thank you. Thanks,’ I mutter and look down as they move slowly toward their vehicle.

I wait awkwardly until they’re gone, then close the trunk with my elbow and get in the car.

*In 7, out 11. In 7, out 11.*

I let my eyes blur as I sit there, exhausted. Putting my wallet down on the stack of loose paper, the writing on the top piece catches my eye. I pick it up, it's Hannah's.

It only has one thought repeated 40 times: *How did we let this happen?!*