

Dear A:

Are you doing well? I hope you are. It is getting warmer nowadays, but these sudden temperature drops are unbearable, I swear. Last week I woke up with a tingling in my throat, and it has not gone away since. I try to drink water to flush it down, but it has been stuck there for days. I go to sleep feeling it burning in my throat. But I am sure it will leave soon—these things have a pattern of sorting themselves out, don't they? In any case, I hope you are keeping warm. Did you keep the sweater that K gave you for your birthday last year?

I know that you will probably never read these words. I know that they will read the first few lines (like this one!) and immediately shred these pages. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I do feel pity for them, even as they strip me down, search my cavities and humiliate me with their teases. But rage also turns into resentment. Perhaps I do resent them. Them, with their guns and their hats and the curse words that casually fall out of their mouths. Then that resentment turns into fear.

I have been dreaming of war. Messy dreams. Fragments that slash into my mind at a moment of distraction, leaving me with a back of sweat, exhausted when I wake up to this reality. I've not had my pills since getting here—maybe that's why the nightmares are starting to spill into reality? I really hope that is it. I dreamed of soldiers marching down the street in riot gear; crawling across a desert as tear gas started raining down; a broken TV set in an abandoned house playing the same speech of the Commander on loop. I dreamed of tasting blood as it swells up from my lungs. I dreamed of blank documents, the kind I used to stare at for hours (in another life!) with an ice coffee at hand in a trendy café. I dreamed of gunshots and fireworks. A victory speech and thunderous applause. They chanted, "Hail Victory." They chanted, "we're taking the country back." I don't know where they thought the country went before all this, but it certainly is back with them now.

Do you remember the poem that used to be all over social media back when all this started—a little confessional piece, the one that began with "First they came for the Communists"? I read you that poem late at night, after you told me to put down my phone and stop doomscrolling Twitter. "You have to keep yourself safe first." You said, "No good marking yourself out for the sniper's convenience." I nodded to put your nerves at rest, but it was really not a nod of agreement. I was instinctively disgusted by that silence. It's like holding back vomit on a

nauseating bus ride. You thought it was going to be a sniper, terrorizing the masses by murdering the few. But machine gun bullets don't turn around in front of the most innocuous child.

Of course, deep down I knew you were right. You are a student of rational choice theory; you're the rationalist and I'm the romanticist. I remember sitting across from you in the library late at night, you were reading Ostrom and me reading Deleuze. After a few drinks, I would start rambling about the schizoanalytics of ungovernable difference. You would smile and quietly nod. I imagine you must have been amused, even a little speechless. I sobbed for an hour when I got back, thinking obsessively that in the face of world-history, "our little lives don't count at all."

I still remember that night at the SX City airport when I left that city, the city that was all I had known back then. All my life fit into a checked bag. It was stunning, the necessity of detachment. To look at an old book, touch it, flip through it, knowing that this was probably the end of our brief encounter in the infinite time-space composition of the universe. They say that immigrants come to this place for a better life. I don't think anyone uproots their life to look for something better, the greener grass on the other side. Maybe a vacation to snatch a quick glance. But to take the leap that most immigrants took is cutting off a piece of your soul, burying it in the soil of the backyards that you will never see again, hoping that one day, historians may be enchanted by the torturous beauty of its fossilized remains. (I can already imagine your expressions reading these lines: maybe annoyed at the verbosity of a simple point? How I wish I could see that face again...)

No: people don't move for a 'better life'; they take that leap so that they can escape the horrors coming from behind. They knew of poverty, of fear, of silence, of beatings, of violence, of arbitrary loss. They come here for the absence of these things.

And now they take off again. Dissociating, not letting yourself get attached—to feel numb is better than excruciating pain of cutting off another piece of the soul, is it not?

Is it not laughable, all the hours we spent scheming and planning for job searches, for career planning and for road mapping the rest of our lives—only to have everything rendered utterly useless by the stroke of a pen?

I apologize for writing this much of the past. I know you don't like it when I dwell in the endless reminiscence, nostalgia and retrospective horrors of trauma from disasters past. But I do miss a lot of things. I miss the towering heights of the chapel, atop which we could see the stars. I miss our cat. I miss the life of waking up at 11 am. I miss everything, everything before it all started.

But for those who live in the distant lands, the killing fields—all of this started a long time ago. It is simply our turn now.

I hope that your new life is going well. I know you've always dreamed of tucking yourself away in a cabin out in the woods, reading in the warmth and brightness of a carefully-perfected fireplace. I hope that you made it there. If not, at least you now have undisrupted supply to the greatest chemical in human history—alcohol!

It has only been two weeks in here; yet it feels like an eternity. Everything is in disarray—I don't think even the guards know what's going on. The first few days I was here, I would repeat the phrase they taught us in these 'know-your-rights' trainings: "I want to speak to a lawyer", whenever they passed by my cell. They would laugh, then walk away. I gave up very quickly. P, a man from D-ville in the cell next to me, kept at it. I think he's going insane. When the world is going insane, sticking to the rulebook becomes the first sign of insanity.

I don't know when I will see a judge, or when they plan to release me, or what they plan to charge me with. I saw on the news last night that H was sentenced to 25 years in prison for "advocating terrorism." I remember our heated argument, before all this started, about whether violence is a just means to induce social change. She told me that violence only begets more violence, and that things will never end well once blood is spilled. It's ironic, isn't it? She believed in the power and relative safety of nonviolence, only to be put in maximum security prison regardless; I left SX because I feared this very thing back home, only to sprint into another captivity that fooled me with its mask of civility.

Ironically, fear loses its power as soon as the nightmare materializes. When something becomes *fait accompli*, there is no longer a point to fearing it. Perhaps we all needed the nightmare to come alive, to consume us all, to kill us all—before we can be reborn.

Please, be well, stay free and live on. That is my only ask.

Always Yours,

*Z*