

To Go Out

By Em Syth

Anne had been inside for a while, longer than you would think. It all began when the pandemic started and she, like many, panicked and ceased physical contact with the outside world. It had never been easier to do – if you were fortunate enough to have a job that allowed you to work from home; that's where you were.

Outside was a disease that no one understood but scientists had discovered spread fast. One person would infect many. Initially no one even knew how it spread. It seemed like it could get to you from anywhere through anyone. At first you were fine, then the sore throat, fever, and shortness of breath came. It hit some people very hard, erasing whole families from the planet.

You heard stories where first a grandfather was admitted to the hospital, followed by a grandmother after a few days of deteriorating at home. Their 54-year-old son could not visit them because he tested positive. His father was moved to the ICU where he went into cardiac arrest and was on a ventilator within days. The son himself was admitted as his father died alone, but for an ICU nurse in personal protective equipment. The stories could continue for multiple generations – aunts, uncles, and cousins. The country counted the supply of ventilators, holding its breath.

Anne had not seen her parents since she traveled to her grandfather's funeral the first week of March. In the weeks that followed, Anne always wondered if someone had come home sick from the event and was now dead. She had seen hundreds of relatives – an extended community. She had hugged more people than she could count. She had sat close to family in church pews, packed together to share grief and memories. So had everyone.

Anne was at high risk for disease. Anne had asthma and had had it as long as she could remember. Her immune system was weak and she already would get a deep, persistent cough that wore her out for a few months of every year. She was vulnerable – if she caught the disease, she was more likely to have serious side effects and die.

Anne got all her essentials delivered. The driver would drop the items off at the door in a no contact delivery. She would wait a few minutes to be sure he was gone and for any bacteria to settle and then she would retrieve her groceries with gloves. In the early days, she'd even wiped her milk cartons down with disinfecting wipes, following the instructions of her cousin's husband, a physician.

Anne would get up each day at 5am and read the news on her phone in bed. It never really got less grim – the numbers got scary large. Anne tracked statistics each day just to feel her heart drop in her chest and orient herself to reality. She'd put on a shirt and leggings – no socks, no bra – and walk across her house to the coffee maker in the kitchen to make a cup. She hadn't worn a bra in months. Anne would fill the watering can and circle the living room to water her plants. The auto-feeder chimed and poured for Fred, her cat. A morning pick-me-up for everyone. Then she would settle at her desk, thermos of coffee in hand, ready to work.

Anne passed hours like this, comfy and cozy; hand on her mouse and eyes on her two screens. She would enjoy the light that came through the window next to her desk and looking out at the birds, squirrels, and chipmunks. Fred often came to visit her, purring, ready to be pushed off of the keyboard but not off of her hands. Like Anne, he enjoyed window gazing and paid close attention to the animal going ons through the glass.

At the end of the day, she would close her computer and migrate to her couch. Before eventually going to bed to wake up the next day and do it again. Her schedule was consistent. No one wanted to go anywhere and nor did they ask her to go out. As this was her natural inclination, Anne was blissfully happy.

She settled into a routine that didn't change much over the summer. The biggest change was that she would go out onto her extremely tiny, screened-in porch where she kept a chair. Fred would come with her. Sometimes he would make noises at the chipmunks and his head was often whipping around to track birds' flight paths. Anne adored the breeze that rustled the leaves of a nearby oak tree. Anne had not been this happy in years, she realized, not since her hiking trip out west.

As people started to go out, most stayed six feet away from each other to avoid the spread of the disease. When asked to go, Anne always said no. Before she knew it, she had not been outside of her walls in 154 days. Though surprised at the number, Anne could not break the streak. The thought of leaving made her heart beat too fast, and her body would wind-up for a panic attack. Her parents were in Florida and didn't know. When they talked on the phone, her mother told her to go on walks outdoors but she did not understand where Anne was. Anne's rational self knew her mother was right, but her inner self was still too anxious to try it.

It was only somewhat about staying healthy now. Anne was scared to go out. She would open her desk window and enjoy the breeze and watch the trees, but she would not go any further.

Summer turned to fall, and she reluctantly went indoors after two blankets could no longer keep her warm on the porch. Indoors, her cozy desk knick-knacks captured her attention, replacing her

outdoor views and she was happy again. The routine made Anne feel safe – leaving the house was something to fear.

She would not go outside – there was no reason strong enough that justified her life. Her co-workers would talk of being stir-crazy and how they went to parties and then were out of work sick for a few weeks. When they came back, they were nearly always diminished. Anne did not want that for herself – her co-workers didn't have her auto-immune disease.

Winter settled in around her house and it was too cold for open windows. Soon she closed her curtains. Otherwise, the routine remained the same.

Around the holidays, Anne's parents asked her to fly down to Florida to celebrate. She immediately knew she couldn't do it. She couldn't travel by airplane, much less be in a crowded area. Conversations passed with screaming or crying. Eventually, her mother gave up but remained very worried about her daughter, as parents always are.

Slowly winter gave way to spring and then summer, but still Anne couldn't go out. She continued her routine indoors, still happy but now a lot more anxious. As the months passed, she would think about going outside, opening the window to smell the fresh air and feel the breeze. Sometimes she would stand by her front door for an hour, but she never got dressed.

Anne missed being surrounded by nature. She would remember her hiking trip in the Rockies, green trees lining her view before it shifted to brown, gray, and white mountain peaks that pierced the clouds. Anne went two days without seeing another soul, just her and her backpack mobile camp. Her memory would then shift to the forest of greens and browns at her uncle's house up north. She would wander to the edge of the property which bordered a slow section of

river. The sound of water on rocks would keep her company, while dirt moved, and loose branches crackled under her feet. It was heaven.

So was her house though, divided into comfortable scenes she could slip into and between depending on the time of day – in her office to work, in the living room to relax, and in her bedroom to sleep. She was safe. She was happy enough.

In the thick of the summer, her mother asked to come to visit to get out of the Southern heat. Anne initially said no, but her mother was worried and determined. Soon it was settled. Two weeks later, so was her mother, in the second bedroom which used to be Anne's office.

It was lovely to visit with her mother, who stayed in the house with her and did not force Anne out when she went. She could curl up with her mother and know that she was safe. Her mother would tell her stories of her father, family, and childhood. Stories filled with humor and love.

Her mother planned to visit Anne's uncle up north after a few weeks as she had not seen her brother since before the pandemic began. She encouraged Anne to come with her. It would be a retreat – away from people and situations beyond Anne's control, a place of comfort.

Anne imagined herself among the trees, appreciating their shade in the heat of the season. She missed the river, how it bubbled and flowed over the rocks near the shore. She remembered a summer when the river was low, and she forded it in bare feet with her uncle's dog. The feel of slippery rocks and moss under her toes as she twisted her body so her arms and hands could grasp a rock above water to hold onto. About midway through crossing, she had thought that she'd made a mistake – where was her next rock? Was the river moving too fast? Anne had taken a deep breath and plunged forward and made it across! Sure, she fell twice, but she felt accomplished all the same.

Surrounded by pleasant memories, Anne once again took a deep breath. She loved her uncle's cabin in the woods. She would go with her mom to feel the forest again. She felt a deep need to go.

Anne's mother was ecstatic, but not too pushy, when the time came to load her rental car and drive north. Anne herself had moments of doubt, standing by the door like she had so often done in the past two years. Her mom stood patiently on the other side, smiling.

With another deep breath, Anne crossed the threshold of her front door. Though Anne had opened windows and sat on her porch, it felt different to be outside. Putting one foot in front of the other, she proceeded to the car surrounded by an encouraging breeze. When she reached the car, she turned back to the house, fighting the desire to turn and run back in. Her mother reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. The contact gave Anne the courage to be brave – if anything was worth leaving the house, it was the tranquil Wisconsin forest. A place where she could feel free, surrounded by sounds of birds tweeting and small animals rustling. The only humans would be her, her mother, and her uncle. Anne got in the passenger seat and her mother started driving.

They passed the journey in conversation, each excited about the opportunity to retreat for a bit. To leave reality behind and engage with their deeper, inner selves and the natural world. A few hours later they arrived. After a warm greeting to her uncle, her mother and uncle fell into deep conversation. Anne wandered off, pushing open the back door to the view of the trees and stepping outside.

Anne grinned, realizing what she'd been missing. She began to walk; the temperature was perfect. Her house didn't have a scene that matched the greens and browns of forest. The crunch

of the leaves. Before she knew it, the river stretched before her. At peace, Anne gently sat on a rock near the water, settling in to read her book, a smile wrapped around her face.