

OUTSIDE by Etgar Keret

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Translated by Jessica Cohen from the Hebrew

Three days after the curfew was lifted, it was clear that no one was planning to leave home. For reasons unknown, people preferred to stay inside, alone or with their families, perhaps simply happy to keep away from everyone else. After spending so much time indoors, everyone was used to it by now: not going to work, not going to the mall, not meeting a friend for coffee, not getting an unexpected and unwanted hug on the street from someone you took a yoga class with.

The government allowed a few more days to adapt, but when it became obvious that things weren't going to change, they had no choice. Police and Army forces began knocking on doors and ordering people out.

After 120 days of isolation, it's not always easy to remember what exactly you used to do for a living. And it's not as if you're not trying. It was definitely something involving a lot of angry people who had trouble with authority. A school, perhaps? Or a prison? You have a vague memory of a skinny kid just sprouting a mustache throwing a stone at you. Were you a social worker in a group home?

You stand on the sidewalk outside your building, and the soldiers who walked you out signal for you to start moving. So you do. But you're not sure exactly where you're headed. You scroll through your phone for something that might help you get things straight. Previous appointments, missed calls, addresses in your memos. People rush past you on the street, and some of them look genuinely panicked. They can't remember where they're supposed to go, either, and if they can they no longer know how to get there or what exactly to do on the way.

You're dying for a cigarette, but you left yours at home. When the soldiers barged in and yelled at you to leave, you barely had time to grab your keys and wallet, even forgetting your sunglasses. You could try to get back inside, but the soldiers are still around, impatiently banging on your neighbors' doors. So you walk to the corner store and find you have nothing but a five-shekel coin in your wallet. The tall young man at the checkout, who reeks of sweat, snatches the cigarette pack he just handed you: "I'll keep it for you here." When you ask if you can pay with a credit card, he grins as if you just told him a joke. His hand touched yours when he took the cigarettes back, and it was hairy, like a rat. A hundred twenty days have passed since someone last touched you.

Your heart pounds, the air whistles through your lungs and you're not sure if you're going to make it. Near the A.T.M. sits a man wearing dirty clothes, and there's a tin cup next to him. You do remember what you're supposed to do in this situation. You quickly walk past him, and when he tells you in a cracked voice that he hasn't eaten anything in two days, you look in the opposite direction, avoiding eye contact like a pro. There's

nothing to be afraid of. It's like riding a bike: The body remembers everything, and the heart that softened while you were alone will harden back up in no time.

Etgar Keret is an Israeli writer whose latest story collection, "Fly Already," was published last year.