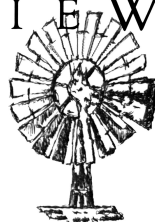


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## *L'attesa ("The Wait," a Covid-19 story)*

Fabrizia Faustinella

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# L'ATTESA

("The Wait," a Covid-19 story)

by Fabrizia Faustinella

The phone keeps on ringing. No answer. It's 6.30 in the morning. Where could she have gone? I told her about the wakeup call so she would not have to worry about setting up her own alarm. We are planning to leave together on a car trip, because flying feels scary and unsafe. We are going south, toward the sea.

I try again. Nothing. What could have happened? She had a cough yesterday, but she always has a cough. It's a chronic condition, maybe due to allergies, I think, maybe due to the fact that she catches frequent colds, because she doesn't dress adequately for this kind of weather. I tell her to wear a scarf all the time.

Did she feel warm yesterday when I kissed her good night? Did she have a fever? No... Maybe... I don't know. She said she felt tired. Why was she tired? We walked a lot in the park. A couple of guys passed right next to us on their bikes, breathing hard. I didn't like that. We didn't even see or hear them coming. They should have moved farther to the side. Then we stopped at a small restaurant. I noticed that the waitress was standing a little too close to us, smiling and reciting the list of specials. I should have told her something: "Don't you know what's going on? You should keep a safe distance," but I didn't say anything, while holding my breath and looking at her with my eyes wide open, waiting anxiously to place our order so that she would leave. A lot of people seem to be casual about the whole thing. Maybe they don't fully grasp the implications of their own behavior. Why did we even stop at that restaurant? We had to...she felt hungry and I didn't want her sugars to drop. But what about the silverware and the glasses and the plates? Who touched them? Did they wash their hands properly? While singing Happy Birthday twice? Were they careful when they prepared our food? Did somebody by accident sneeze on it? She's still not picking up the phone. What could have happened? Would it even be possible to get seriously ill less than twenty-four hours after exposure? But what if she caught something earlier in the week, when we walked past that man who clearly had a bad cold? Or when she opened the

door to sign the receipt for a package she got in the mail? I'm getting nervous. I've called three times already. How is it possible that she can't hear the phone ringing? I need water. My mouth is dry. My heart is beating fast. My face feels flushed. It's so hot all of a sudden. I'm sweating.

Stay calm. Nobody can go from a cough to respiratory failure in a few hours...or can they? I told her so many times not to touch her face and eyes, but she can't help it. She's so used to it that it's hard for her to be mindful about it. There you go...being mindful...something she struggles with. Come on! Where are you? I'll try one more time. Then I'll have to get in the car and drive all the way to her house, on the other side of town, open the door, get inside, and see what happened. Should I call the police first? ...or an ambulance? Send them ahead of me? ...in case help is needed fast... What did she do last week? She told me she cancelled her hair appointment and decided not to go to the movies with her friends, but they still spent some time together, for coffee, she said. Coffee? This is not the time to sip coffee and socialize. Why didn't they just talk on the phone while sipping that stupid cup of coffee from the comfort and safety of their own homes? It was an espresso anyway. You can drink it as fast as the blink of an eye! They are just like children. They don't listen. But wait a second. What if I infected her? I work with sick people, after all... I'm being very careful. I don't even enter my own house in my work clothes. I undress in the garage, under the staircase; then I go up in the apartment above, where I shower. Then I put a clean bathrobe on, and finally I go inside the house. I've been even spraying my hair with alcohol, as an additional measure...maybe that's why it's falling out.

I'm not feeling good. I'm agitated. I'm noticing a slight tremor in my hands while dialing the number and holding the phone. I try to breathe deeply, but it's like a tight band is squeezing my chest and keeping my lungs from expanding. I'm gasping for air. I'm having an anxiety attack or maybe a heart attack. Enough of this wait. I should just put a coat over my pajamas, grab the keys to her house, and go. I hang up and move toward the wardrobe. I'm ready to leave. My phone starts ringing. I turn around and run to answer the call. I stumble. My legs feel weak. I'm unusually short of breath. I answer. It's her. "Where have you been, Mom?" I'm trying to sound casual and calm now, but my voice is hoarse and quivers, trapped in the back of my throat.

“What’s the matter with your voice? Do you have laryngitis? I told you to wear a scarf,” she says. “I was in the shower and couldn’t get to the phone. It hasn’t been but a few minutes...maybe five at the most. What’s happening?”

“Nothing at all, nothing really...just making sure you wouldn’t be late...”

“I’m almost ready. Just take a couple of aspirins before you leave the house. It’ll make your throat feel better.”

