

Emily St. John Mandel Station Eleven (excerpts)

Jeevan's understanding of disaster preparedness was based entirely on action movies, but on the other hand, he'd seen a lot of action movies. He started with water, filled one of the oversized shopping carts with as many cases and bottles as he could fit. There was a moment of doubt on the way to the cash registers, straining against the weight of the cart—was he overreacting?—but there was a certain momentum now, too late to turn back. The clerk raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"I'm parked just outside," he said. "I'll bring the cart back." The clerk nodded, tired. She was young, early twenties probably, with dark bangs that she kept pushing out of her eyes. He forced the impossibly heavy cart outside and half-pushed, half-skidded through the snow at the exit. There was a long ramp down into a small park-like arrangement of benches and planters. The cart gained speed on the incline, bogged down in deep snow at the bottom of the ramp and slid sideways into a planter.

It was eleven twenty. The supermarket closed in forty minutes. He was imagining how long it would take to bring the cart up to Frank's apartment, to unload it, the time required for tedious explanations and reassurances of sanity before he could return to the grocery store for more supplies. Could there be any harm in leaving the cart here for the moment? There was no one on the street. He called Hua on his way back into the store.

"What's happening now?" He moved quickly through the store while Hua spoke. Another case of water—Jeevan was under the impression that one can never have too much—and then cans and cans of food, all the



tuna and beans and soup on the shelf, pasta, anything that looked like it might last a while. The hospital was full of flu patients and the situation was identical at the other hospitals in the city. The ambulance service was overwhelmed. Thirty-seven patients had died now, including every patient who'd been on the Moscow flight and two E.R. nurses who'd been on duty when the first patients came in. The shopping cart was almost unmanageably heavy. Hua said he'd called his wife and told her to take the kids and leave the city tonight, but not by airplane. Jeevan was standing by the cash register again, the clerk scanning his cans and packages. The part of the evening that had transpired in the Elgin Theatre seemed like possibly a different lifetime. The clerk was moving very slowly. Jeevan passed her a credit card and she scrutinized it as though she hadn't just seen it five or ten minutes ago.

"Take Laura and your brother," Hua said, "and leave the city tonight."

"I can't leave the city tonight, not with my brother. I can't rent a wheelchair van at this hour."

In response there was only a muffled sound. Hua was coughing.

"Are you sick?" Jeevan was pushing the cart toward the door.

"Goodnight, Jeevan." Hua disconnected and Jeevan was alone in the snow. He felt

possessed. The next cart was all toilet paper. The cart after that was more canned goods, also frozen meat and aspirin, garbage bags, bleach, duct tape.

"I work for a charity," he said to the girl behind the cash register, his third or fourth time through, but she wasn't paying much attention to him. She kept glancing up at the small television above the film development counter, ringing his items through on autopilot. Jeevan called Laura on his sixth trip through the store, but his call went to voicemail.

"Laura," he began. "Laura." He thought it better to speak to her directly and it was already almost eleven fifty, there wasn't time for this. Filling the cart with more food, moving quickly through this bread-and-flower-scented world, this almost-gone place, thinking of Frank in his 22nd floor apartment, high up in the snowstorm with his insomnia and his book project, his day-old *New York Times* and his Beethoven. Jeevan wanted desperately to reach him. He decided to call Laura later, changed his mind and called the home line while he was standing by the checkout counter, mostly because he didn't want to make eye contact with the clerk.

"Jeevan, where are you?" She sounded slightly accusatory. He handed over his credit card.

"Are you watching the news?"

"Should I be?"

"There's a flu epidemic, Laura. It's serious."

"That thing in Russia or wherever? I knew about that."

"It's here now. It's worse than we'd thought. I've just been talking to Hua. You have to leave the city." He glanced up in time to see

the look the checkout girl gave him.

"Have to? What? Where are you, Jeevan?" He was signing his name on the slip, struggling with the cart toward the exit, where the order of the store ended and the frenzy of the storm began. It was difficult to steer the cart with one hand. There were already five carts parked haphazardly between benches and planters, dusted now with snow.

"Just turn on the news, Laura."

"You know I don't like to watch the news before bed. Are you having an anxiety attack?"

"What? No. I'm going to my brother's place to make sure he's okay."

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"You're not even listening. You never listen to me." Jeevan knew this was probably a petty thing to say in the face of a probable flu pandemic, but couldn't resist. He plowed the cart into the others and dashed back into the store. "I can't believe you left me at the theatre," he said. "You just left me at the theatre performing CPR on a dead actor."

"Jeevan, tell me where you are."

"I'm in a grocery store." It was eleven fifty-five. This last cart was all grace items: vegetables, fruit, bags of oranges and lemons, tea, coffee, crackers, salt, preserved cakes. "Look, Laura, I don't want to argue. This flu's serious, and it's fast."

"What's fast?"

"This flu, Laura. It's really fast. Hua told me. It's spreading so quickly. I think you should get out of the city." At the last moment, he added a bouquet of daffodils.

Second excerpt

At first the people in the Severn City Airport counted time as though they were only temporarily stranded. This was difficult to explain to young people in the following decades, but in all fairness, the entire history of being stranded in airports up to that point was also a history of eventually becoming unstranded, of boarding a plane and flying away. At first it seemed inevitable that the National Guard would roll in at any moment with blankets and boxes of food, that ground crews would return shortly thereafter and planes would start landing and taking off again. Day One, Day Two, Day Forty-eight, Day Ninety, any expectation of a return to normalcy long gone by now, then Year One, Year Two, Year Three. Time had been reset by catastrophe. After a while they went back to the old way of counting days and months, but kept the new system of years: January 1, Year Three; March 17, Year Four, etc. Year Four was when Clark realized this was the way the years would continue to be marked from now on, counted off one by one from the moment of disaster.

He'd known for a long time by then that the world's changes wouldn't be reversed, but still, the realization cast his memories in a sharper light. The last time I ate an ice-cream cone in a park in the sunlight. The last time I danced in a club. The last time I saw a moving bus. The last time I boarded an airplane that hadn't been repurposed as living quarters, an airplane that actually took off. The last time I ate an orange.

Toward the end of his second decade in the airport, Clark was thinking about how lucky he'd been. Not just the mere fact of survival, which was of course remarkable in and of itself, but to have seen one world end and another begin. And not just to have seen the remembered splendors of the former world, the space shuttles and the electric grid and

the amplified guitars, the computers that could be held in the palm of a hand and the high-speed trains between cities, but to have lived among those wonders for so long. To have dwelt in that spectacular world for fifty-one years of his life. Sometimes he lay awake in Concourse B of the Severn City Airport and thought, "I was there," and the thought pierced him through with an admixture of sadness and exhilaration.

"It's hard to explain," he caught himself saying sometimes to young people who came into his museum, which had formerly been the Skymiles Lounge in Concourse C. But he took his role as curator seriously and he'd decided years ago that "It's hard to explain" isn't good enough, so he always tried to explain it all anyway, whenever anyone asked about any of the object he'd collected over the years, from the airport and beyond—the laptops, the iPhones, the radio from an administrative desk, the electric toaster from an airport-staff lounge, the turntable and vinyl records that some optimistic scavenger had carried back from Severn City—and of course the context, the pre-pandemic world that he remembered so sharply. No, he was explaining now, to a sixteen-year-old who'd been born in the airport, the planes didn't rise straight up into the sky. They gathered speed on long runways and angled upward.

"Why did they need the runways?" the sixteen-year-old asked. Her name was Emmanuelle. He had a special fondness for her, because he remembered her birth as the only good thing that had happened in that terrible first year.

"They couldn't get off the ground without gathering speed. They needed momentum."

"Oh," she said. "The engines weren't that powerful, then?"

"They were," he said, "but they weren't like rocket ships."

“Rocket ships. . .”

“The ships we used to go to space.”

“That’s incredible,” she said, shaking her head.

“Yes.” Incredible in retrospect, all of it, but especially the parts having to do with travel and communications. This was how he arrived in this airport: he’d boarded a machine that transported him at high speed a mile above the surface of the earth. This was how he’d told Miranda Carroll of her ex-husband’s death: he’d pressed a series of buttons on a device that had connected him within seconds to an instrument on the other side of the world, and Miranda—barefoot on a white sand beach with a shipping fleet shining before her in the dark—had pressed a button that had connected her via satellite to New York. These taken-for-granted miracles that had persisted all around them.

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By the end of the Second Decade most of the airport’s population was either born there or had walked in later, but two dozen or so people remained who had been there since the day their flights had landed. Clark’s flight landed without incident, diverted from Toronto for reasons no one seemed immediately able to explain, and taxied to a gate in Concourse B. Clark looked up from his edits of the 360° Subordinates report and was struck by the variety of planes on the tarmac. Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Air Canada, Lufthansa, Air France, enormous jets parked end to end.

When Clark emerged from the jet bridge into the fluorescent light of Concourse B, the first thing he noticed was the uneven distribution of people. Crowds had gathered beneath the television monitors. Clark decided that whatever they were looking at, he couldn’t face it without a cup of tea. He assumed it was a terrorist attack. He bought a cup of Earl

Grey at a kiosk, and took his time adding the milk. This is the last time I’ll stir milk into my tea without knowing what happened, he thought, wistful in advance for the present moment, and went to stand with the crowd beneath a television that was tuned to CNN.

The story of the pandemic’s arrival in North America had broken while he was in the air. This was another thing that was hard to explain years later, but up until that morning the Georgia Flu had seemed quite distant, especially if one happened not to be on social media. Clark had never followed the news very closely and had actually heard about the flu only the day before the flight, in a brief newspaper story about a mysterious outbreak of some virus in Paris, and it hadn’t been at all clear that it was developing into a pandemic. But now he watched the too-late evacuations of cities, the riots outside hospitals on three continents, the slow-moving exodus clogging every road, and wished he’d been paying more attention. The gridlocked roads were puzzling, because where were all these people going? If these reports were to be believed, not only had the Georgia Flu arrived, but it was already everywhere. There were clips of officials from various governments, epidemiologists with their sleeves rolled up, everyone wan and bloodshot and warning of catastrophe, blue-black circles under bloodshot eyes.

“It’s not looking promising for a quick end to the emergency,” a newscaster said, understating the situation to a degree previously unmatched in the history of understatement, and then he blinked at the camera and something in him seemed to stutter, a breaking down of some mechanism that had previously held his personal and professional lives apart, and he addressed the camera with a new urgency. “Mel,” he said, “if you’re watching this, sweetheart, take the kids to your parents’ ranch. Back roads only, my love, no highways. I love you so much.”

"It must be nice to have the network at your disposal," a man standing near Clark said. "I don't know where my wife is either. You know where your wife is?" His voice carried a high note of panic.

Clark decided to pretend that the man had asked him where his boyfriend was. "No," he said. "I have no idea." He turned away from the monitor, unable to bear another second of the news. For how long had he been standing there? His tea had gone cold. He drifted down the concourse and stood before the flight-status monitors. Every flight had been cancelled.

How had all of this happened so quickly? Why hadn't he checked the news before he left for the airport? It occurred to Clark that he should call someone, actually everyone, that he should call everyone he'd ever loved and talk to them and tell them all the things that mattered, but it was apparently already too late for this, his phone displaying a message he'd never seen before: SYSTEM OVERLOAD EMERGENCY CALLS ONLY. He bought another tea, because the first one had gone cold, and also he was beset now by terrible fears and walking to the kiosk seemed like purposeful action. Also because the two young women working the kiosk seemed profoundly unconcerned by what was unfolding on CNN, either that or they were extremely stoic or they hadn't noticed yet, so visiting them was like going back in time to the paradise of a half hour earlier, when he hadn't yet known that everything was coming undone.

"Can you tell us more about the . . . well, about what people should be looking out for, the symptoms?" the newscaster asked.

"Same things we see every flu season," the epidemiologist said, "just worse."

"So, for example . . .?"

"Aches and pains. A sudden high fever. Difficulty breathing. Look," the epidemiologist said, "it's a fast incubation period. If you're exposed, you're sick in three or four hours and dead in a day or two."

"We're going to take a quick commercial break," the newscaster said.

The airline staff had no information. They were tight-lipped and frightened. They distributed food vouchers, which by power of suggestion made everyone hungry, so passengers formed lines to buy greasy cheese quesadillas and nacho plates at Concourse B's only restaurant, which was ostensibly Mexican. The two young women in the kiosk continued to serve hot drinks and mildly stale baked goods, frowning every so often at their useless phones. Clark bought his way into the Skymiles Lounge and found Elizabeth Colton in an armchair near a television screen. Tyler sat cross-legged on the floor nearby, killing space aliens on a Nintendo console.

"It's crazy," Clark said to Elizabeth, worlds falling hopelessly short.

She was watching the news, her hands clasped at her throat.

"It's unprecedented," Elizabeth said. "In all of human history . . ." she trailed off, shaking her head. Tyler groaned softly, he'd suffered a setback in the alien wars. They sat for a while in silence, watching, until Clark couldn't watch anymore and excused himself to find more nachos.

A final plane was landing, an Air Gradia jet, but as Clark watched, it made a slow turn on the tarmac and moved away from instead of toward the terminal building. It parked in the far distance, and no ground crew went to meet it. Clark abandoned his nachos and went to the window. It occurred to him that the Air Gradia jet was as far away from the terminal as it could possibly go. This was where he was standing when the announcement came: for

public-health reasons, the airport was closing immediately. There would be no flights for the indefinite future. All passengers were asked to collect their bags at Baggage Claim, to leave the premises in an orderly fashion, and to please not flip out.

“This can’t be happening,” the passengers said to each other and to themselves, over nacho platters and in angry clusters in front of vending machines. They swore at airport management, at the TSA, at the airlines, at their useless phones, furious because fury was the last defense against understanding what the news stations were reporting. Beneath the fury was something literally unspeakable, the television news carrying an implication that no one could yet bring themselves to consider. It was impossible to comprehend the scope of the outbreak, but it wasn’t possible to comprehend what it meant. Clark stood by the terminal’s glass wall in the Mexican restaurant, watching the stillness of the Air Gradia jet in the far distance, and he realized later that if he didn’t understand at that moment why it was out there alone, it was only because he didn’t want to know.

Excerpted from *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel.
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