

Code Orange

S H A S H I B H A T

We didn't in the light; we didn't in darkness.

—“We Didn’t,” Stuart Dybek

It was funny how a crowd could be called a sea of people, when a crowd wasn’t like water at all. Humans didn’t blend into one continuous, homogenous body the way water did, she thought. Even in a mob, a human was singular, could make its own decision. A water molecule was not and could not. A water molecule was helpless, waiting around for someone to drink it or swim in it, waiting to be drained to somewhere else, or to be evaporated by the sun.

“I’ve never seen this many people in one place before,” Divya said, to which Craig just nodded, three times in a row. It was a stupidly obvious thing to say. Nobody had seen this many people in one place before.

Heat. Radiating down from the naked sky and off the bodies in Downsview Park; her skin beginning to burn, though she didn’t realize it. She was brown and getting browner by the minute. “We brown people don’t need sunscreen,” her father had misinformed her, his glasses lowered, *The Toronto Star* a blanket of news in front of him. Still, she sought the single tube in the house, four years old and shared among the family—that was how infrequently they used it. But it was thirty degrees in the crowded field, and all the shady spots had already been taken when they arrived. They had been here for hours already, parked on a sheet spread over the flattened, dry grass, she and the three people she was attending the concert with—Craig, Adam, Kelly. Not quite friends but

she had hopes that by the end of the day they would be like those kids in *The Breakfast Club*, who left detention bonded by the hours of proximity and shared experience and weed, knowing each other's worst secrets.

They were smack in the centre of the field, parallel to the big cardboard Rolling Stones lips and teeth and rolled-out tongue. Divya sat next to Craig, Adam and his girlfriend Kelly over to their right, Kelly draped over Adam's lap—how could they bear it in this heat?

A row of people's heads blocked the edge of the stage, but Divya could still see a sweaty-haired Sam Roberts playing guitar and singing about a bridge to nowhere, the words running together; he was close enough to remind her how absurdly handsome he was—objectively more handsome than Craig, but subjectively there was no comparison. Craig: head shaved, an eyebrow ring, a rare laugh that cracked out from deep in his throat, so loudly it was like there was an amplifier hidden in there. Until recently Craig's hair had been hideously spiked and frosted at the tips; however, shaving his head had revealed that his skull was the same circumference from top to bottom, making him look like a Lego man (but, like, in an attractive way). She wished she were the kind of girl who would casually rub the top of his head, just to feel her palm rasp against the stubble. Craig, she knew, or thought she did, was the type of boy who would not mind this, who would bend his neck shyly, pressing against her hand like a cat. His smell—soap and deodorant and breakthrough sweat and what she realized now was probably sunscreen—was so inebriating she had to grit her teeth to stay upright.

It was June 2003 and Divya was eighteen. That spring, the US had invaded Iraq; Elizabeth Smart had been spotted and rescued on the streets of Sandy, Utah; the Human Genome Project was just about wrapping up; a black Angus cow from Alberta came down with a bad case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and then nobody wanted Canadian beef anymore. *No thank you*, said the United States, shutting their border and seeking more reliable sources for their hamburgers. Forty other countries followed suit. The cows of Canada hung their heads and languished in sickness and shame.

Mad Cow Disease had seemed hilarious until in one of her classes she learned about its slow destruction of the brain and spinal cord. Watching the news with her parents this summer, she saw them cluck their tongues and exchange a knowing look: *See, this is why we don't eat beef.*

Meanwhile, a woman in Toronto developed a cough and fever, and days later she was dead from SARS and weeks later so were members of her family; *outbreak*, said the local news; *provincial emergency*, said the Ontario government; *global alert*, said the World Health Organization. One morning, Divya walked into the hospital where she was volunteering and found industrial-sized pump bottles of hand sanitizer installed near all the entrances. She was at the hospital on the day when they initiated Code Orange, which sounded less like a disaster warning and more like a cool new carbonated beverage. Code Orange meant limiting building access to essential people. Divya was an inessential person. She helped staff the gift shop, dusting off small bears and pumping up balloons to sell to the parents of convalescing children liberated from their inflamed appendixes and tonsils. Supposedly this would help get her into medical school. She would've rather been working at the movie rental place and getting paid.

Because she didn't know what to do with herself now that the day was free, she stopped into the corner store where Craig worked, and where she often bought a bag of Hickory Stix to eat instead of her lunch.

Craig nodded at her—as far as she could tell, he nodded more than he spoke—then tossed her the Hickory Stix without her even asking. “It’s early for your break, hey?” he said.

“They called a Code Orange,” she said, placing a loonie down on the counter, then opening the bag and offering him some. Nobody else ever seemed to come to this store. The Hickory Stix might be centuries old.

“What’s that?”

“Did you ever see the movie *Outbreak*?” she asked, her fingers already coated in seasoning.

“Yup,” said Craig.

“It’s like if *Outbreak* happened in the Greater Toronto Area.”

“Yikes,” said Craig.

This was the longest conversation they had ever had. They attended the same high school but didn’t talk to each other there. Back in tenth grade, she and her friend kept seeing him in the hallway and thus had referred to him as Hallway Guy. He was never in class. In the hallway, he didn’t seem to do anything. He wasn’t socializing or littering or like, reading *Anna Karenina*. She wondered what occupied his brain. What kind of person put in the effort to go to school but then didn’t attend class? Why hadn’t he just stayed home? What was so compelling about the school hallway?

In the fall, she would go off to start college at Northwestern, which she had applied to secretly and which was not a thing people from her high school did. Chicago to them was a movie starring Catherine Zeta-Jones. Northwestern was technically in Evanston, but she told them it was in Chicago because nobody here had heard of Evanston. Craig, when he wasn't working at the convenience store, would take courses at Centennial College. Divya wondered if he would sit in the hallway there, too. Divya had a feeling Craig thought she was rich. She wasn't. There was no way to clarify this without awkwardness. Northwestern had offered her an astoundingly reasonable financial aid package, and when her dad had checked Wikipedia and learned that among their alumni was Dr. Robert F. Furchgott, who had received a Nobel Prize in Medicine for something having to do with nitric oxide, and her mother had learned that David Schwimmer had attended Northwestern before his breakout role as friend and paleontologist Ross Geller, even her parents had agreed it was an acceptable option, though they had hoped Divya would live at home and commute to the University of Toronto. Divya would have to work two jobs during the school year to help with the cost of room and board, but true, she and the others were likely at opposing ends of what counted as middle class. She could afford to do volunteer work over the summer, even if it meant living with her parents. Her dad handed her a \$20 bill every time she walked out the door.

With the hospital on pause, Divya had nowhere to go. Her parents kept suggesting there must be something SARS-related she could volunteer for without actually exposing herself to SARS, but instead Divya began visiting the convenience store even though she had no reason to be there and it was nearly a thirty-minute walk from her house. Craig, she observed, was like a character in a Kevin Smith movie. Not only did he work in a retail customer service position, but he filled his days with absurd interactions and inconsequential adventures. Every day, he drank a can of Dr. Pepper and crushed it flat with the side of his fist. He had a stack of these flattened cans lined up beside the register like a contemporary art project on waste and consumerism. The cans were starting to smell. It was weird that nobody told him to get rid of them.

One time, Divya saw a lady come in and become outraged upon noticing the chicken salad sandwiches were one day past their expiry date, and Craig just looked up from the register and stared at her without saying anything and then she asked to speak to the manager, and Craig

said, all quiet and casual, “Lady, fuck off. There’s a Subway in this same plaza.” And the lady just left. That was it. No consequences.

By late May, the Code Orange was lifted, SARS more or less over, Toronto more or less safe again, though Divya somehow managed to avoid returning to the hospital. In late June, right around the time of graduation, concert tickets went on sale. Divya hadn’t even thought of going, but then one morning she was listening to 102.1 The Edge while making a packing list for Northwestern, and they announced that the third caller would win two tickets to SARSstock or Molson Canadian Rocks or Toronto Rocks—every time she heard about the concert it seemed to have a different name—so she picked up the phone and dialled, and suddenly she could hear her own voice on the radio, saying, “Wait...I won?”

Of course, there were other people she could ask. She had friends. Friends who would raise their eyebrows incredulously at her if they knew she had won tickets and, instead of inviting them, had invited this guy none of them even knew. They had all spent Grade 9 writing “Korn” on their backpacks in white-out.

Regardless, she decided to ask Craig. Why not ask him? She was a modern woman.

“Hey,” she said, in one breath, “so my friend and I were supposed to go to the SARS concert together, but her parents won’t let her go so I have an extra ticket. Do you want to go?”

“Yeah, that could be cool,” Craig responded, the cool breeze of his response proving that he was five levels above her in coolness. “Adam and Kelly are going. They can probably give us a lift.”

Who the heck were Adam and Kelly? But then Divya remembered them from school. Adam had dreadlocks and chains hanging from his jeans, and Kelly wore baby doll T-shirts and candy necklaces and pants so baggy they swept the floors. Together they had taken up a lot of space in the hallway. Divya had imagined a day of being alone in a crowd with Craig, but this was okay, too, kind of a double-date and not a definite sign that he was Just Not That Into her.

In retrospect it would seem counterintuitive that city officials or fundraisers or whoever had decided to mark the end of an epidemic by gathering half a million people in a crowded former military base, the same venue they’d used when Pope John Paul II visited in 2002. A defiant marketing move. *Toronto is safe! SARS is over! By the way, so is Mad Cow Disease! Welcome to our city, famous rock bands!*

Divya was thinking about kissing Craig. Not like right now—she wasn't into PDA—but at some point. Some day. While straightening up the condolences cards at the hospital gift shop, she had constructed increasingly unlikely imaginary situations in which she might have the chance to kiss him. Or better yet, to have him kiss her. It was more romantic to be kissed than to spearhead the kissing. Like that movie, *Never Been Kissed*, wherein a woman in her thirties had to pretend to be a high school student to get somebody to kiss her. This same strategy wouldn't work for Divya. She had recently been a high school student, and it had made no difference. And she had been kissed once, by her chem lab partner, who had given her a ride home after the practice AP exam and then surprise-kissed her, which sounds romantic but is decidedly not. She'd been thinking about stoichiometry, about how satisfying it was—stoichiometry, not the kissing—and when it was over—the kissing, not the stoichiometry—she was left with the same sopping numbness that follows a dental procedure.

"I just feel like we don't really have chemistry..." she had told him the next night, when he phoned her house to officially ask her out. At the time this had seemed to her like a fun slice of irony to lighten the mood, as they were literally partners in chemistry, but he had said goodbye abruptly and then was awkward the whole rest of the semester, sulking as they slowly titrated acids.

Craig, she suspected, would be good at kissing. She surreptitiously glanced at his lips, which were probably about the size of hers. He seemed like he would be serious and focused about it, wordless as a ranch owner in a romance novel.

Kissing was in the zeitgeist, in the air. Not long ago, Angelina Jolie had passionately kissed her brother at the Oscars. Very recently, Madonna had kissed Britney Spears at the MTV Movie Awards.

Now here was Justin Timberlake, an out-of-place pop star, his performance kicking off the second half of the show. Divya hadn't told anybody this, but partway through her OAC year, her music tastes had begun to drift. She secretly liked Justin Timberlake. She was kind of into J. Lo. In fact, she had more ideas about what was under Nelly's bandaid than about any of these bands—the performers today were all white, it occurred to her, and she felt neutral, not indignant the way she might in twenty years. Months later Justin Timberlake would yank off part of Janet Jackson's outfit at the Super Bowl halftime show, exposing her

breast for a shocking half-second. But that hadn't happened yet. Timber. Lake. Was that his real last name? Perhaps he came from a long line of loggers. She pictured him in a plaid shirt, hacking at a tree with an axe. Next to him, a shimmering body of water. A loon floating serenely like in the opening frame of a Heritage Minute, only slightly ruffled by the sound of the tree's landing thump. She liked watching Justin Timberlake dance, admired the agility with which he was dodging water bottles and muffins, thrown at him by people who had a strong preference for rock and roll. "I'm here for the same reason you're all here, and that's to see the motherfucking Stones," he said. Later she'd hear the water bottles were full of piss.

Craig handed her his water bottle now—filled with water, and to drink, not to throw—and their hands touched and just the fact that they were sharing a water bottle felt sexy and dangerous (because of SARS). Adam had taken a bunch of mushrooms and kept talking about mushrooms. Divya hadn't realized at first that he meant the drug mushrooms and not just regular mushrooms, like cremini, for example, so in response she had said, "Oh yeah, me too, I love mushrooms," thinking of the very excellent mushroom ravioli she had at an Italian restaurant in Evanston on a campus visit, and so she accidentally grew in Adam and Kelly and Craig's estimation.

"Mycology...psilocybin...you know the human brain would not be what it is if it weren't for psychedelics," said Adam, while Craig nodded and nodded—Divya wondered if he was also on mushrooms or maybe it was just weed he had smoked while he went off to buy an Alberta beef burger prepared by Alberta premier Ralph Klein; she didn't really know about drugs, but as a pre-med student, she was pretty certain Adam had the wrong idea about brains. "My life plan is to start a mail-order mushroom business," said Adam.

"Is that, like, legal?" asked Divya, and Adam and Kelly just looked at her and laughed.

An hour later, Divya really had to pee—every time Craig handed her the water bottle, she would drink—but none of them had cell phones, and she was worried that if she walked away from the group, she would never find them again. She tightened all her muscles and tried to re-absorb her pee and thought of things that held water: sponges, camels, cactuses. She imagined herself wandering through this crowd, accidentally stepping on the children of Rolling Stones fans, wiping droplets off her upper lip, then

putting her hand to her forehead, staring through the glimmering heat in search of the oasis of Craig's bare skull.

The music was louder, more dissonant now that Timberlake was gone. She wondered where he went, whether he was lounging in a green room or if he had gotten himself out of there, crowd-surfed to freedom—but no, that would be dangerous for him. They would tear him apart. So many bodies, gathered up there at the lip of the stage, close enough together to form a bridge, enough hands to pick you up and pass you along to more hands, palms taut as the coils in a Simmons Beautyrest mattress. Fingers that could pull at your clothing, could loosen a bra and tug your cargo shorts askew, fingers that could poke into wherever, sweaty and dirt-covered from a day in the sun, nails untrimmed, sharp.

Adam saw her looking. “You’re so small—you would just float across the crowd.”

She *was* small, the kind of small that got refused admission to park rides, that got mistaken for a child until they saw her face. “I guess I would,” she laughed. Nervously. She did not see herself as a surfer of crowds. She was the kind of small that broke bones easily, that large fraternity brothers would think it was funny to pick up and carry over their shoulders as she yelped and pounded on their backs.

And now the sun was setting midway through AC/DC's performance, as Brian Johnson in a black tank top sang about dirty deeds done dirt cheap. What a rarity, to watch a rock show under a yellow-purple sky, the kind of thing you only did when you were young, Divya thought, forgetting there were aging fans there, too, their skin thickened and coppery from decades of devotion to rock and roll and the sun.

And now Adam was grabbing her hand—she thought of those pumps of sanitizer at the hospital—and Craig caught on and grabbed her other hand and they were pulling her up off the blanket though her butt was half asleep. Kelly unwillingly staying behind because somebody had to watch their stuff.

“The key is to stay relaxed,” Craig was telling her, his head bent down and almost shouting next to her ear, the two of them in a cocoon. “Just go with it.”

The key to what? But of course, she knew. She couldn't hear the band, though they were so close to it now, the lead singer strutting across the stage, trailing the microphone wire, bass guitarist lost in adrenaline and reverie.

When Craig put his hands on her waist, he was almost solemn, with clear eye contact and a questioning eyebrow to gain permission before he lifted her. This part she didn't mind, being like a baseball in his catcher's mitt hands, but wished he would keep holding on to her—he didn't, of course, and she went high up, horizontal, Adam holding her ankles as he laughed loudly and propped up the middle of her back, up, up, higher off the ground than she had realized, higher than could possibly be safe.

Almost twenty years later, she is sitting with her husband in the serene living room of a house painted all white. They are watching *Woodstock 99*—the documentary about the music festival that ended in fire.

"I don't even remember Woodstock 99 being a thing," she says to him.

"You were probably too young," he responds. "You were what—fourteen?"

He's right. It wouldn't have been on her radar then. Though she did have memories of Columbine in the news, her parents changing the channel and saying this sort of thing had never happened back in India.

Her husband is laughing at the Limp Bizkit fans and that anyone could ever have felt passionately toward a band called Limp Bizkit; then Divya is shuddering as an interview subject describes girls groped as they're passed along the crowd, shirts torn off, boys yelling, "Show your tits!" holding up signs saying, *Show your tits*—girls going wild, girls gone feral, girls screaming in tents, nobody around to report anything to, and even if there were, what would be the point? The casualties weren't even interviewed in the documentary. This was a time without cell phone cameras, a crowd big enough for a boy to disappear.

Her own daughter, two years old, pulls herself along on the beige carpet in front of the television, oblivious to Fred Durst; Divya prays she will grow up a tone-deaf nerd. And then Woodstock 99 is burning, lit on fire with candles meant for a vigil for Columbine—*Not our fault*, says the concert organizer, who built a fortress and packed it full of angry young men.

In the weeks after watching it, she grew obsessed, watching it two more times. She read think pieces about both the documentary and the festival itself, in *The Atlantic* and *Vulture* and *Rolling Stone*, listened to podcasts analyzing the causality behind the disaster. In one podcast, there were three men talking, and one of them said, "The blonde chick throughout the whole thing was the fucking most annoying person

ever.” He was speaking of one of the only women they had interviewed. “She won’t have fun ever that girl her entire life.” He mocked her voice: “*Ohhh, it was demeaning to women...* first of all, no one told you you had to take your fucking shirt off. Second of all, what did you think was going to happen when there’s all these girls around with their fucking tits coming out...Fuck off. Go back to your fucking hole and shut the fuck up.” Divya turned off the podcast.

She couldn’t stop asking people: Have you seen *Woodstock 99*? As though it were a missing child. She wanted to talk to someone about the way a thoughtless decision could lead to violence, or it could lead to nothing at all, to a perfectly normal car ride home.

In Downsview Park, below the stage, as Craig’s hands let go of her, the crowd seemed to tighten until it became a solid mass, and so did her fear, hardening in her chest along with her regret—it was so hard to say no to somebody you wanted to say yes to. Maybe this was what it was like to have Mad Cow Disease, to be a Mad Cow, your body in opposition to your disobeying brain. She braced herself.

But, by miracle, the hands weren’t grabbing or pulling or shoving or groping—they were holding her up. They were gentle, almost reverent, or perhaps this is just how she remembers it, but certainly there was trust. She stretched her arms wide as Craig had advised her, though her impulse had been to clutch them in and guard her breasts. Funny that she had thought to protect them and not her head. Her body felt as light as a sugar glider. This wasn’t a solid mass, but a group of living people in an instinctual act of collaboration, the human sea doing the opposite of parting but still creating a passage, delivering her from one edge of the pit to the other. She had the strangest sense that the crowd was infinite, and she had lost all sense of time—how long was she up there? A minute? A thousand? It was like those days in childhood gym class when the teacher dragged out the rainbow-coloured parachute and the kids circled, each gripping its polyester edge, and one kid climbed into the middle while the others lifted and dropped, and when you were the one in the middle, everything disappeared—there were no mean kids, no nagging homes to return to, no news of a world that was bigger than your powers of comprehension—just you in the rainbow-coloured tarp, a bright ocean in the yard behind the school, limitless and with its own gravitational rules, until the bell rang.

After the concert, they walked through the emptying field towards Kelly's car. The ground glittered with trash, the park a wasteland. Now that the music had ended, it was oddly quiet, and Divya's ears rang with the memory of sound.

The crowd had let her down safely, squarely on her feet. Craig had strolled over. Only Craig could stroll through a mosh pit. He high-fived her. His hand reaching down and hers up. His rare smile. A sidelong look.

Perhaps there were reasons why the SARS concert had been different, tamer. More families, an older, more diverse audience, a Canadian sensibility, she told herself, believing such a thing existed, that belonging to a quiet country could quell a single person's violence.

Kelly drove them to their houses, Divya and Craig sitting in the back, a foot of car seat between them, everyone too tired to talk.

Days after the concert, she worked up the guts to phone him on his mother's landline and ask him out and he said he was flattered but was already seeing someone, and though she believed him at the time, when she was older she would know it had been a lie. It was the kindest rejection she would ever receive from a boy. She treasured it as though it had been a yes.

She had known from the beginning it was a crush with no legs. In a month she'd be at school in a different-but-similar country, and he would remain where they had grown up, working in a corner store in an unremarkable suburb of a recovering city. What did she want? A summer fling? A long-distance relationship? Neither was what she wanted. He would remain here while she grew up and graduated and kissed people she didn't even like and became a doctor and an American citizen and married someone she liked reasonably well but not enough. And one day she would google Craig's name and find a years-old report saying he had been arrested for strangling a woman. A picture of him. Hair grown out. Face bloated and red and unrecognizable, the way people always looked in mug shots: like someone subhuman or left under water. Someone you had never known. There was no picture of the woman, who had survived and was protected by a publication ban. Craig's catcher's mitt hands on the woman's bruising throat. Divya knew that killing someone by strangulation took only the strength of a firm handshake. What had happened in those intervening years? She had witnessed not even a seed of violence. Had she? At least, she couldn't excavate one from memory now. Shaved head. Hallway. Crushed can. Corner store. Was it her memory that was faulty, or her intuition? Had there been a latent wildness, a heat

rising shimmering from the pavement, a highway mirage? There was no way of knowing. No way of fact-checking her own past. He was nobody to her. He had never been anybody to her.

Following the concert, Divya had the worst sunburn of her life. She hadn't known she could get a burn like that. She regretted wearing a strappy tank top and being so careless with the sunscreen application, with herself, that she hadn't recognized the feeling of damage beginning. For two weeks the skin would flake away, though underneath, she was the same as she had always been, alive with the things that could have happened and didn't.