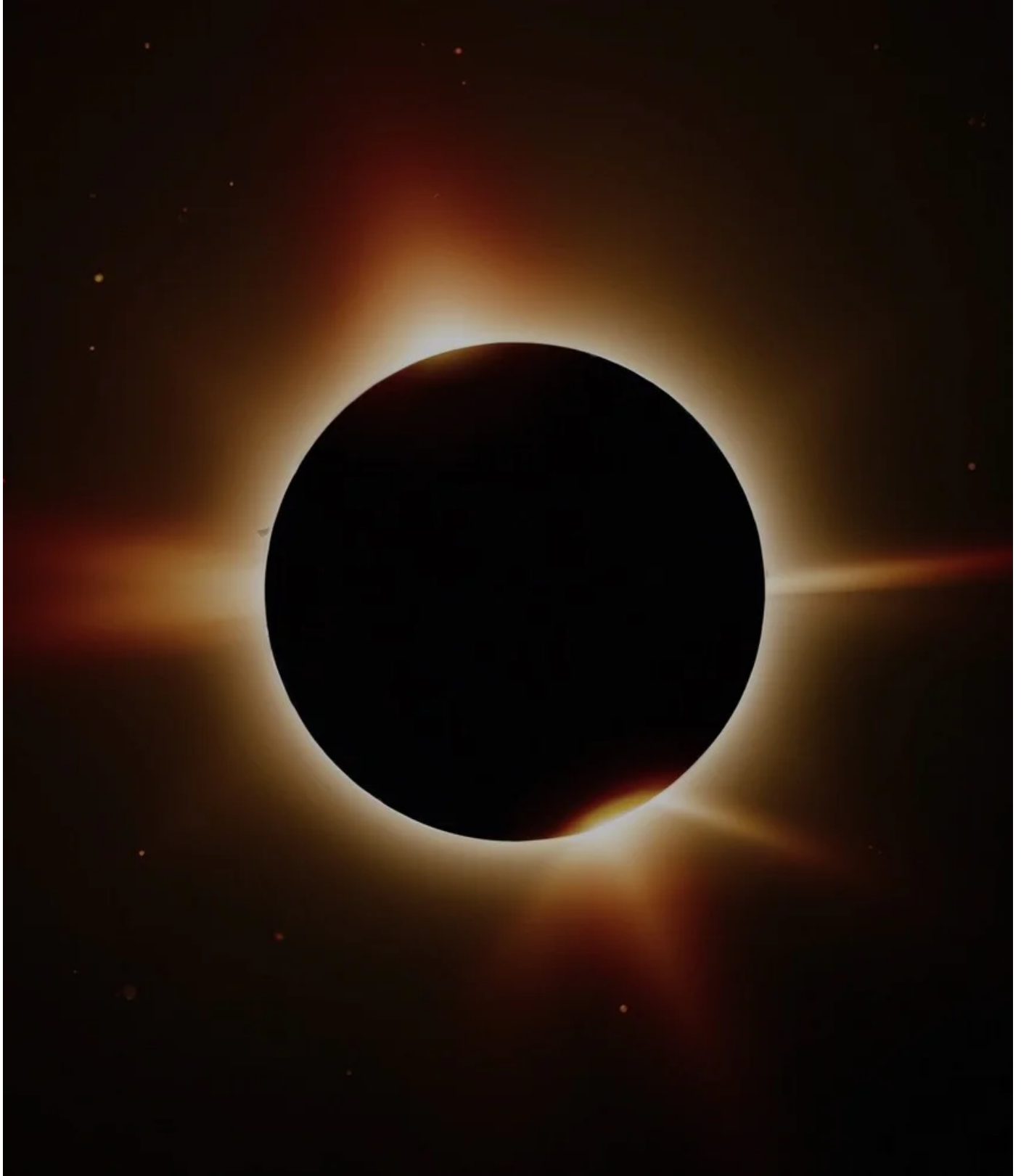


PANDEMIC STORY



Salina smoked a joint laced with estrogen and still felt disaster in her veins. The silken paper had yielded easily to her fingers, formed a perfect

tunnel of OG-E Kush. Her tongue had sliced its length with the precision of a scalpel in an OR. She'd even drawn some of the flower out and into her mouth, the taste small and dull, yet somewhere in there honeyed. She'd placed the salve between her lips, brought a wick lit by the blue-white of a stove's flame to its far end, inhaled, and taken the future into her lungs.

It was female, sure, but also lonely as hell.

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The ritual continued with contortions. Salina folded her limbs to the rhythm of a routine she'd been taught as a child. The quiet brought the situation outside into her just as the joint had filled her with smoke: she was a world crumbling at the hands of a virus that couldn't be tamed.

But the thoughts could be tamed. She vanished history and superstructure and became a party of one, abating the unanswered questions: would a vaccine come, when would she get it, when would she go outside again. When would she get to be herself.

The ritual helped.

The ritual had to help.

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Work was a 3 AM with Wuhan and Dhaka; no time to linger on the mat. She stepped off and towards her balcony, stretching wide, hugging the sunset like a remorseful ex—taking it in like she'd never see it again, looking up past the moon, hanging her gaze on each star. How many were there. How far away was the furthest. Was there intelligent life somewhere, what did they think of our little plague. Would they praise us for trying to slow its spread. Would they mock how badly we'd botched it.

Did they count our deaths like we counted their stars.

Salina blew at the horror the way she'd blow at ashes fluttering down from a wildfire.

The ritual had been no cure.

What Salina wanted was to be with everyone everywhere all at once; to wrap her limbs around her species like a virus, to become omnisciently intimate at an exponential rate. To be carried along streets no longer bare; to drown in a human sea unsullied by masks and sharpened antipathy. She wanted to be mothered, and she could only feel motherly: confined, isolated, misunderstood.

If a woman appears and there's no one to perceive her, does she still get to feel a thing?

Salina rushed off the balcony and back inside, into a closet she'd vowed to forever leave shut.

Where is it?

She kicked at dunes of cardboard and plastic vinyl, knocked over mountains of books written by men, launched glassy ornaments and yards of coiled light out and into the living room, slid suitcases full of hockey pads and shredded clothing across the smooth laminate floor.

There.

She summoned a bright blue sleeping bag, unrolled it into a misshapen rectangle spread out at her feet. She dragged it to the balcony door and tossed it out against the railing with force. Her pupils bloomed, ecliptic.

As she slipped into the sleeping bag, dusk encircled, the color of the sky a candied cran. Her organs, rosy with life, turned the hormones over and pushed at her umber skin from the inside. In seconds, Salina quieted her breathing to an inaudible murmur, then zipped the bag up and over her head.

A few seconds more and she began to fall asleep—into the best sleep she'd ever have, from then until the end of her oft-interrupted life. The bag's interior illuminated by the glow of her phone, its shiny silver lining reflected herself back at her from every direction.

It returned to her, then, the definition of the word "dream."