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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Coronavirus

Live updates

Map

FAQs

How to prepare

Flattening the curve

Newsletter

+

Hello from Italy. Your future is grimmer than you think.

Within weeks, our old lives were gone

By **Ida Garibaldi**

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My family lives in the Veneto, in Northern Italy, one of the regions worst hit by the novel [coronavirus](#). We are on lockdown. It's scary. It's lonely. It's uncomfortable. And did I mention scary?

I'll spare you the statistics and the sermons; both are already abundant. But I do want to make one thing clear: If you think that by stocking up your pantries you have absolved yourself from the responsibility of preparing for this virus, you are mistaken. This is a crisis like none before. Be skeptical of both naysayers and doomsayers; there's no way of knowing how this will end.

The restrictions came upon us slowly but steadily. Within two weeks, our old lives were gone. First the schools closed, then came social distancing. Then the government locked down the hardest-hit areas: no more going in and out of certain provinces; limited movements within the "red zones." Then the whole country shut down. Most stores closed their doors. People who could were asked to telework; those who could not, and did not have a job related to the continuation of essential services, were placed on part-time schedules or unpaid leave. When we went out, we had to carry a pass explaining our reasons for being outside to show to the law enforcement officers patrolling the streets. The priority became keeping everyone inside, at all times.

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For some people, the gradual rollout made these measures hard to accept: Skeptical observers questioned the seriousness of the disease, given that the restrictions were not draconian from the start. And yet without time to adjust to a progressive loss of freedom, we wouldn't have accepted it. We might have rebelled. Instead, we rallied, coming together as one — protecting each other's health, even as we could no longer socialize.

Living under these conditions is difficult to describe. We can only leave the house out of medical necessity or to get food. We can go on short walks but not in groups. We can't hug, kiss or shake hands with anyone outside of our family. We must stay at least four feet from everyone else, at all times.

My family tries to maintain a routine: In the mornings, I home-school our four children, who range from kindergarten to eighth grade, while my husband teleworks. My eldest son's school was the best prepared for distance learning and began remote lessons from the first week of the lockdown. He gets live lessons, homework, regular interaction with his teachers — and just as importantly, regular interaction with friends, which lessens his sense of isolation. It's great, really, but it also requires a dedicated laptop and bandwidth from 8:10 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. daily, limiting what everyone else can do online. My other children's schools, which shut down at the same time, have only started distance learning this week.

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In the afternoon, my husband and I both work as best we can, while the children keep themselves busy. With guitars we had on hand and a drum set they built from scratch, they're putting together a garage band. (Literally — they have to stay in the garage and can't practice or perform anywhere else.) For the first time in my life, I've come to think that having four children sometimes can be less work than having one or two: They can entertain each other.

Counterintuitively, the days somehow end incredibly fast. We are always doing something: organizing lessons, fighting with a malfunctioning printer or about our overloaded WiFi, tutoring each child one-on-one, getting the kids outside, feeding them, drinking coffee, repeat. When, after two or three days, we can't take the confinement anymore, one of us makes a run to the grocery store to buy fruits and vegetables and whatever else we need. (The stores, at least, are well stocked.) We go out by bike to get some exercise. That, too, is a challenge, because we are always tired.

My mother and sisters, my little niece, my aunt, and cousins live in Lombardy, the region worst affected by the pandemic. If my mother, who is 81 (or *almost* 81, as she would point out) catches this virus, she will probably die. I speak to and text them frequently, but I don't know when, or if, I will be able to see them. It's bizarre: Everyone is going through the same emotions — fear, anger, exhaustion — no matter where we live or what we do. We don't need many words to know how the other person feels. We end every call with "Forza!" We must keep going.

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Yes, most people who become ill will survive. Yes, people younger than 45 will probably be fine. But right now, doctors across Northern Italy have to choose between who gets the respirator and lives, and who does not and dies. Italy's health system, for all its shortcomings — the long waits for certain tests, some aging buildings, the sometimes crowded hospital wards — is among the best-performing in the Western world. A 2017 report by the World Health Organization, for example, reported that Italian health care has among the lowest mortality rates in Europe and a strong acute-care sector. And yet this virus has overwhelmed the health system of one of the richest areas of the European Union.

Statistics change daily, as the hospitals scramble to build capacity. On Thursday, there were only 737 intensive-care beds open for new coronavirus patients in Lombardy; the region is home to 10 million people, and as of this writing, 16,220 people have tested positive for the disease there. Depending on how many coronavirus patients go into or out of the hospitals each day, if you have a chronic condition or a heart attack or are in a car crash, you might not be able to access care.

Writing this from Italy, I am also writing to you from your own future. From our state of emergency, we have been watching the crisis unfold in the United States with a terrible sense of foreboding. Please stop waiting for others to tell you what to do; stop blaming the government for doing too much or too little. We all have actions we can take to slow the spread of the disease — and ensuring that your own household has enough canned goods and cleaning supplies is not enough. You can do a lot more. You *should* do a lot more. Stay away from restaurants, gyms, libraries, movie theaters, bars and cafes, yes. But also: Don't invite people over for dinner, don't let your kids go on playdates, don't take them to the playground, don't let your teenagers out of your sight. They will sneak out with their friends, they will hold hands, they will share their drinks and food. If this seems too much, consider the following: We are not allowed to hold weddings or funerals. We can't gather to bury our dead.

For us, it might be too late to avoid an incredible loss of life. But if you decide against taking actions because it seems inconvenient, or because you don't want to look silly, you can't say you weren't warned.

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Updated March 18, 2020

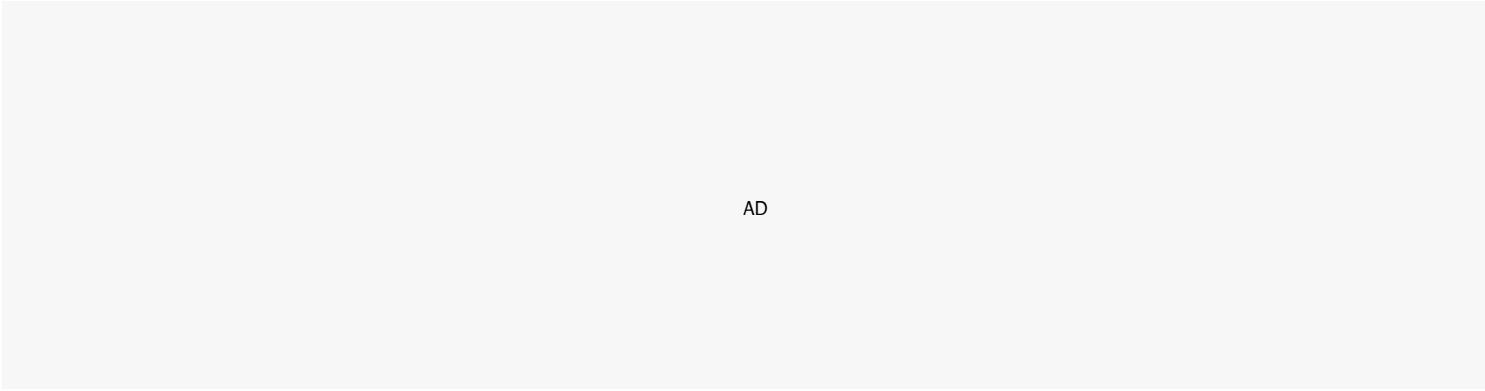
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