



#4 The Virus - Transcript

[Music]

Archived recording (news clip) *A SARS-like virus, which has infected hundreds in China, has now reached the United States.*

Archived recording (news clip) *Across the world there are rising concerns of a potential coronavirus pandemic after a major jump in cases outside of China.*

Archived recording (news clip) *The sudden increase of cases in Italy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Republic of Korea are deeply concerning.*

Archived recording (news clip) *Breaking news—coronavirus fears exploding to a new level across the globe . . . Officials saying it's not a matter of if but when the coronavirus will spread further here in the US.*

Archived recording (news clip) *I would say that there's a general recognition that globally we're not ready for the big outbreaks.*

Archived recording (Michael Barbaro) *So how prepared is this country?*
(Donald G. McNeil Jr.) *Not prepared enough, and it's hard to know exactly how prepared we need to be.*

Archived recording (Donald G. McNeil Jr.) *Basically every surface you touch might potentially have virus on it.*

Mia Sullivan I'm Mia Sullivan, and you're listening to Places. A podcast documenting stories from offbeat American locations. From a girl, who'll hopefully be living in a van soon, but is currently living under quarantine.

Recently on Places, Nick found us a van. He bought it in Chicago, and we drove it back to San Francisco together.

That was end of January. A lot's changed since then. On March 16 . . .

Archived recording (Mayor London Breed) *The new public health order that we're announcing will require San Franciscans to remain at home with exceptions only for essential outings. These measures will be disruptive to day-to-day life, but there is no need to panic.*

Mia Sullivan Staying home? Except for essential outings? For three weeks? What does that even mean? Can I walk Luca? Go for a run? Get groceries? I quickly learn I can do all these things. Thank God.

Are we sure there's no need to panic because, uhh, I definitely feel panicked.

The first week's a struggle. I work from home, in our spare bedroom, and am used to having the house to myself. Now, four of us, plus a giant dog, are packed into our 1200 square foot place, pretty much 24/7.

And every day feels . . . kinda the same.

[Music]

Every morning, I wake up in my home in San Francisco. Literally, every morning. No camping trips. No weekends away.

As one eye starts to open, Luca's still passed out, in his bed. Our new running regiment seems to be tiring him out.

Nick lies next to me, studying a van build topic, like how to install rooftop solar panels, or hooking up battery isolators 101.

Before breakfast and coffee, we hustle out the door for our morning run, up to Bernal Hill. Past boarded up construction sites and masked neighbors. Up the narrow wooden staircase, crossing our fingers no one's coming down at the same time.

In an attempt to avoid people, we run around the park's lower paved path and keep Luca on leash. Toward the end of the path we always stop to look out over the city. The San Francisco Bay is still out to the right. The Golden Gate Bridge is still peaking over the horizon, to the left. And in the middle, there's the city. A city of empty skyscrapers, shuttered shops, and deserted streets.

I start to get used to this new paradigm, but just as I'm settling in, I give up my office. I give it up so Nick's stepsister, Camille has a place to live.

Camille Luscher Right about now, I would probably be somewhere in Europe. Hopefully in Berlin, having a great time! Meeting new people. Sleeping in bunk beds. {Laughs}

I was planning on going on this backpacking trip that ended up having to be cancelled. So I needed a place to go because I had someone filling my room at my other place . . .

Mia Sullivan Can you tell me the story of when you realized that you probably wouldn't be able to take the trip?

Camille Luscher It was probably about the time we were getting news of it spreading in Italy. I was very back and forth for a while. I sort of came to the conclusion that I was going to put the trip on hold.

And then a couple hours later, I got all these texts from friends and family saying "Trump banned travelers from Europe".

Even though it wasn't banning Americans going to Europe, it was still the first signifier that this is just the beginning of a lot of restrictions.

Mia Sullivan Do you think you're still going to go?

Camille Luscher I want to, definitely, but I'm not gonna go this summer. I'm gonna wait until I have a clearer picture of what the world is gonna be like. It would be interesting to go at a time like this, I guess, for different reasons. But those aren't the reasons I want to go for. {Laughs}

Mia Sullivan Camille's experience makes me think more about why I want to go on my trip. And whether it's realistic to start anytime soon. And even if we can start, is now the right time to go? Will we be able to do the things we want to do?

As the days trudge on, San Francisco's confirmed case load stays relatively low, but cases across the US—and in New York City specifically—balloon. Most of my extended family's in New Jersey—and over 60. I'm concerned.

My dad's one of those "I go into the office even when it's blizzard-ing" types. He continues commuting to New York City—by train—until mid-March.

And my mom continues going to church, until the bishop orders priests to stop saying mass. And she continues visiting my grandma in assisted living, til they literally close the doors on her. And then . . .

Mia Sullivan It's day 10 of San Francisco's shelter-in-place quarantine. Today was kind of a scary day. The US surpassed China and Italy in terms of how many confirmed COVID-19 cases we have reported.

Mia Sullivan As of today, March 26, there are 415 reported coronavirus cases and 5 confirmed deaths in San Francisco. On the same day . . .

Christina Sullivan New York City: 23,000 cases. 365 deaths. Also today . . .

Mia Sullivan My sister's fiancé . . .

Christina Sullivan . . . Malik developed symptoms. He had a low grade fever between 99 and 100, aches and joint pain, headache, low energy, exhaustion . . .

Mia Sullivan They both live in Brooklyn. They live in a, you know, not a tiny apartment for New York City, but a relatively small apartment. Luckily they have two bedrooms so Christina can sleep in the guest room. But, yeah, it's really unsettling. Especially now that you can't even get a test in New York City unless you're on the verge of hospitalization.

So just hoping for the best. I mean, he's 31 and doesn't have any underlying conditions. So hopefully it will just be feeling kind of shitty and going back to normal life very soon knowing that he's likely immune. He had a really good attitude about it when I was texting with him. He was like—hopefully this just means I can help out other people and not be afraid.

Nick Baciu Well, we don't know if he has it or not. It's too early. We'll just have to wait and see and just take it day by day. I think we can't let them be too nervous about it because they're living it. They don't really have much they can do at the moment other than stay at home and monitor it.

It's also not that surprising to me. I mean, they live in New York City, which is ground zero for this right now in the United States. So everybody's going to

know someone that has it. We're just hoping that the other prediction of—everybody's gonna know somebody who dies from it—doesn't come true.

Definitely did not think this is what we'd be talking about two months ago. Two months ago I bought the van.

Mia Sullivan With all the question marks surrounding the virus, we decide to push the trip back a month at least—leaving around 4th of July instead of Memorial Day. Luckily, Nick can keep his job another month and plans to head to Tulsa to finish building out the van in mid-May.

But I'm concerned that we may need to push the trip back even further.

[Music]

Mia Sullivan (anxious thoughts) *It seems like there's no end in sight for shelter-in-place.*

What if the National Forests close?

What if people don't want us in their towns, and they're really mean to us?

What if no one will let me interview them?

What if we have to postpone the trip until next summer?

Mia Sullivan These questions occupy my thoughts, but Nick doesn't seem too worried. He thinks we'll be able to head out this summer.

Nick Baciu We're having to change our plans a little bit. But I'm continuing to make progress on the van while I'm here and stuck here for probably another month.

Mia Sullivan We insulate the van, put in the subfloor, and install three windows.

[Loud sounds of dremel]

Nick Baciu I just got done using a dremel to cut the main support beams of the van, which was a little nerve wracking. But I still have my hands, so I'm a happy camper.

[Music]

Christina Sullivan March 31: Day 6 for Malik. He's feeling better but still achy and tired. Day 2 for me, sad face. I have a low grade fever; fatigue and cloudiness; a dry cough . . .

Day 7 for Malik, day 3 for me. Breathing is worse; throat is more sore; a hundred-degree fever.

Day 8 for Malik. Still mild joint pain. Day 4 for me. I tried to work for an hour and a half but got a massive wave of exhaustion.

Day 5. Fatigue is worse. Lost sense of smell.

Day 6. Our friend Jason's great aunt died yesterday. She got sick with COVID very quickly and died. He couldn't get her into a hospital. After knowing it, she just died the next day.

Day 8. Fatigue is definitely better. Cough is better. Some smell. Not much.

[Music]

Day 10. Fatigue is much better. Cough is the same. Smell is coming back.

Felt 100 percent today. Took two whole weeks but feel so lucky to have gotten through it. Same for Malik.

Mia Sullivan Their recovery makes me feel so much better. My mood starts to shift a little bit. And by late April, I feel like I need a little change of scenery.

Mia Sullivan Do you think I should wear this jacket?

Nick Baciu I think you're gonna be a little hot.

Mia Sullivan Note: always bring a jacket to the beach in San Francisco. Always.

Mia Sullivan Luca, we're going to the beach!

Mia Sullivan We head to Ocean Beach—a three and a half mile stretch of coastline that spans western San Francisco. We've been sheltering in place for six weeks, and I actually haven't left my neighborhood until now. It's a hazy, sunny spring day. Pink and yellow wildflowers blanket the sand dunes.

Mia Sullivan Do you have the keys?

Nick Baciu Yeah.

Mia Sullivan We walk to the beach.

Guy That's a nice doggie.

Mia Sullivan Thank you.

Guy Giant!

Mia Sullivan {Laughs} Do you want to play, Lu?

Lady He looks like a big muppet.

Mia Sullivan Yeah. {Laughs}

Lady Is he a Labradoodle?

Mia Sullivan He's a Bernese Mountain Dog-Poodle mix.

It's not the biggest beach.

Nick Baciu That's OK, though. Should I let him go?

Mia Sullivan Uhh. Yeah, I guess so.

Nick Baciu Yeah?

Mia Sullivan I'm just afraid he's gonna go crazy.

Nick Baciu Yeah, he will. He's just gonna run.

Mia Sullivan OK. Yeah, go for it. Luca's running like a crazy puppy! This is his first time at the beach in a couple of months.

Nick Baciu Leave it, Luca. Leave it.

Mia Sullivan Leave it.

Nick Baci Leave it. Hey!

Mia Sullivan We prevent Luca from swallowing a jellyfish. And then . . .

Nick Baci Gentle Luca.

Mia Sullivan Gentle Lu.

Mia Sullivan Luca befriends a brown pit pull mix named Iyo by mowing him down at the shoreline. They spar for 15 minutes straight. Then we play some frisbee.

Nick Baci Want me to throw it again, Luca? Yeah, good boy!

Mia Sullivan Luca, Bring it back.

Luca {Pants very loudly}

Nick Baci Want to do another one?

Mia Sullivan You got it Lu! {Laughs} Aww. He was dragging on that one. {Laughs}

Nick Baci I think he's tired.

Mia Sullivan He's sitting on it so you won't throw it any more. Are you a tired boy?

Come on, Lu! Good boy!

Nick Baci Alright, bud. We gotta go.

Mia Sullivan At Ocean Beach, it doesn't feel like we're in the middle of a pandemic. Kids boogie board and play in the sand. Surfers clutch their boards, running toward the perfect spot. People romp with their dogs. I see few masks.

The same day we go to the beach, Mayor Breed warns she'll likely extend shelter in place. Again. And sure enough . . .

Archived recording (Mayor London Breed) *Unfortunately, we will need to extend the deadline for the stay-at-home order through the month of May.*

Mia Sullivan While the number of confirmed cases in San Francisco is low, it's continued to steadily rise. And while our testing capacity has improved, we're still not hitting our county's goal—to give at least 200 daily tests per 100,000 people. And we're still having trouble supplying enough personal protective equipment to healthcare workers.

So May comes, and we're still at home.

[Singing Happy Birthday]

I celebrate my 32nd birthday with oysters on my back deck and a bike ride to Golden Gate Park. We're in the middle of the park, in Hellman's Hollow—a large grassy meadow flanked by Monterey cypress and blue gum eucalyptus trees. Yellow and white wildflowers sprout up through the grass. This is where Outside Lands and the free Hardly Strictly bluegrass festival happen. And around the corner the Grateful Dead played, just before the Summer of Love.

Nick Baciu This park is special. It's not downtown but it's in a major city, and it also makes you feel kind of in nature. I think I like this part of the park best.

Mia Sullivan I ask Nick if the pandemic's impacted his thoughts about living in San Francisco.

Nick Baciu I feel really good about the way the city has responded. One thing this city has shown as a result of this pandemic is the ability for the city to come together . . .

Mia Sullivan We flattened our coronavirus curve in San Francisco, largely because of Mayor Breed's early action. On February 25—before the city had any confirmed cases—Mayor Breed declared a state of emergency, after learning from a top CDC official that the outbreak in the US “may be severe.” San Francisco was one of the first American cities to shelter-in-place. And we're required to wear masks in public.

As Nick gears up to leave, Tulsa lifts its shelter-in-place ordinance. Which seems kind of crazy to us.

Mia Sullivan So Nick, how are you feeling?

Nick Baciu I thought you had different questions for me. {Laughs}

I'm feeling a little stressed out. Because I've never done this before. And there's a lot to be done.

Mia Sullivan What do you think you're most afraid of?

Nick Baci Just making the right decisions. Well, I know there's gonna be a bunch of things that go wrong. But I just hope it doesn't go too wrong.

I'm probably worrying too much. I'm just wanting to make sure that I think enough about it in advance so that it doesn't cause problems later on.

[Music]

Meghan Baci Here's flowers. Here's your mint. And then some more snacks.

Nick Baci Nice!

Camille Luscher Bye!

Nick Baci See ya!

Camille Luscher In seven weeks? Cool. I believe in you. {Laughs}

Nick Baci Bye, bud! Love you! I'll be back soon.

Mia Sullivan Can you let me know where you're sleeping, or if you're going to get out of service range?

Nick Baci Yep, I'll let you know.

Mia Sullivan OK, bye. Love you.

[Van door slams and van starts up]

[Music]

Mia Sullivan Next up on Places, we get a glimpse into the life of the van builder. And then, we finally hit the road.

This episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Mia Sullivan. A big thank you to Nick Baci, Christina Sullivan, and Blair Sullivan for their feedback and constant encouragement.

Our theme is by Brent Curriden. And our show art is by Christine Hostetler and Michelle Anderson. Additional music was provided by Blue Dot Sessions.

I'm Mia Sullivan, thanks for listening. See you next time, on the road.