



Pandemic Love

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Pandemic love.

Pandemic love.

When said aloud, it has a sort of rhythm to it, like a heartbeat with a misstep, fluttering.

Pandemic love.

It was like how I imagine it feels to pull taffy for the first time. Sweet, yet stretched out so wrongly that it clumps on the ends and lacks a defining middle. Drooping toward the floor, leaving you with fistfuls of cavity-inducing calories. Don't pull too far, the taffy-puller mentions just a heartbeat too late.

Ah, better luck next time, then.

In October, pandemic love would have been nothing to me but perhaps a strange thing to call the feeling of being lovesick. *Poetic*, I would have called it. I had not yet memorized the way his shoulder fit my head, and there was still that thrill when I outlined his cheeks with the backs of my fingers, the space between my second and third knuckles. I liked to do this when he wasn't paying attention, when I could stare and try to memorize that feeling. The thrill usually fades after a little while; I knew this from experience. I wanted it to last forever, and I was sure it would.

February meant youth. Finally being able to roll down windows without parents in the car to complain about the wind, his hands outlining the crinkled creases of my denim, coming to rest on the thigh *he* didn't think was too chubby at all. Rushing down the southbound to get smoothies in that hole-in-the-wall spot nestled between the towering buildings downtown. We'd found it by accident a month ago. When we found something new like that, it felt as if we were the only two people in the whole world to know of it. And maybe we were. I'd never seen anyone else waiting in line, just a single man at the cash register relaying orders to the smoothie wizard hidden behind the kitchen curtain.

This San Diego winter was really just a slightly cooler summer with a larger dosage of overcast skies. Even with my eyes squinted in the chilly sunlight, I could see his smile, spot that one sharp tooth that sometimes cut his lips, sometimes cut mine too. I loved that tooth. I told him so. He told me he loved me too. It was sweet, sweet like the tangerine juice dripping down our chins and drying on the seatbelts, dribbling into the button-up shirt I'd selected from his wardrobe that day. We did laundry that night, giggling, always giggling, warming frozen fingertips on too-expensive dryer machines.

April was real pandemic love now: glancing over every once in a while, noting the way his profile was dimly outlined in the grayish hue from my screen, which screamed stockpilers and shortages. Scrolling through headlines that I could only detach from when he curled his fingers to beckon me over. When the air didn't smell of his cologne and aftershave, it smelled like the bread I burnt and the meals I heated up in a saucepan (my housemate took the microwave home with her a month before, when we parted with "see you soon" and not yet "stay healthy, stay safe.") When the air didn't smell of his cologne and aftershave, I was alone.

I would have had to walk to class in the spring rain showers. Instead, I laid under blankets still cold from the overnight chill, huddled next to him for warmth while the college professor droned on. San Diego winter came late this year. We found out a tomato soup and grilled cheese was only good the first three times a week. By the fourth, the words "tomato soup" meant nothing. It was just something in a bowl next to something too undercooked or burnt no matter how closely I watched it. I'd eat it anyway, because grocery store lines were purgatory for the living. Even at double speed, the professor droned on.

Stale bread reminds me of the summer, when pandemic love became sickly love, entirely distant from the lovesickness I'd known last fall. It felt like bubblegum cough syrup dripping down my throat, or perhaps bubblegum taffy sticking too tightly to my teeth. I stared out the window I once easily fell asleep under in my childhood room, my fan whirring on medium, watching me in our cyclical turmoil.

Distance was eating us. I craved his hand wrapped around mine, or maybe just a faster text back. I never once doubted that he was my person. And my person was a hundred miles away, forgetting about me during 12-hour workdays. Abandoned, I dreamt of rolling down windows and apple pies from Julian.

Pandemic love followed me to October, sinking itself into the plastic of the bags from the thrift store. It was one of the first times I'd seen him since I moved back two months ago. It would be one of the last times, too: Something sick had sunk itself into the clothes. Not the thrifted clothes—those were hanging up in my closet, my closet with empty hangers that once held his sweatshirts, and his t-shirt with tangerine stains that never washed out, which now filled up plastic thrift store bags. We didn't say a word.

He was a 15-minute drive away and even now, at the end of things, it had taken him an hour to get here. Maybe I didn't thrill him anymore. Maybe he didn't thrill me. Maybe the thrill didn't matter.

"So that's it, then?"

In between his question and the closing of the door, my silence answered. We were fragile.

"Young love," people always sigh. Young pandemic love, though, no one would sigh that, except me, my finger hovering over the call button. Pandemic love, pandemic love. Above the heartbeat chant rises the questions, always unbearable.

What if I'd been more patient? Did I make the right choice? *Was there a right choice?*

You'll never find out now, will you?

Love,
Pandemic

