

Chrysalis: The diary of a reformed loner

Day 1. March 20, 2020.

I've blown through my entire supply of novelty pasta in three days. All the sticky sweet, tomatoey, animal-shaped goodness licked clean out of its tin cans in three. Fucking. Days. How the hell do I plan on surviving this impending apocalypse with an insatiable drive to gorge and inhale my way through all the survival supplies? An ex boyfriend once told me: "when I date someone, I try to imagine what they'd be like in an apocalypse. It's always a deal-breaker if I think they'd slow me down or get me killed." His demeaning metric of romantic aptitude has haunted me since. I now chronically compare things like my composting habits, pain tolerance, or personal hygiene to its applicability in some senseless and fictionalized zombie mutiny or Richter shattering earthquake, then inevitably scoff at the unlikelihood of ever having to prove myself in such a case. But here you have it, folks. Here be dragons, and we've sailed right into their waters, and they're awake. Now, in the throws of a pre-pocolypse, I've already blown through my emergency reserve of insta-pasta and in its place are empty metal coffins containing only shame for both my careless gluttony and lack of qualifications as mate in times of scarcity. Fucking famines. Why couldn't the historical marker of my time have been a violent political revolution? My skills are much better suited to vigilantism or looting. You know that pigeon scrawnier and sadder than the rest in the flock? The one missing a toe or two, and its dull, dirty feathers left patchy, revealing scabbed wounds from lost battles against the big boys. No one ever thinks they'd be *that* pigeon. But here I am, a sad, skeletal, pecked apart sky rat, scarfing down breadcrumbs and scraps while the others aren't looking.

It must be something about being told to apply more self control in *these times* that has inspired my Pavlovian salivation at the slightest thought of my mildew-caked fridge. Even the dangerously expired box of Funfetti cake mix that's lived in the shadows of my most unused cupboard since the day I moved in tempted my voracious appetite. I mean, if I'm going to get sick and succumb to this stomach churning pandemic, I'm certainly not going out with regrets of snubbing the enduring joys of a candy sprinkled confection. It didn't even taste as old as the date implied.

Do I really think my newfound compulsion is valid evidence of my totem ranking in the post-apocalyptic pecking order? Not particularly, but my lack of survival instinct is becoming increasingly worrisome. But not as worrisome as the other psyche shift that's crept over me as of late.

Here I am: a slowly fattening loner hating aloneness for the first time in her life.

You see, long before the world's population unveiled itself as putrid Petri dish, I thrived in self-imposed quarantine. In fact, I built a life similar to the one now demanded of our doomsday cheerleaders. I live alone with a surly, nasty roommate of the canine variety and spend most of my time lit only by the blue glow of a laptop in a dark, crummy apartment. I only leave the warm

confines of my brown-shag-carpeted cave to get drunk, or get coffee, or get laid. I can see Vancouver's busiest street from the second floor and, most days, the uninhibited slurs of overgrown frat boys pouring out of the Italian restaurant across the street is enough social interaction for a girl like me. I order in, and binge old movies, and write, and Tweet profane commentary to illegally live-streamed UFC fight nights. And repeat. I generally hate people, with few carefully chosen exceptions, and pace the Granville Strip at 2 a.m. on Saturday nights, sober and chain smoking my way through a pack of darts, to remind myself why. But I also desperately love watching it all unfurl like an unscripted reality show with no arc or ads. As long as the characters don't turn and begin talking through the TV screen, I can nurture this love-hate *thing* with other humans day in and day out without much want for anything else from them. Every subconscious microexpression, item of weather inappropriate clothing, jerk of the neck to investigate a loud noise, or snort of unexpected laughter breathes life into my casing. But directly interacting with their humanness can be excruciatingly uncomfortable. Eye contact alone can braid my intestines into the gaps between my ribs and vacuum the last hiccup of air from my lungs. So, observing, I jot notes into my phone or scrawl them into my notebook to later be collaged into more palatable characters I'll surely enjoy more than actually having to converse with their raw, unpredictable, needy, fleshy muses. Stealing hand-selected scraps, I go home and write them: my characters. I fall in love with them, laugh at their cleverness, argue against their utter stupidity, tire of them, then go back outside to harvest more puzzle pieces at a coffee shop or dinner party or hotel bar. I only get a phone call once or twice a week from family that know I only come home on holidays and forgive my apathy toward their close regional proximity. And I like it that way. Or, I did. It *was* a blissfully sullen lifestyle only depressing a few days out of the year, and for the tradeoff of 300-some-odd peaceful, independent, days of aloneness, it was an easy sacrifice.

That was, until COVID-19. Or the "novel coronavirus" as bag-eyed health officials call it during their daily debriefs. Though with a creeping 200,000-plus cases, causing more than 5,000 deaths worldwide at the hand of lung paralysis and wrenching pain-induced vomit, there is nothing apparently novel about it. And while I haven't caught it myself—sanitizing and scrubbing the skin on my hands into mere flakey patches held together by heat rash—I have caught something more untreatable, more foreign, and more gag-inducing than I have ever encountered before.

I want to be around... people. And not just to exist externally latent, as if wallpaper at one of their happy hours. I actually want to... attend a happy hour.

I started noticing the itching craving on day three of the soft-shutdown—and by "soft" I mean the country's point man hadn't gone so far as to close the borders to all, but most, and save a few grocery stores, ballsy bars, and liquor depots, most businesses had 'tentatively' shuttered.

And I know I've caught this social disease by the growing severity of my desperation to be in the dead centre of heavily populated places—a yearning I can't seem to assuage by eating all six of the protein bars I bought last week. I feel like some cinematic depiction of a freshly bitten victim to an old world vampire, slowly becoming more crazed at the smell of human skin, hair, blood.

The first craving was for the pool hall. Near instantly, I began missing the dingy smell of stale-beer-soaked tables. I miss rubbing chalk off my blued fingers and drunk guys badly pretending not to watch me bend over a table. God how I want nothing more than to open a tab and deep throat cheap pilsners for hours while making increasingly lewd jokes about holes and big, hard sticks. I miss my neurotic friend who insists on colour coding the balls before breaking them, and always, always flips the triangle twice toward him before putting it back point first. I want someone to check my ID. I want to sit on cracked leather bar stools. I want to hear the repetitive pings and dings of pinball in the background. I want, desperately, to dagger-eye a group of sloshed 21-year-olds until they feel so insecure and uncomfortable they fuck off away from my favourite table for jagger bombs at the Roxy. I doubt they'd even know its the best table in the bar. I'd be doing everyone a favour. I want the nods and grunts of appreciation from other annoyed patrons as they stumble out of earshot.

The second wave of social desperation came when St. Patrick's Day hit and slid under the radar without even so much as a temporary four-leaf-clover tattoo or glittery bowtie. No green beer. No sticky floors. No one spilling their cheap tequila shot on my blistered toes. No happy, obnoxious dancing along to bagpipes or singing to the only Dropkick Murphys song anyone knows. Nothing. The one holiday that endorses binge-drinking-induced sloppy camaraderie was nowhere to be found in a world where we all exist at least six feet apart. With that much space between us, do you know how hard it would be to pungently splutter "I love you, man" into your new blackout buddy's ear? Amidst the existential anxiety, most seemed to have even forgotten it was happening. I was devastated. I'd *never* been devastated at a forgotten club invitation.

Things that used to take a week's worth of energy, now I was weighing against the fine or jail-time it might incur if I tried my luck and got caught.

Symptom three: I called my ex, *just to talk*. Luckily, I hung up before the barely literate dud could answer the phone. I blamed it on a pocket dial via text before launching my cell like an angry addict into the couch and asking my dog why he hadn't stopped me earlier.

And it's only getting worse. I quipped about the "nice weather" to a silicone-gloved barista this morning. And when they told me they too would be closing down for the next two weeks, I felt like I had just be dumped. "But... but... my coffee at home just isn't as good!" I stammered, completely skating over the huge health risk they had already endured staying operational thus far just to serve a bunch of Yaletown socialites their oat milk lattes.

The only thing that could explain this isolation-borne illness is that my chosen lifestyle has suddenly become trendy and, worse, mandatory. Once I realized I was being *strongly advised* to bore deeper into my existence as a hermit crab, the shell started to irritatingly dig into the flesh of my shoulders, my spine began to ache under its weight, and I wanted to gnaw my way free of the hard casing. Where once my dingy hole of a spackled studio was a latched-and-bolted

sanctuary from the small talk of nosey neighbours, in its place stood padded walls lit by cold fluorescents.

It's like being on a bad mushroom trip—one where dust appears to crawl, and from dark corners bulge socketless eyes, and the roof slinks inward around you, closer and closer with each forced inhale.

I think I'm going insane.

I miss people. I miss my strangers. I want my family to call. And I've jarringly realized a socially distant life is only comforting when it's not prescribed by doctors.

But this is all foreign to me. And trust me, you can't WebMD "help me, I think I like humans". I've tried. If I call my parents, they'll know something is up and send an onslaught of webinars about depression, again. And all my friends are busy posting online about their crafty achievements during #selfimposedquarantine like it's some sort of survivalist Pinterest board. Porn isn't as satiating as it used to be and practicing safe sex in a pandemic is just not having sex, or touching any body parts for that matter. How I yearn for the sepia-toned salaciousness of the 60s, hold the STIs. My dog isn't much of a conversationalist and when I take him to the park, everyone just stands around the borders avoiding eye contact, waiting for their furry prisoner to shit and tire itself out before dragging it back under their sanitized rock.

It's torture.

I'm not entirely sure what to do. I can't actually socialize—not because I am scared of becoming a dry-heaving incubator of viral plague, but because I haven't the slightest clue as to *how*. I can't go home—my parents will only exasperate this developing psychological disorder. My friends are locked away and my co-workers too.

So, it begins. I write to keep myself sane, or company. Or to keep some sort of record during this unfortunate and inescapable evolution in the chance I don't make it out alive.