

Love in the time of coronavirus: How San Franciscans cope

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Somewhere in San Francisco's Western Addition, a woman scrolls through online personals. She searches profiles for words like "apocalypse" and "crisis" and "quarantine" and asks people questions like, "What sorts of things do you think are possible now that you didn't think were possible before?"

In the Mission District, a couple already engaged fix a spice rack as they shelter in place, and learn about each other, too. Not far from there, this time in the Tenderloin, a relationship ends over text: "I do not want to date you anymore. I'm sorry for the timing."

Imagine walking down the street and all the fronts of all the buildings falling away. Imagine the living room stages revealed and the dramas unfolding. All around the world, people are falling in love and loving and falling out of love just as they always have. Only now with the added complication of a pandemic.

“What I’ve been noticing a lot is those Tinder boys are very lonely right now,” says Jessi Reid. She’s 33, and single in the Mission District for a year now. About a week before the shutdown, she thought she’d try dating again. Odd timing, she knows, but it’s not a bad distraction. She’s chatted with a few and gone on one “really strange” video date with another. “Men are more emotionally available on the app. Since no one is hooking up, they’re just wanting to talk, which is really sweet.”

There’s a sense that the world has stopped even as it spins wildly out of control — so much time to contemplate so much uncertainty. Love can be uncertain, too, but it’s a familiar sort of uncertainty. So, it seems, there are lots of not-quite, not-yet love stories like Reid’s.

Maybe a week or so before the isolation order, Lauren Ruben (28, San Francisco) had met a man on one of the usual apps. They dated some. “Really good dates,” she says. As social isolation set in, they met at a park one last time. “Sat on opposite sides of the bench.” They talked about how weird it felt that the world still seemed normal. “We did have a connection,” Ruben says. “The whole world was slowing down, and it seemed a lot less transactional than normal.”

She was committed to keeping space, though. And anyway, he had plans to leave the city and pass the pandemic in a cabin in Sonoma County.

From that distance he wrote her daily. This kept on for a while, and after many days Ruben drove to the cabin, just for a couple hours, just for dinner.

In her first letter back to him, Ruben seemed to already know what was coming next.

“We’re going to have to square the emotional intimacy we’ve achieved of talking all the time with the reality of not having actually spent much time together when this all lands,” she wrote. Last week she called it off. “The more I would talk to him, that friendship or connection would develop, but the greater the gulf was for our physical comfort,” she says.

But even if that story is ending, others continue. John Dellaporta, a 36-year-old actor in Los Angeles, is still talking with an online date who, almost as soon as they connected, moved back east to be with family. The other night, he mentioned how weird it was that they hadn’t yet kissed. “It’s ridiculous — but it’s kind of fun ridiculous. It just feels like the stakes are so much lower, but the fact that the low stakes invited intimacy isn’t something I expected.”

Others find comfort not in something new but in nostalgia. Nairi Azaryan (25, San Francisco) has been thinking a lot about an ex lately, about a trip they made to the desert. “Piece by piece, day by day, I’ve been recollecting on my actions ... how they eventually did lead to us breaking up.”

She ended up texting him. “I mean yeah, it’s stupid, but whatever.”

There are no expectations, she says, except maybe comfort. “I’m just trying to hurtle past all the normal — there’s a slow game of ‘Let’s get comfortable talking to each other.’” She just wants to be able to call and talk to him. “I’m kind of alone most of the day in the house, which doesn’t help.”

The pandemic and all its uncertainty have made distance a thing you can now measure in time — everybody who is not together is far away from one another, whether a few miles away or several states away. Emily Graham had plans to fly from Long Beach to Washington, D.C. She’s 22 and it was spring break and that’s where her boyfriend lives. But his lungs carry scars from a previous injury. “It’s just not worth the risk,” she says.

It was hard enough, him living all those miles away, but at least, before this pandemic, they had a date to look forward to. When you date long-distance, she says, all you ever really have is a date — a date on a calendar; that’s what keeps you going. So they do what they usually do, talking through screens and over the phone, texting just to keep up, only without much hope for any time together soon. “There’s no end date for all this,” Graham says. “He was planning on moving here come summertime, but obviously ...”

Just as far away from one another, but in the same house, are Martha Cecilia Ovadia, 35, and her husband, down in Homestead, Fla. Her husband works at a hospital, and it seems almost certain he’ll be exposed to the virus. They don’t talk in ifs, they talk in whens, so they’ve split their home in two; one floor for him, one floor for her. They talk down hallways to each other and watch the same show, bedrooms away. “We’re pretty much self-quarantined from each other,” Ovadia says.

In the morning Ovadia writes letters to him, on new paper that looks like old paper. The notes are melodramatic and funny. She seals them with wax. “Save it for when it gets rough,” she tells him. “It feels like I’m sending my husband to war every morning.” When he gets home his face is different, changed from his time at the hospital, but they do not touch. “It’s the most surreal experience.” It’s hard not to feel insecure when you lose a thing like touch, when you lose proximity. But there are worse things even still. Another friend they know has moved into an apartment on his own, away from his family. The friend’s wife just gave birth.

Love shifts to fit the moment — proximity and touch drives a lot of what we do now. Three people, in a polyamorous relationship, downsized from two homes to one. Elsewhere, an MBA student at Stanford and her girlfriend decided they’d rather be together than apart during all this, so when courses went online she flew to Houston. They’ve adopted a cat, too.

There was a moment where Amelia Bonow (35, Seattle) tried to feel things out with a guy she’d just started dating, if only to avoid a quarantine with no touching and no pleasure. “I would like to be able to hang with somebody, if we’re all going to be quarantined,” she says.

But no. They ended it. “From that point forward ... I’ve just been flailing wildly with the phone and the computer,” she says. “It feels like everyone is sitting really lonely and alone, looking at their phones.”

There is a lead maybe, “this really cute boy who lives downstairs in my apartment. (But) he’s not giving me enough to work with.”

Times like these serve to test and to clarify. All those people talking online will eventually have to meet in person. The shotgun move-ins, done under all this pressure, will offer a nice proof of concept. Or they won’t.

In retrospect, Bea White (34, Tenderloin) maybe could have been a little clearer with her boyfriend that the relationship had run its course. In retrospect, maybe he shouldn’t have picked her up from the airport the night the shutdown went into effect. And in retrospect, maybe she shouldn’t have invited him inside her friend’s house where they began to meal plan and pool money for the weeks ahead. But she did and the pressure grew.

He didn’t know how to cut an endive, and he kept asking her if she was all right. “I couldn’t breathe without him noticing.”

And so the text. “I do not want to date you anymore. I’m sorry for the timing.”

This is a love story, too, even if it’s the end of one.

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