

March

*It was their quietness that made me lean toward them fascinated
the first time I saw the axolotls.*
Julio Cortázar

Leticia and Jerry decided to co-quarantine on the morning of their fifth consecutive night in bed together, some two weeks after that glacial early morning, silent and ashen as an oyster that failed to open, when Jerry stopped to fix the sudden gash on Leticia's front bike tire on the Columbia Street Waterfront Greenway. Leticia watched as this thin, agile stranger—who'd jumped off his own bike without a sound, his face shielded against the piercing cold by a black ski mask—pulled out tools and patches from a nylon sack, his gloved fingers familiar, comfortable, with the work at hand. *There's a deli on Hicks and Kane, Jerry had said. Congress is just a couple of blocks down. We can take it to cross the BQE. I recommend riding there. I can follow you. So we can make sure the patch worked. You could really freeze out here on a morning like this.* The patch held, and at the deli, Leticia bought coffee. When Jerry shed his ski mask, two brown spoon-shaped eyes emerged. Their steady gaze reminded Leticia of a shelf stocked with provisions.

Two weeks later, there they lay—sipping coffee, naked from the waist down, propped up on pillows, scrolling through articles on their silvery laptops. The State's email, reminding all citizens of the impending start of that year's Annual Quarantine Month, pinged both their inboxes simultaneously. It had been over seven years since the initial virus outbreaks devastated the State, which had been quick to determine that compulsory, annual quarantines were the only effective weapon to prevent waves of deadlier viral strains from emerging. The only way to keep the populace safe, the State insisted, was by keeping people inside their homes for one month every year, regardless of the mounting effectivity of vaccination campaigns. Whatever was inevitably brewing amongst the population at large, the State decreed, would diminish by keeping random bodies apart.

Have you registered for Quarantine Month? Jerry asked. Leticia shook her head, *No.*

We could quarantine together, Jerry in a muted voice. *Yes,* she responded simply, *yes.*

The tips of their fingers logged onto the State's Quarantine Registrar, where each individual was required by law to declare the name of the persons, if any, with whom they would spend the thirty-one days of March, now known as Quarantine Month. Simultaneously, they typed in each other's name.

That first March they spent together in absolute isolation in Jerry's brownstone basement apartment, located on the block right before Carrol Gardens becomes Red Hook, was nothing short of grotesque, Leticia would later relate to her roommates. Grotesque in a great way. Not only was it love at, basically, first sight, she confirmed, but it was artistically scorching.

The manufacture of clothing is so violent, Leticia explained to Jerry one night, a week or so into their month-long mandatory confinement, the overripe color of her eyes fogged by the pitch dark of his basement apartment where light from the outside world had trouble entering. Nothing is as vicious as an industrial sewing machine. The way clothes are produced is a mad stabbing of fabric, fabric we slip onto our bodies. At first, I thought that by stapling clothing to canvases I could show this violence. Maybe I was naïve to want this, but I did. I wanted people to see, then feel, the hidden hostility in the mass production of soft, even delicate, objects. But then, the virus came, and everything changed. Nothing was as savage as the virus. As how the virus enters our bodies. Slowly shutting us down. Choking us. From within. I stopped stapling clothes. I started piercing the canvas with thread. When I do it, I feel I am the virus piercing people's skin, their bodies. Their organs. But, when I draw the needle out, it's also me, only this time I am sucking the virus out.

Doesn't it depress you, to relive the virus like that, every day, when you work?

Yes. It does.

They were silent after that. Then Jerry reached over and held her. And, though they were both of slight build, his grip over her was conclusive, his hold. So, too, his hardening. That night, their bodies thrust together as if attempting to reach, to scrub clean, each other's secret pockets of muck. Leticia had had a few boyfriends before, but she never considered labeling any of it as love because she never felt like the part of her that actually contained her had ever been penetrated. As a result, she had come to believe that there simply was no such thing as touch.

After her month interment with Jerry, her work's focus, which had suffered a serrated rebirth after her mother's death eight years prior during the virus' nightmarish Second Wave, became less about incursion and more about incorporation—about absorption. Never had Leticia produced such essential work, puncturing the dozen medium-sized canvases she'd brought with her to Jerry's place with vermilion, ochre, magenta, bergamot-colored threads, trapping every sliver of canvas with her fury of woven texture. *Just look at the work I am producing; we are so in love*, Leticia proclaimed, meaning it.

Moving in with Jerry after the end of their first Quarantine Month together was a nominal process. She'd already brought most of her significant belongings with her for their four weeks of sheltering in place, not that she had much by way of stuff. When she met Jerry, she'd been living in Red Hook for a little over two years, in an airy if dingy fourth-story walk-up that she shared with two friends who had graduated with her from Savannah's School of Art and Design. The three of them amassed their dorm room furniture into the frank geometry of the two-bedroom apartment, switching bedrooms in four-month intervals so that each had the chance to sleep in the south-facing bedroom, whose side views of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge suffused onlookers with a narrative of possibility. Such arrangement also meant that each girl spent four months of the year sleeping on a futon in the living room. Leticia's futon *terzo* occurred during Quarantine Month each year, a cycle she requested, a cycle her roommates readily granted.

From spending five consecutive Quarantine Months with her father in his small Fort Lauderdale condo (she'd drive down from Savannah to be with him as soon as classes paused in preparation

for the month of remote learning), Leticia had realized that people tended to limit themselves to their bedrooms during enforced isolation, leaving the rest of the living space virtually uninhabited. It was during this time that she picked up cooking and cleaning in earnest, activities she could only savor if performed under rigorous solitude. Before her father woke, she was up disinfecting surfaces, dishing breakfast, and preparing the single elaborate meal of the day—lunch. After lunch she worked and studied in the living room, while her father read in his bedroom until dinner, which her father was charged with preparing. He never managed to present more than a platter of Leticia’s irregularly warmed leftovers—but she didn’t mind. Like this, they dwelled within a routine of contained, hushed tending and their month together, with its otherwise confrontational absence of mother, felt like something more than mere survival.

The same happened in Red Hook—Leticia’s roommates hardly entered the kitchen before noon, leaving her to clean and prepare whatever meals she wished in peace. Before the first of March, they each contributed a portion of their paltry, entry-level salaries to the pantry fund. Somehow, Leticia managed to deliver elaborate meals each day—herb-roasted chicken, goulash, curried garbanzos, cinnamon-fried plantains, quinoa-stuffed peppers, lathered tahini, and pastas in every iteration imaginable. Since none of the girls could afford to pay the high pre-Quarantine Month ticket prices to fly to their families, Leticia’s cossetting grounded them in a way that felt like home.

When she told her roommates she was quarantining with Jerry, the Jerry she had met just two weeks ago, they were not as concerned by the swiftness of her decision as by its timing.

What if you get sick of each other halfway through? Who’s going to cook for us? Does he have a living room? Where will you work? Can you prepare and freeze dishes for us? Are you sure he’s not a freak? Leticia left them unanswered.

Her father’s questions, though, she addressed.

Leticia, how is he?

He is hardworking, Dad. He lost his older sister to the virus; she had diabetes. His grandparents, too, of course.

Leticia—Leti, are you sure?

Yes, she pressed, yes. Then, cautiously, but aware her father would not know how to respond, she ended the conversation, he is like us.

She kept quiet until he seemed to soften, until he sighed, and less assertively muttered, *Okay, Leti, okay.*

Leticia had in fact meant exactly what she said. To her, *like us* was a transparent phrase, with no generational, no father/daughter decryption required. *Like us* meant like us. Not just hurt—like us—but evidently maimed. In Leticia’s mind, she and her father belonged not to the ranks of the wounded, but to the very substance of wound. Leticia’s father, a straightforward, well-liked high

school history teacher, had married once and late in life to the woman he joked was his hot trophy wife, Leticia's mother, a proficient nurse at Fort Lauderdale's Holy Cross Hospital. They had lived in a small but relatively new condo with a small pool and a small Intracoastal view. They had wanted nothing more.

Now, eight years and eight Quarantine Months after her mother's death, Leticia was surprised to feel so, so—unprepared. *I should be better at this*, she thought, sitting in Jerry's kitchen, her kitchen for the past year, surrounded by the stack of blank canvases she'd lugged all the way from Michael's earlier that day in preparation for tomorrow's lockdown under a sky so opaque it could only mean snow. She counted. Five Quarantine Months with her father. Two with her Red Hook roommates. Then, that grotesquely epic one with Jerry last year. *It's been fine before, hasn't it?*

She was sure it wasn't fear of the virus's taking, of its abrupt carnage, that unsettled her—no, the fear was over. Despite alarming bursts of infectious mutations, vaccines had the virus itself under control. Many even questioned the continued need for Quarantine Month. Even so, the economy had adapted to eleven months of pedestrian commerce and one month of quarantine-based business during which the State hired millions of workers to hand-stitch next-generation facemasks.

This is how Leticia discovered sewing. That first Quarantine Month after her mother's death, she registered to receive a case of facemasks at her father's Fort Lauderdale condo. These masks required hand stitching to snugly fit the ten different State-designated face sizes. "One size fits all" masks allowed the virus access to certain face shape's open cavities. Once this issue was identified, the State conducted a digital face census, requiring all citizens to send in a close-up selfie. The nation's jaws, cheek bones, nose widths, chin dips, lip curves and face widths were mapped into ten categories, each assigned a tailored mask shape that fit each the wearer's face in a private, deliberate way.

It took Leticia two weeks to sew her case of facemasks, working into the night as if keeping vigil. Once she was done, she kept sewing—she took the clothing she had planned to staple and cobbled it onto her canvases, using the leftovers from the State's facemask sewing kit.

I should be looking forward to this, Leticia thought. *Another Quarantine Month with Jerry*. The thin wooden pantry was stocked. The cleaning supply cabinet, too. Now she'd brought her art materials home. Home. Was this place home? So far, it was a life, an adult life. Besides Leticia's solemn cooking and their sporadic yet frenetic love making, there were plenty of other activities they shared, other pursuits by which they amassed their days into months: endless bike rides, books and culture magazines, probing walks, museum exhibits, and the seasonal tilling of the backyard shared by the residents of the brownstone apartment complex. Jerry's intermediate position at an established Manhattan ad agency afforded them the income to eat out with their fistful of friends. Her own job at a fledgling gallery paid little but opened doors for her art, plus they let her use a small corner of their storage area to work on her own pieces. None of it was bad.

She even had a solution to the recent slump in her work—that visceral satisfaction she derived from the willful perforation of linen by thread, the crafted tumult that lent her canvases the quality of beautiful bruised pulp, was fading. The energy that meeting Jerry had injected into her life, too, was spent. Even her work had begun to feel like work and its constancy like another element within her increasingly stabilized, settled existence. *I need to cut the fat, the excess meat*, she realized, mulling over a near-finished piece at her gallery’s warehouse. She took a set of scissors from the packaging room and sliced into the stretched linen, into her embroidery, fraying weeks of painstaking work. The next morning, she added X-ACTO knives to her Michael’s lockdown shopping list, the X-ACTO knives she’d tossed onto Jerry’s small round kitchen table, her small kitchen table, where they had landed with the grace of a metallic octopus.

Leticia picked up one of the knives, still frigid from the outside cold, and began peeling its tight plastic wrap. She wished she had entered her father’s name into the State’s Quarantine Registrar, even if that meant scrambling to find a way to fly south to Fort Lauderdale, even if that meant sharing the apartment with his new live-in girlfriend, whose figure had grazed the frame of Leticia’s screen during a recent Saturday morning Facetime chat.

Dad, was that Badia? Leticia had asked, trying to keep her tone flat.

Yes. She moved in, Leti.

For a moment, neither spoke—they were as quiet as a cotton ball being pulled apart.

I didn’t know it had gotten so serious. Leticia said, finally. She knew her father had begun seeing their Moroccan downstairs neighbor toward her final months at Savannah, but she had assumed—hoped—it would remain casual. This, however, was not a thought she was able to admit to herself, or to anyone else. Seeing her father move on from her mother’s death reinforced the idea that she had also moved on, that both of them had rebuilt their lives and were doing fine. But she had not rebuilt herself. Somewhere, inside, she was only going through the motions of her honeyed, established life. Somewhere, deep inside, even beyond Jerry’s intentional reach, she was permanently, irretrievably crushed.

Things evolved over the past year. It just made sense for her to move in. Especially now that you’re settled with Jerry.

What does my living with Jerry have to do with it?

Her father took an audible breath and paused, then said, —precise as precipice—*lockdown alone is hard.*

Leticia wished she could’ve answered, *lockdown with anyone is hard.* But she didn’t. She couldn’t permit entry to the reality that, even with Jerry, the days of Quarantine Month, the days of all months, were hard. Too much silence passed, and a sliding door shut between them. They returned to their world of courtesy, of discretion, of restrained communal hurt.

It's good you are settled, Dad.

Yes, Leti. It's good we both are.

Yes.

Badia has a tagine recipe she wants me to send you.

Send it over. I still have a few days to scrounge for supplies.

Leticia did not tell Jerry about Badia, did not buy the ingredients for Badia's tagine. And now, tomorrow, or rather that night at one in the morning, lockdown began, and people would only be allowed to walk the streets singly, quiet as concrete, like a silent film record of present time. To the grocery, the pharmacy, the laundry—and back. Her breath entered her chest as gasps. It was too late now, to go anywhere, fly anywhere, too late—and against Quarantine Law. On an impulse, she called her father, a ritual she observed only on Saturday mornings.

Leti, congrats, her father exclaimed in greeting. I am so happy for you and Jerry. I couldn't ask for a better son-in-law.

What? Leti whispered. What? Dad, what are you talking about?

Oh, God. Shit. Don't tell me Jerry hasn't proposed yet. Damn it. Leti, I am so sorry. He told me he was proposing tonight, on the eve of Quarantine Month. I thought you were calling to share the news. He asked for your hand last week.

He's not here yet, she responded meekly. I, I was just calling to make sure you were all set for lockdown.

Yes Leti, Badia and I are fine. Oh God. Promise me you'll act surprised when he asks. Okay? Please.

I promise.

Call us tomorrow so we can congratulate you, Sweetie. Okay? We're so happy for you.

Okay.

I have to run. Badia and I were about to go on a last walk before they cage us in. Bye, Leti.

Bye, Dad.

Leticia stared at the table, her table. Any minute Jerry would walk in and find her there— X-ACTO knives, thread, canvases strewn across compact space. She got up and started collecting her things, her mess. It would be tight, but if she hurried, she'd have just enough time to wipe the kitchen clean.