

Arras, Rehas, Oxygen Mask

Musings of a pandemic bride to be

I was supposed to change, or at least hyphenate, my last name next week to match that of my best friend and long-time partner. Most of the plans were set: it was to be on a Friday morning (a holiday so no one would have to miss work), followed by a reception in one of Malate's oldest extant restaurants. We had invited 150 guests. We would not be having an entourage of bridesmaids and groomsmen, but we were sure our friends from different parts of our lives would turn out to celebrate alongside our big and diverse families. We had briefed our photographer about the little details to consider given our guests' various personal and political leanings that could lead to awkward scenes captured for posterity. We would be celebrating the day in scarlet and silver: scarlet for boldness and my favorite color, and silver to evoke that vintage feel we both adore.

Of course, none of these plans (or the contracts surrounding them) ever considered the possibility of a pandemic. For a very short span of time I remained hopeful that quarantines would quickly ease up and that *maybe* we would be able to push through with our original date, albeit with some modifications for the sake of social distancing. As the numbers began to climb and the quarantines grew longer, I had to be reconciled to the fact that we would not only have to severely downscale our plans, but we would have to move our wedding date too.

How does one grieve a path postponed or not taken? Till now I am not sure how to exactly describe it. It was more than cursing the fact that our wedding bands would now have the wrong date engraved on them, or worrying that my very girly dress would not fit with all the quarantine stress eating, or stressing out about guest lists changing, volatile supplier schedules and potentially losing deposits. It was about letting go of that certainty of starting a new chapter on that specific date, with a particular person. It was about coming to terms that I would not be able to leave my family's house right away and move to the home that my partner and I have been building. It was about having to hold on to the label of "bride" when I was ready to become a wife.

Just when I was starting to come to terms with the whole sadness of it all, the question of the Anti-Terror Bill came to the fore. If I had to pinpoint a day when I began to become truly afraid of that bill and its ramifications, it had to be the day that I found a multiplicity of fake accounts to my name. Friends and I spent the better part of two days reporting as many fake accounts as we could find, even those of acquaintances and strangers asking for our assistance. As more and more discussions on the anti-terror bill came to the fore and the bill was eventually passed into law, I was asked if I would start concealing my social media presence, or if I would go incognito. I remember laughing and saying, "What do you mean? I'd have to conceal my whole *life!*" My political leanings and the circles I run in have been inextricably linked to a lifetime of protests, letter campaigns, civic projects, and other peaceable activities that would be disallowed or looked on with suspicion under this piece of legislation. Why would I have to hide my past and being, when my future was already hanging in the balance?

Yet throughout this, the threat of the pandemic still looms. I am not in a situation wherein I can work from home; I am a frontliner and in the health profession. My weekdays are filled with seeing patients for a plethora of complaints and situations ranging from "most likely this is not COVID, this is your arthritis or acid reflux acting up" to "sorry, we have to put your name in for monitoring since you are symptomatic." Despite all the assurances that my situation in a health center is "low-risk", I have had the feeling of dread from having colleagues go into 14-day quarantine due to being exposed to symptomatic patients or fellow healthcare workers who tested positive for

the virus' RNA. Each day feels a little like a net closing in, with me wondering if I will be the next doctor in our area who is going to be sick, or test positive. Public health, one of the great loves of my life, is now taking on a dark import for me that I fear will never really leave even years after this pandemic has fizzled out.

So what awaits me? Arras: a postponed wedding in a time when starting a new chapter seems bleak or even pointless? Rehas: time behind bars for speaking out on the things I see around me, or for refusing to be silenced? Oxygen mask: something I will almost certainly need if I ever do fall sick thanks to my various comorbidities. It's a question I try not to contemplate at length because of the way that fear can paralyze a person. And where I am, I do not think I am in a position to be afraid or stop moving because of all the responsibilities I have on my plate. Every day is a struggle to move forward to a future I cannot quite visualize as clearly anymore.

Perhaps, more than my wedding day, I pray for the day I can dream again.