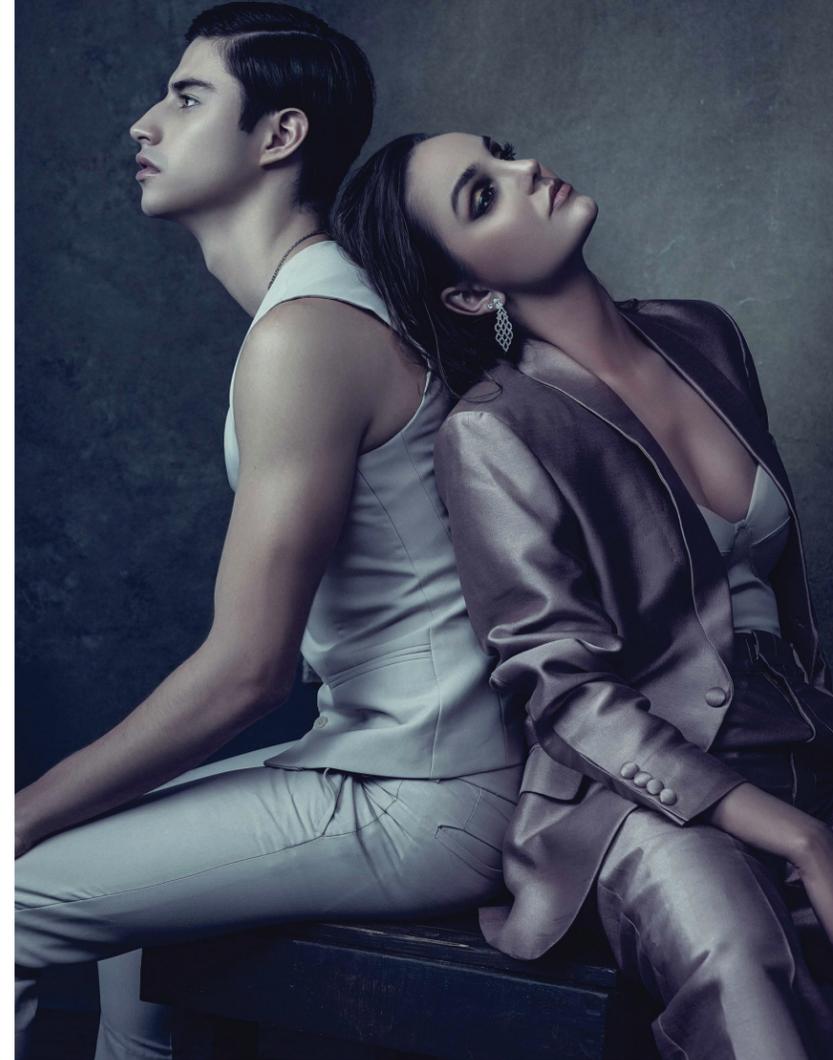


Surface Tension

While some relationships fall apart during the pandemic, others grow stronger

By MARELLA RICKETTS



When reality as you know it is drastically shifting, you can't help but feel unprepared. Let me share with you a few examples: I did not expect to still be working from home at my new job, where coffee runs with colleagues are replaced with Google Calendar invites. I didn't think I would have to limit my encounters with friends and spend all this time at home. And I certainly did not expect to be broken up with in the middle of the pandemic. My ex and I entered these uncharted waters hopeful, holding on to each other. In the days that followed our breakup, questions floated around in my mind, one of them standing out: *Does the quarantine corrupt one's thinking or does it help you see things more clearly?*

In a world without the coronavirus, I could've easily found ways to temporarily distract myself from the pain that comes after a breakup. There would be bars I would frequent, friends I would invite to join me, strangers I would potentially meet. But experiencing this in solitude forced me to deal with things head on. *What was I so afraid of before?* I thought. I pursued healthier outlets such as journaling and exercising, and friends proved to be a quick call away. And then suddenly, a wave of emotion would wash over me.

Photo courtesy of MEGA ARCHIVES

My parents have been married for 27 years. Perhaps this is why I gravitate towards them for relationship advice. Our topic for today? Conflict during the pandemic, which they've had their fair share of, like any couple.

"Your mom and I are homebodies, so I thought it would be easy. But when you're home every day, you start to feel the tension," my father shares. My mother nods in agreement "Many people your age are dealing with being away from their partner. It's also a challenge to be together 24/7. If you can't adjust to this new reality, the relationship will only be strained," she says.

When I ask them how they have been adjusting (both individually and as a couple), my father talks about his anxieties, something he is more open about these days. "In the beginning, I would wake up at 4 or 5 AM, getting anxious about a few things. But prayer has personally helped," he says. "It's also important to create your own personal space in your day." For him, it is working out or catching up on sports news. My mother, on the other hand, enjoys testing out new recipes and calling up her best friend. "When I need a little space, I tell him. I do this so that when I face him, I'm in a better mood to talk," my mother says, emphasizing the importance of communication.

"It's easy to say 'I love you,' but the foundation should be strong. Your mom and I have that already. We have trust in the relationship. Even when we fight, we trust that after a while, we will understand each other," my father shares. He looks lovingly at my mother, who quips, "Having separate bathrooms help!"

Falling in love is a funny thing. You're single, convincing yourself how happy you are about it as you attend a friend's birthday party. You meet a guy who accidentally spills tequila on you, end up talking the entire night, then spend the next few days wishing he didn't just end a long-term relationship. Soon, he asks you out and while a bit awkward, like many first dates are, the chemistry is undeniable. "I wish I had met you in a different circumstance," he thinks out loud, hinting that he isn't sure if he is ready for a relationship just yet. You tell him you think so too. Despite that comment, he continues to pursue you, no red flags in sight. Things start to make sense. You both realize that love doesn't care about timing; it creeps up, hits you instantaneously.

"There were signs from the start," my mom reminds me, pulling me back to reality. She was right. While the relationship was very real, contributing to our individual growth even, there were issues that would always return, showing up a year and a half later. In the end, I accepted that there was only so much I could do.

"Always remember that you and your partner come from different backgrounds. You have to understand that to be able to communicate better. It's easy to tell someone you love them, but it's a lot of work. You have to make those choices together," my mother says. I realize I am lucky to have parents who practice what they preach, even in the midst of their most difficult challenges.

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Talking to them brings me back to Theology class in college, where we studied the work of M. Scott Peck. Love is as love does. *Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love*, he once wrote, answering the question I had asked earlier. When experiencing conflict that only seems to be exacerbated by the pandemic, you have a choice: you can allow the situation to lead to the end of the relationship, or you can decide that it is still worth it. Realizing this was essential to help me move on.

In between my fingers are pages of my journal that he filled up—from the tequila-infused night we first met to the very ending. I always thought he would last longer than one journal. At one point, we really wanted it to. But like I always have since I was a child, I will simply keep writing. There are many more journals for me to fill up anyway. ■