

## The Pestilence

I couldn't breathe.

I began to feel my chest tightening three days ago, the tendrils of veins full with blood suffocating my insides.

Nona bought me the gift for my birthday thinking that's what this whole thing was all about.

I don't even like lace. Or red.

Finn and I had practically grown up together—and they knew me better than anyone else ever would.

I wish I could tell someone. But I guess I didn't need to. They all knew why this was happening. Nona said awhile back this didn't happen to people. They could just be together and be happy or at least keep living and trying. Now it's just sex and we're encouraged to get to know very little about others, or risk literally losing our lives in it all. Finn pat my forehead with a damp rag, shivering through the their own fever spells.

They squeezed my hand, "It's gonna be okay."

I felt safe with them and comforted hearing them say that. But I sighed in a shudder as the tears swelled hot behind my eyelids.

"Sloan c'mon it'll be okay. I promise. We'll go tomorrow. Nona said she'd pool together the rest of the savings with us so we can get the shots."

"But how do you know they'll work?" I quavered.

“They have to.”

I woke up and Finn was gone.

I opened my eyes to sharp pain and bright colors. Zigzags of blue and black and gold flashes blurred past my vision. It was like fireworks were exploding in the back of my skull. I was trying as best as I could to breathe through my nose and focus on making it deep and steady, but the air came out unbearably hot the way it does when you have a *normal* cold. I could hear faint murmuring coming from the other room. Nona was watching her evening old shows.

I heard the front door slam and the TV went quiet.

Nona’s voice thundered “What is wrong with you?”

I sat up and tried to listen more closely through the buzzing in my head.

She was yelling again “Well we’ll figure it out! I’m telling you we’re all going to march down there first thing in the morning.”

I tried to stand up but my feet were numb and I felt like I was going to throw up any moment. I got ahold of myself and began wobbling towards the bedroom door. When I reached the living room Nona and Finn were sitting and Nona’s cheeks were slightly flushed. Ginger sat on Finn’s lap purring, without the slightest irritation. Finn’s face glistened and I could see the yellowing of their skin setting in. I still tried to muster a smile.

“What are you doing up?” Nona scolded.

“I heard you raising your voice and I just wanted to make sure everything is alright.”

Nona paused, looked down at the carpet and looked back up at me with distant eyes.

“Finn went down to the pharmacy this evening and said the price was raised on the antidote again.”

I felt my hands begin to tremble and my chest tightened a little more.

Finn butted in, “We’re have to try again tomorrow. We’re only a couple hundred short and I’m gonna try to negotiate with them.”

They winced and clutched their stomach. I could tell they were beginning to feel worse too.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to punch a wall so hard my knuckles stayed scabbed over for a week or so, but all I did was plummet to the floor and start sobbing.

“Hunny Bun stop that. We’re gonna pull through.”

I could feel Nona’s hand stroking my back, tender and firm all at once.

“I’m gonna go with you two tomorrow and give them a piece of my mind.”

Lifting my head, I wiped my nose.

“But how can you know we won’t get worse before then? We have a sure chance of dying before the morning. You know last week I heard Taryn Jones the baker’s assistant came down with it and in the span of four hours—”

“Stop that! Stop it right now. I won’t have you speaking like this. You and Finn are not going to die on my watch. Now you’re my grand-baby and I’m not gonna take my eyes off either of you for a moment tonight. We’ll kick start immediately in the morning. They open at 6am.”

She took me in her arms and squeezed tight.

Finn hackled and coughed. They looked down at their hand—blood sprinkling their palm.

I closed my eyes and focused on the dark, trying to wonder what it would be like if that were all there was.

Nona stood up, using her knee as support. “Well then, I’m gonna make you two some lavender chamomile. It did some tricks in my day, I’m sure it can still do some now.”

She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on, clattering with the dishes and humming to herself.

I crawled over to the couch where Finn was sitting and hoisted myself up onto the cushion next to them.

“I love you.” They mumbled, trying to close their eyes to rest.

“And I love you.” I said, a scalding tear running down my cheek and dissolving into their shirt sleeve.

I woke up to Ginger pawing at my thighs, as she searched for a comfy place to settle. The sun was dipping up through the curtains and I was freezing.

Finn was gone.

I sat up in a sharp jolt and started to panic, until I heard retching coming from the bathroom down the hall. I stood up with a start and a rush of overwhelming dizziness clouded my sight—everything was spinning. Still, I teetered towards the bathroom. I saw Nona sitting with Finn as they keeled over the toilet bowl gagging. They had a moment of sudden reprieve and looked up at me with teary eyes.

“We have to get going soon, or this is going to get worse.” Nona said, her voice wavering, weak, and shrill.

“You know what we have to do,” she continued. I felt my stomach clench up and drop off a cliff.

“Yeah. I guess.”

“I hate to, but otherwise they’ll have even more reason to refuse you two the antidote. You must pass in order to obtain even the slightest of their sympathy.”

With that I bent below the sink and pulled an old faded makeup bag from the cupboard. I unzipped it and pulled out a bright red tube of lipstick and a palette of purple powder. Finn hadn’t had the energy to shave in a couple days and their hair was a little tattered and scraggly already. I guess we could pull it off.

I knew Nona understood how disorienting this was for Finn and me whenever we had to do it. I couldn’t remember the last time I enjoyed going out and looking strangers in the face without pure, utter fear and discomfort. I wasn’t ashamed, no. I was angry and sad that Finn and I could never go out and just be. They and I were like a black mold burrowed deep within the walls of a sacred institution, ripping away at its foundation minute by minute. They weren’t wrong though. Finn slowly rose from the ground and grazed my hand with theirs.

I looked at them with uncertainty but they nodded at me in a calm that made me feel like everything would actually be okay.

After getting cis-situated we bundled up and made our way outside. My face stung the minute I felt the outside air in its brisk roughness. It was as if the air itself was also attacking my otherness on command.

Nona paused and looked at Finn and me. “You two aren’t fit to walk. I’m gonna drive.”

“I think we can tr—“

“And then what? Have your fevers worsen and one or both of you passes out and needs to be carried the rest of the way? I don’t think so. This is safer and faster. For all of us.”

Nona had lost Rozzie a couple years back and I remembered that day vividly. They had tried to walk, but Nona ended up carrying her the rest of the way, in such a state of panic that by the time they got there, she didn't even realize the rigor mortis already setting into Rozzie's dead body. It took her weeks to return back to herself again. I didn't ever want to know how that feels. If Finn...

"C'mon, lets haul some bum." Nona motioned, opening the backseat door for us both.

A forty minute walk, cut just under twenty driving. As Finn held my hand, I could feel the blood pulsating through their veins and a cold clamminess. Their heartbeat was unsteady—all strong and weak at once. Nona turned on her station and started humming to herself. She looked back in the rearview at us. Starting to snap her finger, "Hey, you two try not to fall asleep okay? Fevers this high and your chances of shock have increased drastically."

I could hear her, but the music was started to become warbled in my ears. I patted Finn's shoulder, but they wouldn't look at me. They just kept looking out the other window.

I froze.

Then I patted their shoulder more rapidly. "Finn? Hey, stop no no. Wake up."

I started to feel the heaviness of my head as if I had suddenly become stuck on a pendulum. I laid back. I could see that Nona had pulled over and was speaking into the rearview again and turning to pat Finn and me, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. She had started to cry and jumped out of her seat to come to the back.

And then it all went black.

## **Critical Analysis Portion**

In this story, I wanted to exacerbate issues and lore existing within society in order to make them a very real component in how we view sex and love. In class discussions regarding senses of hysteria and lovesickness, I considered what it would be like to make conditions such as these literal threats to people's lives and well-beings. These concepts derive loosely from bell hook's writings, our study of Greek philosophers and Freud's theories, as well as a deep engrained element of pop culture. The conglomeration of these sources provided a foundation for my story, wherein a rather contemporary society people live in a sex concentrated environment where love is de-emphasized and actually condemned because when people fall in love, they literally fall severely ill—often times on a life-threatening level.

In writing this story and trying to formulate my ideas, I wanted to dissect aspects of identity including specifically gender, sexuality, and class. I had to consider these components within the framework of concepts we discussed in the course and among those I intended to explore were heteronormativity, institutionalized intimacy, ontological rootedness, and the sublimation of love rather than sex which consequently led to a discursive explosion of sex. My characters: Sloan, Finn, Nona, and briefly Rozzie all defy gender and sexuality norms in some way. Both Sloan and Finn are gender non-conforming individuals who are in love with each other and occupy different facets of expression, along with sexualities that digress from heterosexuality. Nona and her partner Rozzie were a lesbian couple, also deeply in love before Rozzie died. In this society, there is an undeniable negativity to these circumstances, however my intention was not to make this setting entirely dystopian. Instead, by magnifying certain

components of present day society—the United States in particular—I wanted to highlight flaws in its structure that place individuals in a state of contention with one another, so much to the point that normative life can be both a utopia and dystopia for different people. So, my characters live within a frame where the things influencing their identities manifest on a dystopian level because they do not adhere to the socializations or expectations that they have been exposed to. The issue of love sickness becomes extremely classed, as there is an antidote available to individuals of a high income bracket with wealth behind them. Those not within this bracket must gamble in the black market or negotiate with pharmacies to receive a diluted version of the antidote which saves people from death but does not resolve issues that remain preexisting conditions and lifetime diseases. Thus, wealthy individuals are inherently able-bodied, white, heterosexual people who are socially accepted on all levels. My characters however do not pertain to the hegemonic group.

The style I chose to write my story in is a little more abstract. I did not want to over-explain any elements because sometimes I think the level of mystery and confusion adds depth to not only the story, but to the ways we live out our own lives; we do not always know what is going on or how and the ways we approach certain life events can be choppy and discombobulated. So, I chose to focus in on a small span of time, adding lots of description for how my characters feel as the events unfold, to play off of how much goes on within our subconscious while minimal change may be occurring externally. In order to dramatize the effects of this love sickness, I use a lot of figurative language mainly to explore Sloan's sensations and some of Finn's. There are some gaps in the story that would ideally be explored in further writings. But for the sake of this project, I wanted to keep it rather brief and leave the



reader with the inclination to want to read more and know more about these people's lives and experiences.

Heteronormativity and cis gender expression are enforced in this society and any deviation is policed and ridiculed. Those who do not conform do not face anything as drastic as incarceration on an overt level (though are statistically more at risk than conforming individuals), but they do face social challenges such as job opportunities, community networks, service at public establishments, and bullying at school. Drawing on my background in psychology, I tried to emphasize in group/out group mentalities that already exist within interpersonal dynamics. Though it is gradually becoming more socially acceptable for individuals to have non heteronormative relationships, there is still the assumption that these relationships are merely part of phases in people's lives and that heterosexual relationships are the only valid relationships. I tried to also consider our discussion of the 2009 Wolkomir study on heteronormativity and how both asexual and non heterosexual couples unlinked love and sex in such a way where there was an expansion of the two, rather than a mutually exclusive or an "if this, then that" mentality; this demonstrated a more mature understanding of the relationship between love and sex. I tried to incorporate this in Sloan and Finn's relationship through how they live in a high sex society while still maintaining a strong emotional and thought based connection.

This carries over into how institutionalized intimacy also takes root in my story. The characters must interact with a society that denies the existence of their identities and their relationships, being fed the rhetoric that there are right and wrong ways to go about loving and sex. With this, I kept bell hooks in mind because of her writings on how different schools of

thought and sectors of society impact the ways people feel okay loving. Not only does hooks explore this in religion, but also in how families coagulate on the basis of feminizing love and organizing based on how different individuals should love based on gender. I did not discuss marriage at all in my story, but I tried to create a family that defies the norm of a small nuclear family—with a mother, father, and two kids. Instead, the family I discuss is a grandmother living with her grown grandchild and their partner, with a cat.

Because of Sloan and Finn's isolation from the majority of the world, they have a strong ontological rootedness. We defined this concept in class as being the "mysterious promise of a loved one to anchor and sustain one's life, even when false". Not only was this a talking point in class, but hooks also theorizes that if more people took hold of this sensation, they might be more giving. That is to say that vulnerability and selflessness in love give way to more meaningful relationships and connections, devoid of vanity and jealousy and mistrust. This—along with heteronormativity—was one of the concepts I tried to write more obviously, being that the two literally live at home together and must make a lasting companionship that can not easily be replaced in their society.

Finally, I applied Freud's sublimation theory, but I reversed it. Instead of individuals needing to find other outlets for sexual energy, they are forced within this society to manifest their notions of love in acts of sex instead. Therefore, the innate, insatiable pleasure/pain complex still exists, but it is instead brought to the forefront of lifestyle in my story. Instead of demonstrating maturity and Freud's perceived acts of higher social value, this results in an immaturity and surface level to almost all social interactions within this society.

All in all, I think these concepts could be addressed further if I pursued further development of this story. But the basis if each is explored, allowing for a springboard into discussions on normativity and how people may choose to identify still as themselves in the face of adversity and danger.