

On Friendship, Apart

“I’m homesick,” I confess to my phone screen.

“Homesick for which home?” the face on the screen shoots back, with a twinkle of humor shining through a pair of pixelated green eyes.

“For our home.” I pause. “Or I guess your home. Your home that was my home but is now only your home.” She cuts me off before I can stutter on.

“I know. I’m homesick, too. Except, I guess I’m home already. I just miss you.” The humorous twinkle had disappeared, and now only sadness tinged the green eyes staring back at me.

The aching phone call conversation rings painfully familiar for anyone in a long-distance relationship. The pitfalls of miscommunication and pain wrought even more impossible by the miles that stretch between two people, two people who just want to be together. We cope how we can — sending dream homes where we can one day live together, watching the same TV shows to discuss over lengthy phone calls, jotting down the names of various characters in each other’s lives to remember for future stories.

Our relationship checks all the boxes of a stereotypical long-distance relationship except for one small detail; we’re not in a relationship.

Rachel and I have been best friends practically since we met in late 2019. Like many couples, we like to reminisce over the day we met, squabbling over the details and rehashing first impressions. We were freshman in college, yanked from our respective hometowns and dropped in the same dorm building in the middle of Los Angeles. As I remember it, we met at a mandatory orientation and a painful round of icebreakers, although she’s positive we met through a mutual friend in her dorm room later that week. We both agree that we clicked over country music and vodka out of the bottle one fateful Friday night.

The details of our whirlwind friendship, already difficult to recall past the haze of freshman year, became even more impenetrable after we were sent home for a two-week spring break, an extended vacation to allow for the newfound virus to blow over. Two weeks stretched into two years, years of uncertainty, fear, and loneliness. I escaped from the trenches of COVID relatively untouched by loss. My family and close friends remain healthy and secure. However, many of my friendships did not make it out of the first few months of isolation, and Rachel and I had to work to keep our relationship afloat.

In those first few months of quarantine, there wasn't much to discuss in our regular phone calls. ("What did you have for dinner? Oh, pasta again?") We created a shared playlist of our favorite country songs and tried to watch the same movies to discuss over the phone, but there just wasn't much going on in our lives. So, we resorted to discussing the news, which provided more than enough fodder for long-distance facetimes and anxiety. We talked circles around new COVID numbers and masking mandates, swapping stories from our respective hometowns. ("So, do people actually not wear masks in Texas or is it like just a political bit? Really? Not even in the grocery store?")

Out of all the headlines, Rachel always picked out the ones about climate. Like many of us at the time, Rachel was riddled with anxiety about the pandemic and societal inequity and impending environmental disaster, except the latter *really* gets her into a ball of nerves. The silver lining of early pandemic months was that society's withdrawal made way for nature to creep back toward its natural balance. These were the months when articles pronouncing the return of whale pods to emptied out harbors went viral on Twitter, under captions like "humans are the virus <3." Rachel excitedly told me about improving air quality in Los Angeles. Once the 405 had cleared out, the air began to clear, too. Early on in our friendship courtship, we had bonded over our mutual air-quality anxiety. When I first moved from Dallas to Los Angeles, I developed a nasty cough that reared its head at the worst times: silent testing rooms, crowded elevators, awkward dorm room hook-ups. Rachel pushed me to go to the campus doctor, who diagnosed me with a case of Reactive Airway Disease (RAD) and sent me on my way with a little red inhaler. Armed with the knowledge that LA air had poisoned my lungs, Rachel remained particularly attuned to the city's smog levels. She would text me warnings when the air quality was bad, although she was usually in need of comfort herself. The temporary abatement in fumes and smog in Los Angeles eased her anxiety, even as she quarantined in her parents' home a few thousand miles away in a suburb of Chicago, so much so that we discussed it on the phone extensively.

Although we share in this climate anxiety, the degree of her persistent weather-induced worry constantly surprises me, particularly when I realized she kept tabs on my forecast even when we live states apart. In February of 2021, I was living with some friend in Austin while she was living in Los Angeles. Although we were still talking regularly on the phone, her call one morning caught me by surprise. "What're you doing?" she asked, with a familiar anxious twinge lurking in the upper register of her voice.

"Just packin up the car. We're driving up to Dallas for the weekend," I answered, then sensing her tension, "... Why?"

"Did you read the news today? Did you check the weather?" She shot back.

"Um no. I have to drive my roommate up for her second vaccine," as if that explained why I didn't check the weather before making the 2-hour drive from Austin to Dallas, much of which was along shoulder-less, pothole-riddled highways.

"I don't think you should go. There's a huge storm on the way."

"There's always a huge storm on the way in Texas this time of year."

“That is literally the worst explanation you could’ve given for driving multiple hours without checking the forecast,” Rachel continued to reprimand me while I checked the weather, then texted my roommate to reschedule her appointment.

Later that night, an unprecedented snowstorm swept across the state, knocking out power lines and crushing in roofs. The icy roads left many of Dallas’ poorly designed interstate overpasses riddled with car wrecks. One pile-up on 1-35, the along my (almost) route home, involved more than 130 vehicles and left six people dead. She sent me TikToks with footage from the disaster, and I tried to shrug off the idea of what could’ve happened without my guardian Rachel.

Like many long-distance relationships, at least like the ones I’ve heard about from friends and films, sometimes our dynamic can settle too deeply into the rhythm of distance. Conversations become exclusively catch-up calls, dominated by background information on people the other will likely never meet, only to build up to punchlines that the other won’t find funny because they weren’t there. The other person fades into a stranger, the space becomes unbreachable. As Rachel often reminds me, “we’ve spent more time as pen pals than as in-person friends.”

We had managed to spend a brief couple months together in fall of 2020, allowing us to test the limits of our in-person versus online compatibility. Our university had suddenly canceled on-campus housing while we had already begun road-tripping across America, forcing us to find a long-term Airbnb to house Rachel and I, along with two other friends. There wasn’t much to do in the fall months of 2020, so we watched reality TV like *Selling Sunset* and went for drives on the vacant LA highways.

(“Should we drive by the Oppenheim Group office?”)

“Isn’t it like 40 minutes away?”

“You have somewhere else to go?”)

Life was peaceful and fresh after months of cramped quarantine, but it wasn’t all sunset drives. Before eating every meal together, we’d only edged around the subject of eating disorders, which we both suffered from our own unique, competitive ways. Grocery stores and kitchen tables were suddenly rigged with invisible wires, tugging at our emotions, prodding us at our most vulnerable points. I said things — things I won’t repeat for the sake of any vulnerable readers — laced with icy poison, while I wordlessly withered away with my own consuming eating disorder. It was the type of silent suffering that evaded direct confrontation, the type of invisible pain that wove between benign trips to the grocery store and loaded silences in froyo shops.

It avoided confrontation until it spilled from the shadows into the white-hot light of a southern California summer.

“Why do you say shit like that? You can’t tell me you don’t realize it when you say shit like that,” Rachel said one day, our first fight. No yelling, just slow tears and apologies. Then a few days of overwrought politeness, littered with conversations, briefer and gentler but equally as fraught, about “us.”

Eventually, things felt settled again, but when I moved back to Texas for the foreseeable future, everyone in the house likely breathed a sigh of relief. I got some treatment, and we went back to our regular phone calls. Rachel still issued me individualized weather warnings. Back to being pen-pals.

We now live further apart than ever before. I’m studying abroad in Spain, while she studies and works in Los Angeles. She took over my lease, so she now puts her groceries in my section of the fridge, does her makeup at my desk, and sleeps in my bed. A nine-hour time difference between us, but we seem more like family than ever, sharing a history and a home. The lines of our lives winding and weaving across each other, the intersections sparse but endlessly consequential. That first fight pushed me to get help, and to be a better person. Our friendship since its inception had made me feel cared for and taught me to care.

“Homesick for which home?” she asks me.

“For our home.” Wherever that may be, even if it’s nowhere.