

# Dine With Distance

**Modified, General, Community Quarantine** — what the hell is that supposed to mean?

Living in the Pandemic is like having an unofficial, secret relationship with a girl whose parents are conservative and strict. Each time the two of you want to see each other, that girl has to set a million restrictions while saying “Yes, indeed, I want to see you too.”

MGCQ is that girl that says: Yes, we could go out. But here are the restrictions: wear a mask and a face shield that would worsen your vision because you’re also wearing glasses.

So each time you take a breath your lenses would fog all over and so is your face shield. Not to mention how hot it is in Quezon City during May. So take all of it. Sweat, fog, smoke, dirt. That’s the cost of protecting yourself.

And when we finally see each other, after how many months is it again? From March 2020 to May 2021? What?! A year and two months?! Wow, that was long. After all that time when our pent-up longing for each other almost brought us into a mental breakdown—after we’ve finally got ourselves seated on our favorite fast-food chain as we’ve always used to—a *plastic barrier separates us from our table*.

Now, how the fuck would we even hold hands?

The answer: we’re not supposed to.

I said I wanted to have chicken with you again, Leila, but half of it is a greasy, crispy, deep-fried lie.

The truth is I just wanted to be with you again. Forget the chicken. We could eat after making love but all the hotels are closed in the meantime. So here we are, and you said: *I'm beem doi'm lat-of thimkim*.

"What?" I pulled down my mask and asked, "could you take off your mask, please."

You did take it off, Leila. What you said was: I've been doing a lot of thinking.

Ah, yes, for what else is there to do? Leila, I know on a daily basis that all we ever do since March of 2020 is to think. We both woke up five minutes before our first class. Boot up our computers and open Zoom. And we think and we think and we think. Sometimes about the class, most of the time it's one of these things. Like the thing you said next: "I think that we're not working anymore."

"Well, I think we're not even studying anymore," just me, referring to the remote set-up of our school. "Let alone working, am I right?"

You didn't laugh but you know for a fact, Leila, that I use jokes as a coping mechanism and your non-laughter denoted that you were sick of it. After hearing my voice for the first time again, you were sick of it.

You should've kept your mask on. You shouldn't have shown your face. I asked you, Leila, on all of the days that have passed when we could not see each other, you chose to wait for this particular moment. To break my heart face to face. Do you like how crying makes my eyes puffy? Does it turn you on to find me humiliated in public? Is it funny how snot runs down my nose?

The answer is none of the above.

“It’s just that — I’m afraid you won’t believe me if I ever broke up online. Because we know how it goes, Daniel. Way before the pandemic, you know how we get into fights. How it ends.”

I know it all too, well, Leila. Back then we’d fight via chat, you’d say we’re through. I’d say, are you sure? I would not believe you — *you cannot even say it in my face* — I never did. Moments would pass and suddenly you’re back to your senses. You’d apologize. I’d say it’s okay. Although this is the thing you did not know, I am always crying behind my phone. Puffy eyes and snot running down. I know we’re okay again but I’d still be crying. I’d be asking myself what am I crying for: *is it the fight that went through or the fact that it would only take days until we fight this way again?*

That’s how our fights end: As if it never ended, just took a slumber until a flick of a wrist woke it all up again. And as some sort of peace offering, that has become a tradition between us two, I’d message you the day after the fight: *Chicken tomorrow? My treat.*

That’s how we lasted.

Leila, let me tell you about the things I have read as an attempt to distract myself from the end of the world.

You know how we used to hate the Facebook Pages of self-proclaimed authors? Yes, those pages that post a ton of “motivational quotes,” but at the end of the day, we would dismiss it as toxic positivity?

I loved one particular quote. Like many pages, I forgot its forgettable name but the quote lived rent-free in my mind.

Especially at this moment: when I had to pick up the chicken we ordered at the claiming counter. Because you broke up with me before our order arrived before we actually ate the chicken. So we now have to awkwardly eat it. At this moment: As I walked and approached the fast food crew with teary eyes — fully aware that this crew was intrigued — I remembered that one particular quote. I hold on to it.

That generic Facebook Post said something... generic. And Leila, do you know the thing about generic quotes? They're generic because they're true.

It simply said: **Crying is a natural reaction to pain.**

I don't know about you, Leila. Maybe you're the strong one between us two. Maybe you're saving your tears for when you get home. But me? I did not manage to fight it. Even though I got a big thigh part for my meal. Even though you tried to console me by giving a part of your chicken's skin. "I'm sorry," you said, although you weren't.

You know, for truth, I've seen it coming.

I just wished that our love had died a natural death, instead. Not this cholesterol and calorie-induced heartache. But believe me, I was expecting this. As I was crying-eating my meal, in an attempt to zone out, I looked at every trivial detail I saw: The signs that told us to wear masks, wash hands, and stuff.

One sign really caught my attention. It was plastered on our table. To keep customers from sitting in front of each other. So that, in a table meant for four, two people could sit across the table... diagonally.

The sign said: **Dine with Distance.**

A sign we don't really — we did not — ever need.