

*August looks like four white walls dotted with coloured photographs of friends laughing on summer vacation. In the dull heat, I have counted every stucco on the ceiling. I have danced with every speck of dust. Yesterday, and today, and tomorrow.*

For the past six years, I have lived with a chronic pain condition. My feet and ankles ache with prolonged periods of walking or standing, and I struggle to move down stairs or across grassy terrain. My tendons and ligaments injure easily and heal slowly. My muscles grow tense with sustained activity. Some days, it is too much to even walk across campus or perform the basic activities of living.

This disorder has fractured my social life. The ability to stand is so deeply interwoven into society that most of us never even give it a second thought. But knock it down, and you rip a hole through everything you used to know:

Picnics. Conventions. Food festivals.

Hiking. Camping. Shopping.

Parties. Night clubs. Bar crawls.

Almost every activity necessitates some degree of walking or standing. Almost every activity brings with it a risk of rolling an ankle or overstretching a muscle, leaving me in pain for weeks. Before I go to any event, I must ask myself: is the chance of injury worth the experience? Oftentimes, the answer is no.

At present, I have not received a diagnosis for my condition. My pain is nameless and shapeless, thereby putting me in a solitary community of one. Over the years, I have discovered new ways of connecting with people, and activities that I can safely participate in. I have found familiarity in the laughter exchanged between friends against a background of telephone static. But still it remains: the gnawing pit at the bottom of everything. The nameless pain. The shapeless disorder. The solitary community of one.

That is, until one year ago.

In the spring of 2020, a butterfly flapped its wings on the other side of the world, and Ontario cocooned itself into a state of lockdown. *"Maintain physical distancing"* blinked the highway signs. *"Save a life"*. So we went home, locked our doors, and opened up the blue-white screens of our laptops. At the click of a mouse, everything moved online: musicals, gaming nights, comedy shows. My concerns of injury evaporated with the last

of winter's snow. In their place: the glow of my computer screen, a window into everything I had been missing. And the world opened up to me.

Tonight, I am in both Toronto and Vancouver, California and New York. Without the need for a body, I can go anywhere. Here, in the safety of my room, there is no sitting on the edges of a banquet hall while dozens of brightly colored dresses chatter and mill about. There is no staying behind while the rest of the lab embarks on a hike down to Cootes. I am in the center of the crowd at the pride parade. I am the first one on the dance floor at prom. With the locking down of our country, the borders of social life have been opened up to me. For the first time in a long time, I am just as alone as everyone else.

It is such a strange feeling to have the whole world suddenly experience your pain. In this new world of dusty auditoriums and abandoned city streets, everyone feels more isolated than ever before. "Quarantine blues," they call it. "Social withdrawal". Yet, I feel the most connected I have been in years.

It makes me feel a sort of quiet sadness that it took this, a global pandemic that had claimed thousands of lives, to give me back what I lost from mine. Living at home, functionally and geographically separated from my friends, a defining property of my social isolation became that I was the only one experiencing it. I have been in my own kind of quarantine for years, and the world has only now just joined me.

I do not know how long this sense of belonging will last: whether it will be gone in the span of months, or if it will trickle out into the years to come, leaving little golden rivers for me to follow after the rest of the world has gone back outdoors. However, while it remains, the only thing left to do is to ask — may I have this dance?