

## Four Weeks, and a Bag of Hot Cheetos

“Yes sir! I see this is your first time wearing a progressive lens. This type of prescription eyewear is essentially three different prescriptions in one lens: A distance, an intermediate, and a reading prescription. Yes sir, it does take some getting used to- you need to give yourself at least a week or two for your eyes to adjust.” The man sitting in front of me didn’t seem very convinced by what I had said, obviously turned off, responding to me with an egocentric smile. “No thank you, I’d just like to return them. They give me a headache and I just can’t get used to them.” I sat up and guided the middle-aged man across the peeled tile flooring and over to the register, eager to just move forward and help my next customer.

My hair is greasy, and I’m still in the same sweats I wore on Sunday. It’s 3:42 am. I open my eyes to the buzzing voice telling me to buy Rosland Capital gold, like it was some sort of all-fulfilling investment. My ribs dig sharply into my side, where I normally sleep, the pinching pain running back and forth from my left side to the right, depending on what side I flipped over onto. It’s almost like a chore, shifting myself from side to side. Soft snores echo from my phone where my cousin and I have our nightly talk-’til-we-sleep video calls. Voices, snores and silence. Stiff and bloated, I reach over to grab the TV remote. *Click*. Still soundly snoring, I hang up the call with my cousin, throwing the heavy blanket off of my sore body. Acidic fluid races through my esophagus and up to my throat. I jump up, forcing a strong swallow to keep the sharp burn from coming up any further. Let me tell you first hand that Mike’s Hard, Hot Cheetos and McDonald’s are not a great combination before bed. It sounds great in the moment though, but it’s like a boomerang that comes back to hit you in the gut. You didn’t think it through, and you’re just not that great at assessing when it’ll come back- before it finally hits you.

I’m running on my fourth week of quarantine. I haven’t been to work since November

22nd. In the daytime: coughing, sneezing, an Eric Clapton song playing in the yard, and soft sounds of Christmas carols coming from the Google Home in the kitchen. At night: faint honking from the boulevard and chirps from hidden crickets. Sitting up, I remind myself that I'm just having a casual drink, nothing more, and some junk food to calm my nerves just like every other night. This is the last time, though. This crap isn't good for me.

I walk into the restroom and struggle to pull down my joggers. They're tight, and the indent of the waistband digs into my stomach and around to my back. I peel them off and notice the red vein-like streaks that run all across my abdomen. The threads on the legs are wrapped tightly around my calves, like fists on a link of sausages. I've been branded, like a damn farm animal. As I'm sitting on the toilet, I leer over at the thickened skin and puffed fingers on my hands. Holy shit.

I was not like this a year ago. I used to dart from class to class around the gigantic campus, my Adidas gym bag jolting around on one shoulder and my grey study bag on the other. I'd stare into the shiny glass windows of the Student Recreation Center, or LA Fitness (University gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays, LA Fitness on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays) with gleaming wide eyes, in awe that I was now, finally, just as capable of doing the things these other people were doing. The dark silhouette of a downward dogged-posed girl, another girl viciously timing herself on the treadmill, Kid Bloom blasting in my ears to pump me up. As I open the heavy glass doors into the gymnasium, I get a rush from the smell of the musty, sweat-stenched air. The bass bouncing off of my eardrums was enough to defibrillate my heart and prep me for my workout, like a natural dose of caffeine. It was the healthiest I had ever been. My collar bones were visible, and my jaw was no longer entrenched by the large mass that hugged it ever so tightly for over 13 years.

I sit up and reach behind me to clean myself, my face turning bright pink with embarrassment. I can't reach. I stand up, and a strong ache-like-lightning runs down from my back and to my knees. My knees start trembling, and I finally pull my weight off the cursed seat. In the mirror, I don't see the same person I was once so glad to see. This one has a puffed face, scars and acne all over. Her eyes are yellowed and her skin is covered in ugly, red burn-like blemishes. She's got a sack strapped to her abdomen and thick-skinned sleeves for legs and arms. I stare at the figure in front of me, in disbelief that what I was staring at was actually me. I was only waiting for the gyms to open up again- I wasn't going to let myself go like this. Again.

Look, no one tells you how to make proper substitutes for things during a pandemic. There's a designated place for everything: You gotta pee? Bathroom. You gonna eat dinner? Dining room. You gonna sleep? Bedroom. That's how I've programmed myself. Place of worship? Church. Place to learn? School. Place to exercise? Gym. Map everything out and you've got yourself what science calls "compartmentalization". It's not the best way to handle things, but it's the way I handle things. I get up everyday, just like everybody else and start my day with a cup of coffee and an over-hard egg and a Premier shake. I drive to my retail job at the optometrist's office, while my brother and aging parents stay home, given the fact that they have the opportunity. I don't have a 9-5, but it's a job that manages to pay for my university tuition and leave me a little extra. Financial aid doesn't give me shit because my mom makes too much, and God forbid I skip a semester to get my assets in place. I hear my mom's voice, "You cannot take a semester off. Those people almost always don't end up going back. You're going to get even further behind." I have no choice, and the fear that sat in silence slowly crept forward, making itself more and more visible with each article that read, "COVID-19 cases hit new record high in LA County".

A mother who is a breast cancer survivor and a hypertensive father. A brother who was going to commit his love to his longtime girlfriend before Christmas Eve. Just last month we heard my mom's squeals of joy to see the petite \$3,000 engagement ring he had bought for his, unironically, petite girlfriend. He said he wasn't sure how he'd do it, he didn't know when, but he was definitely going to do it. No cliché bullshit either, just a straight-forward, "Will you marry me?" as opposed to the grandiose proposals as seen on TikTok or Instagram. She's a nice girl, she deserves it. She's everything my parents wanted in a daughter-in-law. It'll have to wait until next year, I guess.

Now back in my bedroom, I lock the door behind me and roll into my balled-up comforter. I drag the sheets over my grimy body and reach into my bag of Hot Cheetos. I decided to call my cousin back, hoping she'd answer my call.