Love in the Time of COVID-19

by K. C. Norton

"How are you today, Mr. Jameson?" I ask as I sort the puffed cereals.

The James gives me side-eye, the same way he always does. He's a crabby old bastard, if you really want to know, but who can guess what his home life is like. I mean, I can't imagine that there are a whole lot of grandkids lining up to visit him and check in and on him and do his laundry. I suspect this not only because he mostly just squints and grunts, but also because he's here, by himself, doing his own shopping. Again.

Which, these days? If you've got loving grandkids, they're doing it for you.

"Something I can reach for you, Mr. Jameson?" I ask. I give him my sweetest smile.

"Grapenuts," he grunts at last.

"But of course." I pick a box and nestle it gently among the other items in the front of his motorized shopping cart, with the bananas and milk and digestive biscuits and carrots and orange juice; the same handful of things he always gets. I'm tempted to ask if he eats them all at the same meal, or spaces them out somehow, because: gross. "Anything else?"

The James grunts at me and rolls away, looking back over his shoulder twice before he turns the end of the aisle and leaves me to my restocking.

I keep the smile pasted on even once he's out of sight. Seriously, it's free. And being disgustingly cheerful, it turns out, is practically my superpower.

# # #

I have never been above-average at anything in my life before. My old sock drawer is full of participation ribbons. I've never been a great test-taker, either; my biggest achievement has always been showing up. If you want me to make an effort, I'll be there. Just don't ask me to excel unless you're prepared for disappointment. Mom wanted me to be a lawyer. Dad was hoping for either an athlete or an artist. They set their sites high but broad. So long as I was good at *something*, they'd have been thrilled.

To be fair to them, if they're disappointed that so far, I'm a fantastic stockgirl? They're being pretty chill about it.

Reese, my big sister, Skypes me every evening, no matter what. Reese is what you might call more of a *conventional* hero. Right now she's stationed at one of the tent cities outside Atlanta, handing out food and masks and administering medical testing. Tonight she looks dead tired, but she gives me her signature double-dimpled grin when I answer.

"Hey, Ringo!" she laughs. She's been calling me by this same stupid nickname since freshman year of high school, on account of my hair. "Still perky?"

"Perky's a gross word," I tell her, pulling a face because I know she wants me to. "But, yeah, still smiling."

"I can see that."

The problem with Skyping Reese is that I have to guess how she is. I can’t ask, because I've been watching the news, and I know it's not great. Instead, I gather clues. Her hair is messy, so they've had a busy day and she just got in. She's wearing makeup, which on Reese means that she's covering the bags under her eyes. Still, her mouth isn't pinched at the corners, so things aren't getting worse.

I mean, hopefully.

"So, do you have an update?" she asks, and I nod furiously.

"Today, we had a code purple."

"Code… purple." Reese bites her lip. "Right, can you, uh, remind me what—"

"I mean she was literally purple today. Purple Chucks. Purple earrings. Purple eye-liner." I sigh, leaning back against my headboard dramatically. "Swoon city!"

"You've got to talk to her," says Reese. "This is getting pathetic."

"I make eyes at her from an appropriate distance!" I insist.

Reese shakes her head. "I thought we had a national emergency down *here*, but Ringo? Your case is freakin' terminal."

I flutter my eyelashes and let my hand rest against my forehead. "She gives me the vapors, I'm telling you."

"Good thing you can't get too close, then," snorts Reese. "Hey, I gotta go. I need to call the parentals and then get some sleep. Your assignment for tomorrow is to talk to her."

I pretend to weep into my pillow, because this is all I have. The only weapon in my arsenal.

Sometimes the best thing you can do for somebody is give them a chance to forget about their problems. Even if it's just for a minute.

# # #

That said, I really do need to talk to Natalie. Reese isn't wrong when she says that this whole crushing-from-afar situation is becoming deeply pathetic.

There are a lot of things that are pretty terrible about living through a pandemic, turns out. The top three, in my admittedly privileged opinion, are as follows.

One: Reese being activated.

Two: The fact that even though stockgirls are now one of the few things standing between civilization and anarchy, we still get paid crap.

Three: Flirting is now basically the worst.

I mean, sure, I *guess* there are worse things. But while I'm slowly piling potatoes onto the display before the store opens, watching Natalie out of the corner of my eye, I really can't think of any.

My usual flirting strategy goes something like this. I brush past my person of interest, initiating light casual contact. If this goes well, I kind of hover in her space a little and see how she takes it. Somewhere in here, I make eye contact. If she's cool with all of this, I blurt something like, "Hey girl, I'm gayer than the soundtrack to *Rocky Horror*. How about you?"

I didn't say that I was great at flirting, but at least I had a strategy. Now I've got zilcho.

Natalie is basically perfect. Her style is the kind of casual that someone might not notice if they just passed her in the street. Did she specifically pick those shoes, that shirt, those earrings? Or was it a happy accident?

I've been watching her, and I know. It was no accident.

That said, I have *no earthly idea* how I'm supposed to talk to her. Where do I even start?

The potatoes are half done, and Natalie's cart of fruits is filling up the display. Reese gave me one job. It's now or never.

"If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be?"

Natalie's head jerks up away from the pluots and she stares at me. "Sorry?"

"I, uh." I resist the urge to scratch my neck because I don't want to have to change me gloves yet again. "I've just been feeling cooped up, you know? So I was wondering…"

"Oh," she says. "Oh, um."

"Sorry, forget it," I say, waving my hand between us.

"No, it's just going to sound stupid," she says.

"I doubt that."

She bites her lip, then rolls her eyes. "Okay, don't judge. But I would be sitting in a restaurant stuffing my fat face with steamed buns. Like, a hundred steamed buns. You have no idea."

"A hundred?" I whistle.

"I know that's lame. I should probably have lied and said that I'd be visiting the British Museum or doing hot yoga on some Tibetan mountainside."

"You could at least say you'd be eating a hundred steamed buns on a Tibetan mountainside," I offer.

"Nope. I want to go to Sichuan Moon and eat two of every dumpling and bun they make, and then go to Target. And just… browse. Is that sad? Don't answer that."

"It's very attainable," I say.

"Not now."

My cart is almost empty. I should really head back to the stock room.

"Let's say we did," I blurt. "Let's just pretend we went."

"Together?" asks Natalie.

I feel heat creeping up my neck.

A little smile slides onto Natalie's face. "Okay. Hey, thanks for the great… date?"

"Oh, yeah, you're very welcome," I say.

"It was exactly what I wanted to do. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess?"

"Okay," says Natalie, spinning her cart around. "But next time, you pick the place."

"Next time?"

"Our next date," she calls over her shoulder.

I resist the urge to whip out my phone then and there and text Reese, *Code heart-palpitations*. But it will have to wait until I'm closer to the hand-sanitizer.

# # #

Officially I was hired as a stockgirl, but these are crazy times, and we're assigned registers for the morning rush.

Natalie is three registers behind me on the fifteen-items-or-fewer line, which sounds like an easy job but I assure you is a nightmare. I look over once while someone fiddles with the credit card machine to find her smiling at me.

I recognize a lot of people who come through the line. We don't know each other, really, but I can usually make small talk. Now, not so much. People are scared and anxious, and it makes them rude. Most transactions are silent and tense. All I have is my smile, which I never let falter. Sometimes, when people glance at me, I can actually see their shoulders ease for a moment.

Just give people a moment to forget and relax. For things to feel normal. That's all that needs to happen.

Finally, someone smiles back. It's an older woman I've nicknamed Coupons for the obvious reason. She drives most of the other cashiers crazy, but I like how organized she is.

"Are you stocking up?" I ask her, parceling things out into her canvas bags. Coupons usually buys mostly fresh produce, but today her cart is filled with frozen vegetables, crackers, and canned soups, very out of her ordinary. She must be getting ready to self-isolate for a while.

It's weird how much you can know about a person without really knowing anything about their lives.

"I'm afraid so," she says, lifting the bags into her cart with pale skinny arms. "I'll be riding this out for as long as I can."

"Stay safe," I say, while I tally her discounts. Sometimes I wonder if this is what things were like in London, during the Blitz. Or the Black Plague. I mean, it must have been worse than this, right? Maybe this pandemic isn't like anything. Maybe it's just another thing we have to survive.

The James is right behind her. He scowls at me as I scan his groceries, and I grin and grin.

He's scared and lonely, and I can't fix it. Patience is all I can give him.

# # #

"A made-up date?" asks Reese, looking hella skeptical. "She sounds like a dork."

"It's all we have!" I protest. "What else are we supposed to do?"

"Oh, right, I forgot that *you're* also a dork." Reese rolls her eyes. "A match made in heaven." She's getting a rash from where her mask rubs her nose and chin during her long shifts.

"You're just jealous!" I protest.

"Because there's so much to be jealous about. Listen, Ringo, you and I are getting the exact same amount of action, even if it turns out that your dream girl really is into you."

# # #

Sometimes I can go a whole hour without thinking about it.

Sometimes I wake up in the morning, before sunrise, feeling perfectly content and half-asleep, before I remember to be scared.

Sometimes I wish I could just stay home, curled up and safe, until this is all over.

Then I grope around for my socks and my bra, because what Reese is doing is even more dangerous. Why should I get to protect myself, when Natalie is putting herself on the line? What would happen to The James if we all stayed home?

So I get up. And I come to work. And these days, it feels like an act of goddamned heroism.

# # #

"So where's our second date going to be?" asks Natalie. She's organizing the cheeses while I shelve single-serve yogurts. This is unprompted on my part, may I add. She just wheels up and starts chatting.

"I have to say, I like the classics. It's dinner and a movie this time."

"Oh?" She wiggles her eyebrows. "Do tell."

"Mexican, for sure," I tell her. "I mean I would borderline kill for a basket of tamales from El Gringo."

"I could go for their vegetarian sampler," says Natalie. "Oh, my god, we could eat from each other's plates. Is it wrong that I miss sharing food with people?"

I shake my head. She can do no wrong, as far as I'm concerned. "Are you vegetarian?"

"Hell no," she says. "But have you had their summer squash soft taco?" She rolls her eyes back in her head and groans, which makes me blush a little. She's too hot. It really isn't fair.

"Mexican, though? On a second date?" She raises her eyebrows.

"Gastrointestinal distress is a non-issue, since we'll be seeing John Wick part four. The gunfire will provide the perfect cover."

Natalie cackles, almost dropping an armload of string cheese. "So this date is pretty far in the future?"

"I've paid extra for an early-release bootleg."

"Because that's how that works."

"Back off," I pretend-snap. "This is *my* fantasy date, okay?"

"Sure, sure. So, John Wick IV. How was it?" she asks, tugging on a curl of her black hair.

"I liked it. Solid action sequences, as always. What about you?"

"I don't feel like I can give it a fair review. I was a little distracted." She's staring at my mouth. *She's staring at my mouth.* "You know, by all the kissing."

"O-oh." I swallow. "Yeah."

"Didn't you like it?" she asks, pouting.

While my hands arrange the Yoplaits, my brain is trying to imagine what it would be like to kiss Natalie. Not that I haven't thought about it before. "I did like it. A lot. What about you?"

"Not sure," says Natalie, tossing an empty box back onto her cart. "Guess I'll have to gather some more data."

"On our next date?" I ask.

"My treat," she says, leaning on the cart and winking at me.

I wish it wasn't the damn apocalypse and I really could kiss her.

# # #

I think about our made-up date for the rest of the day. It bouys me through the long line at the register, over the complaints of the customers who are running low on chicken broth and insist that I must have some stashed in the back. (I don't.)

I'm floating so high in my happy place that I almost don't notice when I fall asleep without getting a phone call from Reese.

# # #

I have Monday off. There's nothing to do but lie around and read and watch movies and clean my apartment's kitchen. It feels lazy but nice. I used to go out all the time, but right now inside is the only place that feels safe, even if it isn't the air that's tainted. I get to go a whole day without being afraid of touching something I can't see.

Which is great and all, but I miss Natalie. Where would I take her if we both had the day off? An improv show at the indie bookstore downtown? Maybe I'd just ask her over and spend the whole day kissing her.

Except I've never kissed her before. This is all theoretical, and we have no safe way to test the theory.

When Reese doesn't call at eight, I dial her number. It goes straight to voicemail.

So much for having this one day where I feel truly safe.

# # #

Natalie grins at me from her register on Tuesday. I wave, but my heart isn’t in it.

I scan people's groceries, but the smile on my face feels plastic. For the first time maybe ever, I'm glad that people are being all quiet and morose. I feel like I might cry at any moment.

I've just finished out a massive sale to a guy in gloves and a respirator who seems to be emotionally prepared to live on protein bars and canned soup for the next two years, when I hear someone yelling.

"What am I supposed to do?" a tiny woman with a silver bob shrieks at Natalie. "This is the fourth place I've been, and *nobody* has tissues, or paper towels, god *forbid* toilet paper. You tell me, what am I supposed to *do?*"

Natalie, my Natalie, who usually looks equally ready to start a feminist book group or hoist someone's wayward toddler out of traffic one-handed, appears to be on the verge of a meltdown. Our manager, Mercedes, pokes her head out of the office, and I see her gesturing frantically to one of the other cashiers for backup.

I take a deep shuddering breath and turn back to the line. Wouldn't you know it, The James is staring at me from the seat of his electric shopping cart.

"Hey, Mr. Jameson," I say. It doesn't sound as bright as I would like, but I think I'm starting to crack.

As usual, he squints at me and grunts.

Being cheerful might be my superpower, but I swear I'm this close to going full postal on him. *I don't know where my sister is!* I want to scream. *I don't know if she's sick, or if she's hurt, or what's happened to her. And you're here, buying the same things you buy every time you come in. Just buy twice as much! Come half as often! Just let me go home where I don't have to be afraid for myself, for my not-girlfriend, for the whole crazy world. Just let me go home and fall apart in peace.*

I take his stupid cereal and his milk and his friggin' juice and slam them into bags one by one.

"There you go, Mr. Jameson. Using your card today?" I feel like my teeth have all been filed to razors. I may be grinning, but I have dead shark eyes. Honest to God, this guy. This day. This year. I'm so over it.

The James blinks at me, and then his pruney little mouth curves into what might be a smile.

"It it it it," he stammers, then licks his dry lips and swallows. "It's go-going to be okay, h-honey."

I'm frozen. I've been turned to stone. The James slides his card in, waits, then takes it back when the machine beeps. How have I only even seen his squinted eyes, and never his shaking hands? How have I never noticed that he only buys the smallest packages of everything, as if he has no one to share it with, and nothing that needs to be cooked? I've heard his grunt, but never his stutter.

And it's never occurred to me that he might actually be kind.

As he wheels away, I give him the best smile I have, which isn't saying much. I'm the worst, and everything else is *also* the worst, and I don't think I can keep it together for one more second.

I wave to Mercedes and mime, *Give me ten minutes*, then head off to the back. I keep swallowing, squashing my tears down inside me, wishing that I could do better. Be better. Wishing that I was as confident and together and selfless as I keep telling myself that I should be.

I've decided that I'm going to try calling Reese again, but when I push through the doors to the back, I find Natalie folded up against flat of watermelons.

"Hey," she says weakly.

I push all my wretched, self-pitying, pathetic feelings to the side in an instant. "What happened?"

"Panic attack," she explains. She hugs her knees to her chest, taking deep huge breaths. "I-it's fine. I get them all the time."

It absolutely isn't fine.

Touching someone is such a basic expression of intimacy. Except now, I can't hug her to calm her down. I can't touch her arm or rub her shoulder when she's panicking. It would be a huge violation of her privacy. A risk. And sure, there are places where a girl hugging or kissing another girl is a huge risk right out of the gate, but this isn't the same.

All I can do is watch her struggle for air from six to ten feet away.

I sink down next to a stack of empty milk crates. "What can I do?"

"Talk to me," she says.

"Okay," I say. "Um, right. So, let me tell you about our third date."

She makes a noise that is either a laugh or a sob. "Great."

"It's a nice day," I say. "We're going out for a picnic. Now, I know like this sounds like some lame trashy rom-com nonsense with ants and potato salad, but no. We go right from the store. On our way out, we each grab something from the hot bar, a drink, and a cup of fruit. No, a small fruit tray. So that we can share it and get our germs all over it and eat out of it with our hands."

She makes the noise again. Maybe it *is* a laugh?

"Oh, and a thing of bread. And we walk to the park out here, by the water. And we eat our lunch and feed the ducks, and then we watch a movie on my tablet, which we both touch with our dirty sticky hands, and we use absolutely no hand sanitizer."

"Tell me more about these dirty, sticky hands," she says. She still looks rough around the edges, but she's smiling at least, which is something.

"I don't know what you mean," I say, deadpan. "I'm an innocent. God's perfect creature."

She full-on laughs. "You are so full of it."

I laugh, too.

"It was that lady," says Natalie. She moves to wipe her eyes with her palms, then second-guesses herself and wipes them with her sleeve. "We're all scared, you know? It's not like she's the only one going through this. Honestly, if it wasn't for you, I'd have probably lost my mind by now."

"Me?"

"Well, yeah." She gestures at me. "I mean, you're still just grinning like an idiot. I mean, no, that's not… I mean it doesn't seem to get to you. Somehow, you're able to just be like, *Hello world, this is the new normal and it's fine!*"

"Yeah, but I'm on fire while I'm saying that."

"Oh, sure," says Natalie. "It's one of the things I like most about you."

"The fact that I'm a dumpster fire on the inside?" I ask, trying to make a joke out of my genuine bafflement.

"Girl, you're not a dumpster fire. You're *flames*." She gives me finger-guns and a giant wink when she says it, and it's so stupid that I have to laugh again.

I want to kiss this girl. I want to offer her my hand and pull her to her feet. Instead, we get up and dust off our butts separately. I wait for her to wash her hands and get new gloves before I take my turn at the sink.

"I’m really not going to be able to hold it together for both of us," I blurt. Is there even an *us?* Maybe I need to chill.

But Natalie shrugs and hip-checks the door open. "Of course not. We'll take turns," she says, ushering me back out into the light.

# # #

I'm just getting out of the shower when the phone rings, and I wrap myself in a towel before lurching across the room to answer.

It's Reese.

"Oh my god, oh my god!" I shriek when her face pops up on the screen. "What the actual heck? Where have you *been*?"

"We had to be quarantined until our tests come back," she says. "I didn't have my phone with me. Sorry, Ringo. Um, did I interrupt something? Why do you look all wet?"

My hand is shaking. "Quarantine?"

"Possible exposure," says Reese, biting her lip. "I mean, definite exposure. But that doesn't mean I'm sick. We've got a lot of protocols in place, kiddo."

I can't help myself. I finally ask my sister the question that I haven't asked her since she was called up. It's the question I'm constantly trying to banish from her mind.

"How are you?"

Reese smiles and shrugs. She looks narrow and kind of pinched, but she still looks like herself.

"Waiting for results, Ringo. Hanging in there. How about you?"

There are a lot of ways I could respond, I guess. Brush the question off. Pull a little act to distract her from what's happening. The problem is, it's the same with my sister as it is with The James – with Mr. Jameson. I can only give her as much as I have. Ultimately, I can't protect her, the same way she can't really protect me.

"I'm scared," I tell her. "But I'll be okay."

"I know you will, Ringo."

We can't carry each other, but we can prop each other up and take turns dragging the baggage.

"How's your dream girl?" asks Reese.

I grin at my sister, and this time it's not because I have to, but because I can’t help myself.

# # #

At the end of our morning shift on Friday, Natalie waits for me at the door. She's holding two bags. When she sees me close my locker, she sets one of the plastic bags down and steps back a few feet.

"I just washed my hands," she promises.

Inside the bag is a box of chicken tenders from the hot bar, a fruit cup, a root beer, a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer, and a handful of grapes. I look up at her with my eyebrows raised.

"Bread's bad for ducks," says Natalie very seriously. She pats her purse. "I've got my tablet here. Fully charged."

"Oh," I say, looking at her, and then looking at the bag. "Is this –"

"If you're free," says Natalie airily, "I'd like to take you on a date."

Sure, we have to sit at separate picnic tables in the park, and we kind of have to yell at each other to carry on a conversation. And yes, there is hand sanitizer, and no, we can't share our food.

Still, grapes are pretty aerodynamic. The ducks really go crazy for them. When we cue up a movie and hit play at the same time, I can't help looking up at her every few seconds. A lot of the time she's looking back at me. It's a pretty quality first *real* date, given the circumstances.

"There's nobody I'd rather be sitting six to ten feet away from!" I call to her, making a crazy face.

Natalie makes kissy lips at me.

I don't have to be happy for anyone but myself in that moment. We may not know what happens next, but for the first time since all of this started, I'm actually looking forward to finding out.