M Harper Harrington

“I thought nothing would be worse than those bushfires.”

Australia, Canberra, 19 March – 11 May

My name is Morgan Harrington. I am 34 years old and I live in Canberra, Australia, the nation’s capital and the town I was born in. I live in an apartment with my girlfriend of 18 months and a dog named Blackjack. I work as an anthropologist for an independent consultancy. Our work is generally focused on issues related to Indigenous land rights, including native title. However, the pandemic has disrupted out ability to conduct the field research necessary to do this work. Like all other Australians, I was under ‘lockdown’, and required to stay at home between late March and early May, 2020, the period covered in this diary. The pandemic hit us mere weeks after the worst bushfires Australia has ever seen finally went out, and the experience of one crisis after the other coloured the thoughts I recorded here.

I confirm that all names have been changed to pseudonyms, except where permission has been given to use real names. All photos were takin by the author.

Thursday 19 March, 2020

“What more restrictions will there be today?” I thought as I awoke. I didn’t want to get out of bed. Tasmania has shut its borders and declared a state of emergency.

My birthday plans – to go and see a couple of stand-up comedians as part of the Canberra Comedy Festival – are kaput. The festival was canceled on Wednesday. The international acts canceled when gatherings of over 500 people were banned on Friday last week (March 13), and yesterday they pulled the plug on the whole thing. Oh well, Elodie made vegetarian lasagna (my favourite) and we drank a really nice

bottle of wine that my mother's friend gifted me while we watched the Wu-Tang Clan documentary 'Of Mics and Men'. A good consolation prize.

My brother called me and said to expect this kind of thing to last many months, or a year, and for the effects to last decades. "Don't make any plans," was his advice. Apparently this is what they are telling people in the military, where he works. Anyone who doesn't have to be there has been sent to work from home. I asked him if he would come to the drinks Elodie and I are planning for our birthdays on Saturday afternoon. He said that with two kids he wouldn't risk it.

I called Michelle for a chat. She was supposed to go back to the UK on Sunday for several weeks to see her fiancée and her family. That is all up in the air now, although she is a permanent resident of Australia and a citizen of the UK, so can technically still travel out of one country and in to the other, and she said she'd rather be with her kin if she has to be stuck somewhere. She also said she wouldn't risk our Saturday drinks because of her asthma. Another friend already told Elodie she wouldn't come.

I think it is the loss of control that is frightening people. I think what's really making people scared is that we don't know what's going to happen. Buying toilet paper – and other panic buying – is a response to that, because, even if you have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow, at least you can be sure that the toilet paper problem is solved. It's a particularly secular capitalist response; I think that other people living in less modern conditions are used to not being in control, and put their mental anguish in god, which they then try and appease it through ritual. I saw toilet paper for sale on Gumtree.

In the afternoon I spoke to my neighbour, Ian. I had to drop our spare key back off, but I stopped for a chat because Elodie told me his work is drying up. He is one of the best classical guitarists in Australia. He is doing a PhD at the ANU School of Music, which has canceled all of its classes; this makes up most of his income.

Although he teaches private lessons, he can't really go to them because he's an asthmatic and he can't risk getting the virus. I felt solidarity and fear.

Today the government announced it would introduce quantitative easing, and cut interest rates to .25 percent. Alan Kohler seems worried.

There is some good news: my neighbour Dianne does not have the virus. I ran into her in the hallway as she returned from collecting her medication. "Yeah it's great, but I think I have tonsillitis and it really hurts." Get well soon Dianne.

This is the second crisis of the year. I thought nothing would be worse than those bushfires. I thought our country was over. But in February it rained and now the countryside looks like Ireland. It is like the fires never happened. But the brief respite and the cooler temperatures have not been enough to revive our burnt-out spirits. This crisis is affecting much more than the fires did, and it's just the beginning.

Saturday 21

Instead of birthday drinks we're going to meet at The Dickson Wetlands for a BYO picnic. We are still allowed to be in a group, as long as we're outside. Is it safe? Who knows? The government has shut Bondi Beach.

Sunday 22

The picnic was surprisingly good. Now is the best weather of the year, sunny and clear but not too hot. Being at The Wetlands was perhaps preferable to the pub in that respect. But we all sat further apart than normal, which felt abnormal. I gave a mate a handshake when I arrived – I haven't seen him in many months – only for everyone else to tell me off. It's so unnatural to not make contact – physical,

emotional, social – with other people.

The dregs of the picnic, six of us, came back to our small apartment for dinner. We sat around Mum and Dad's antique dining room table for the first time since we inherited it. It sits so well in our apartment and it looked great all set up for company. Before we ate I said "I just want to say that with everything going on right now it is really nice to be here with you sharing this meal." We cheers-ed, ate, drank, and were merry. We played a card game in which you have to guess when a particular thing happened in history that Sky, our neighbour, brought over. In the end it was a really nice birthday. I'll miss these simple, social pleasures.

Elodie is on the phone to her mum, in Townsville. They had planned to go on a big trip to Paris in April but they canceled their plans (on March 4th). I told Elodie I thought they were overreacting. She said the problem wasn't that they might get the virus, but that they couldn't' get insurance, and that they might get stuck somewhere. Even then, just a couple of weeks ago, I thought this would blow over, like SARS and Swine Flu. I was wrong.

Today I started to worry. The ACT government has made some announcements. They have asked people not to leave the territory unless they really have to, and will be shutting down all non-essential business starting on Wednesday. Schools will be shut from Tuesday. On TV tonight David Speers interviewed Scott Morrison and he couldn't say what 'non-essential' means, but it's clear enough that in 48 hours we aren't going to be allowed to leave the house unless we have a very good reason. I just read a report saying the price of vegetables has tripled in regional South Australia as the panic buying continues. I have to now admit to myself that I'm not immune to this.

After I heard the announcement I made a big list of things to do – and things to buy. We aren't going to run out of anything in the next 48 hours, but we're nearly out of tea, and cheese, and a few other things we like, and I have no idea what is going to

happen tomorrow or the next day, or at the end of the week, and with everything that has happened so far it may well be that we can't go to the shops anymore. So I'm going to stock up while I can.

This morning, before I heard all this news, I went to the nursery. It's autumn and we have a lot of things we'd like to do in the garden before it gets too cold. I bought over $300 worth of plans, gypsum, gloves, trowels, seeds and secateurs. If we're going to be stuck in here for months gardening will be good therapy.

Monday March 23, 2020

Yesterday was incredibly busy. I was trying to get as many loose ends tied up before the lockdown comes in to affect. Not that a lockdown has been announced, but we're all expecting it any day. Yesterday was the last day of school in the ACT until... no one can say. In the morning I did my daily yoga stretches (via YouTube) with ABC Radio National on. It was not the least bit meditative, and I wasn't focused on the stretches, so I probably did more harm than good, but I am so worried about what is happening that I really did not want to miss any information (plus, Elodie already had it on when I woke up). The talk was all about the collapsing economy.

I listened to the ACT Chief Minister, Andrew Barr, on 666 ABC Canberra explain the details of the closure of 'non-essential' businesses. He said it means cafes, restaurants, licensed areas of bars, clubs and gyms have to shut (although take-away food will still be allowed). Everything else is allowed to be open. He specifically said that hair-dressers were not required to close, because the government wasn't "expecting anyone to go six months without a haircut." But who knows what will happen, and I was planning to get one anyway, so I called to make a booking straight away. In this way, I too am succumbing to panic buying. I went from hippy hair down to my shoulders and in my eyes, to a 'Peaky-Blinders' style crop, with just a little on

the sides.

At the barber, Rochelle, the young woman who has trimmed my golden locks for the past couple of years, said I was the second longhair to come in for the Covid-19 Cut. She said the salon will be lucky to be open by the end of the week. They have to be in close contact with people to do their jobs, and apparently hair-dressers have been complaining that they're being put in danger (although she said this could just be full-time, salaried staff hoping to get paid time off). She said people were supporting their business by buying a gift certificate, so they would have some money in their coffers (coiffeurs!) in the hopes they'll make it though. I got one when I paid – with my new short 'do I will certainly need it.

There were queues for the newly announced social welfare payments (JobSeeker) that went down the street and around the corner of Centrelink offices around the country The Coalitions relentless efforts to gut social services seem rather ironic now.

Rochelle's partner has had to apply because he's lost all his work. She said he did this online and that it was fairly straightforward, except that he has to provide separation certificates from his previous *two* employers. She went on to tell me that she thinks they should lower the Newstart rate back to where it was when this is over, because otherwise dole bludgers will take advantage. "Why would you go to work when you can clear $500 a week?" I didn't say so, but I disagree. I think this has, or will, fundamentally shift society, including our attitudes towards income and poverty. We are seeing, today, right now, how essential it is to have every one of us – real estate agent, cleaner, and clerk – with a home and spending money. We'll see.

I think neo-liberalism may be dying from the Corona Virus. Where is the free market solution to this problem? There isn't one. And anyone would be mad, inhuman, to suggest that governments (and whatever other large institutions are able to) shouldn't help.

While this makes me optimistic – there is great opportunity in this great crisis – I also feel that we are just only one-step away from living in a totalitarian police state. Something like the former East Germany, or China during the Cultural Revolution, where even the most minor subversion (hanging out in a park with too many people) is brutally punished, and people inform on one-another for the pettiest things (inviting friends over, doing 'non-essential' activity in their driveway). We'll see.

I am succumbing to panic buying. Besides the hair dresser, I went to t2 and bought nearly $200 worth of tea. We were all out, and we have talked about switching to leaf tea because its more environmentally friendly than bags, and I do really like tea, and I am sure I will use it and enjoy it. But still, it was extravagant. Woolworths Woden was surprisingly quiet, but I did overhear panicked conversations "just get as many as possible" and "oh, but I really want that one." There were signs up everywhere outlining three categories of restricted products – 1 item of things like toilet paper and milk, and 2 items of everything else per customer. There was no flour, no pasta, no pasta sauce. But I found everything I needed, including the last loaf of Burgen Soy and Lindseed loaf, for the freezer, just in case. I think that perhaps the panic buying will subside once we reach the point that everyone realizes they have more than they need, and nowhere to put it. At the check-out I stood as far away as possible from the check-out chick and man in front of me – he was wearing a surgery mask, and rubber gloves, the empty packet of which he handed to the check-out chick.

I also bought another big bag of dog biscuits. Elodie bought one on Thursday, and they usually last about six weeks, but I really don't know if pet stores will be open in six weeks. The way Europe and Britain are going they won't be. There were signs up in Petbarn Phillip saying that supplies of certain pet food were limited to two per customers. I bought new shampoo and conditioner (I was out), bird seed (at a second pet shop, after I forgot to get it at Petbarn), and went to the Chinese grocery, and then the Indian grocery. I love going to Bharat International because it's like a little slice of India here in Canberra. They have the same kind of café-style take away that

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I used to eat my lunch at when I worked at Tehelka, a great selection of Indian sweets, and a full Indian grocery. The women behind the counter wore a surgical mask. I looked at her red dot, clearly visible on her forehead above, and her kind eyes, and ordered my favourite: Chole Bhatura. “We can only do take away.” Of course. This is what the shut-down of a non-essential service to ensure social distancing looks like. I really wouldn’t ever want to eat Chole Bhatura anywhere but at table near a tap – the curry is runny and the bread is greasy – but I agreed to take it away because I want to support this local business. To not do so would be to contribute to the recession. So I ordered and bought frozen roti, and a five-kilogram bag of flour – they had plenty. Then I waited for my food, remaining an uncomfortable couple of metres from the other patrons, worrying if they have the disease. I am becoming paranoid, and suspicious of strangers.

Out in one of Phillip’s beige, utilitarian, U-shaped alleyways I ate my lunch on the bonnet of Elodie’s orange Renault Capture, trying not to drip gravy down my wrist or on my clothes, reflecting on the day. This is crazy.

After that I drove to Bunnings. On my way up Hindmash Drive I tried to call Elodie, but got a weird message on phone saying that “Service to the telecommunications network you are trying to call is temporarily congested, please try again later.” I bought a raised vegetable garden, and seeds to fill it with.

I took the dog to the vet. His back legs are going. It’s an ongoing problem and we know there is nothing that can be done, but it flared up over the weekend, including some bleeding from his toe. So I wanted to get it checked out before we can’t. The vet said that while they were considered an essential service, and thus are allowed to stay open, if one of them gets the virus they will have to close.

I went to the print shop and got my manuscript printed – at least I will have plenty of time to work on that.

Elodie had a terrible day. They have been told they are not allowed to work from home, according to the lawyer in her division. But her staff with children who were at school now have to stay at home to look after them, so what are they to do? And they now must all expose each other to themselves and not practice social distancing, which is dangerous.

The gym texted me, twice:

“Hi Morgan, as per the Government announcement, the club will be closed from 12pm today for an initial 4-week period. All member fees will be suspended free of charge until we re-open. Keep an eye out on social media and your inbox for more details. We appreciate your on-going support.”

And, a couple of hours late:

“Hi Morgan, Next Gen is closed due to new Government guidelines. For more information, please click the link https://cutt.ly/NG-Update-AU”

I am relieved that I don’t have to pay the $45 a week membership fee when I can’t even go, but I feel for the gym employee I heard interviewed on ‘The World Today’ news this afternoon. She had shifts and an income up until last week. Now she’s broke and on the dole queue.

Tuesday 24 March, 2020

“The response to the virus has destroyed the economy, and in modernity the economy essentially *is* society. So is the cure worse than the disease? What rationale has led the people in power to shut down the economy? A measure of supreme risk-aversity intended to stop people from dying? That’s noble, but only up until the point at which it ruins the lives of a great deal more people. Risk aversity is intended, usually, to protect investment. This mass shut down is doing the opposite. Why have there been such heavy-handed measures? Society has been dismantled. It will have

to be rebuilt. Is destroying the lives of many worth saving the lives of relatively few? We'll see."

I wrote the above paragraph at around midnight on Sunday/Monday. A chill ran down my spine this morning as I heard Donald Trump say something very similar, that the 'cure' for the pandemic 'could be worse than the problem itself' and vowed to reopen the US economy in weeks. If thesis is free-market capitalism, and antithesis is social isolation, what is synthesis? I am optimistic it will be something more humane, equitable, and environmentally friendly than what I've put up with most of my life. This crisis requires us all to be very self-less, and hopefully this lesson will be put in to practice in other ways once this is all something else again.

The World Today reported from a 'dead silent' queue outside the Centrelink on Crown Street, Darlinghurst. The line hadn't moved for an hour and everyone in it is broke. Elodie says we're all just two weeks away from being homeless. Many people are now half way there.

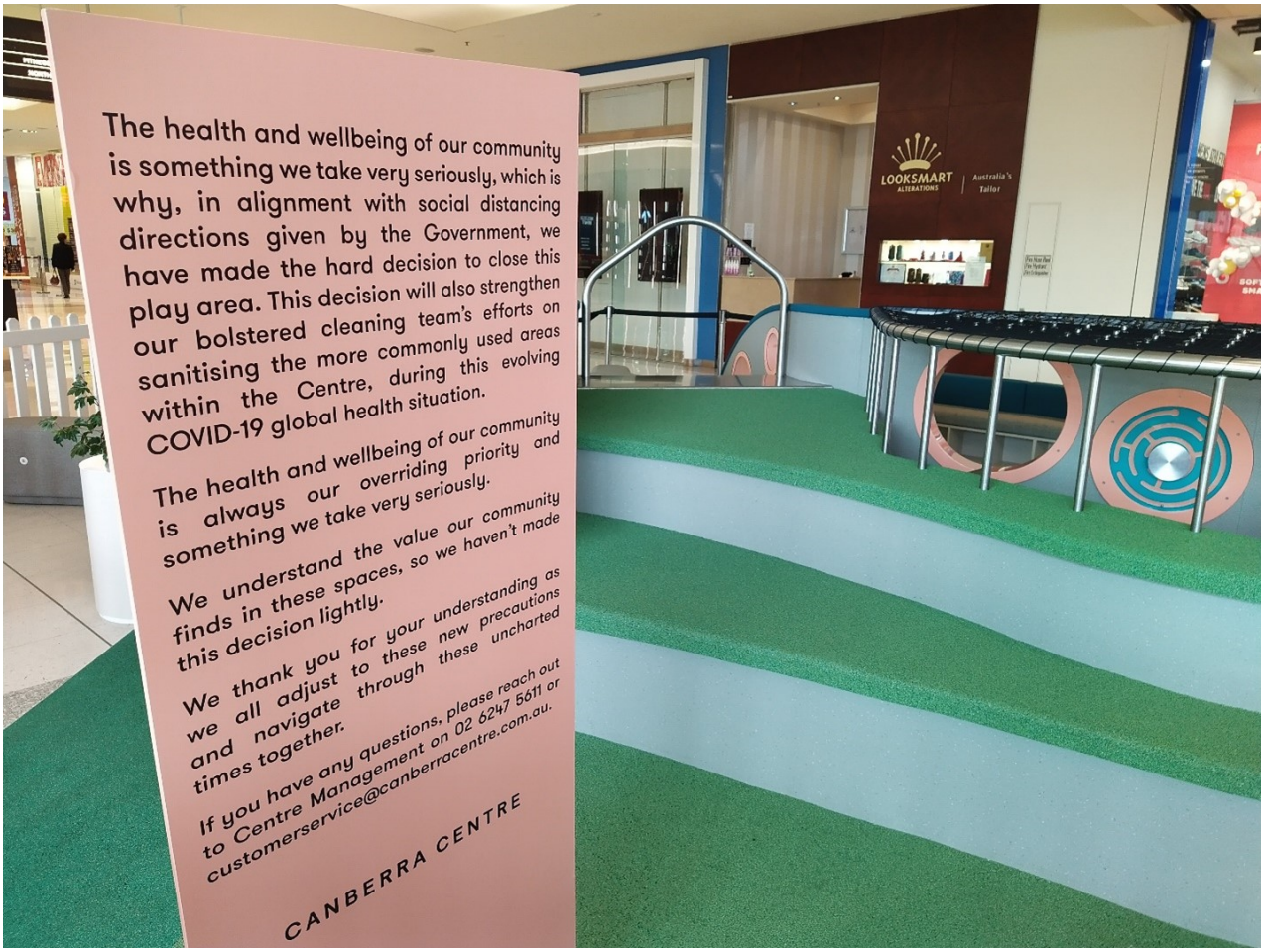
My day was focused on IT. I needed a new computer to work from home, and I started by looking at Dell which, from Elodie bought her Latitude last year, I know has great computers and prices. I used the 'compare models' function of their website and narrowed it down to two options, but when I dialed the 1800 number to order, Anup set me straight: there is a very high demand for new computers at the moment (because everyone all-of-a-sudden has to work from home) and there is a supply problem, because the factories in India are closed...because of the virus. He said if I was willing to buy a slightly older model, and content with a 15" screen, he could probably sort me out. But only if I could wait an hour because he was so under the pump he had to do many other things first. An hour later I had my quote. $1600 for a Dell Precision 7530, and an estimated delivery of 21 April. Rather than wait a full month, I thought I'd try my luck at the bricks and mortar stores in Civic.

Office Works was down to nothing but the cheapest models. JB HiFi was a frenzy of

panicked buyers and frantic staff trying to sort them out (and, probably, in the back of their mind, wondering how much longer they'd be employed for). I saw one man clutching two armloads of DVDs and CDs, his arms together in a cradle. I haggled over equivalent Microsoft Thinkpads, only to reach the conclusion that I could get a better computer, for over a $1000 less, if I was prepared to wait a month. So I've ordered the Dell. By the time I finally paid Dell, the wait time had gone up to April 28.

Josh, the guy at JB HiFi, was friendly and helpful, even in the chaos of panic buying. He said that availability was a problem, and that many models of laptop would have to be shipped from other JB HiFi stores, if they had them at all. After a lengthy conversation about what to buy, and my bargaining, I told him, honestly, that I had decided to buy a Dell online, and that the only catch was that I'd have to wait a month. He said "yeah, and that's if we even have mail in a month." I felt that perhaps this was his snub, because he'd taken the time to talk to me when the shop was very busy, but in his comment was a grain of something I was feeling too – the uncertainty of what's going to happen next.

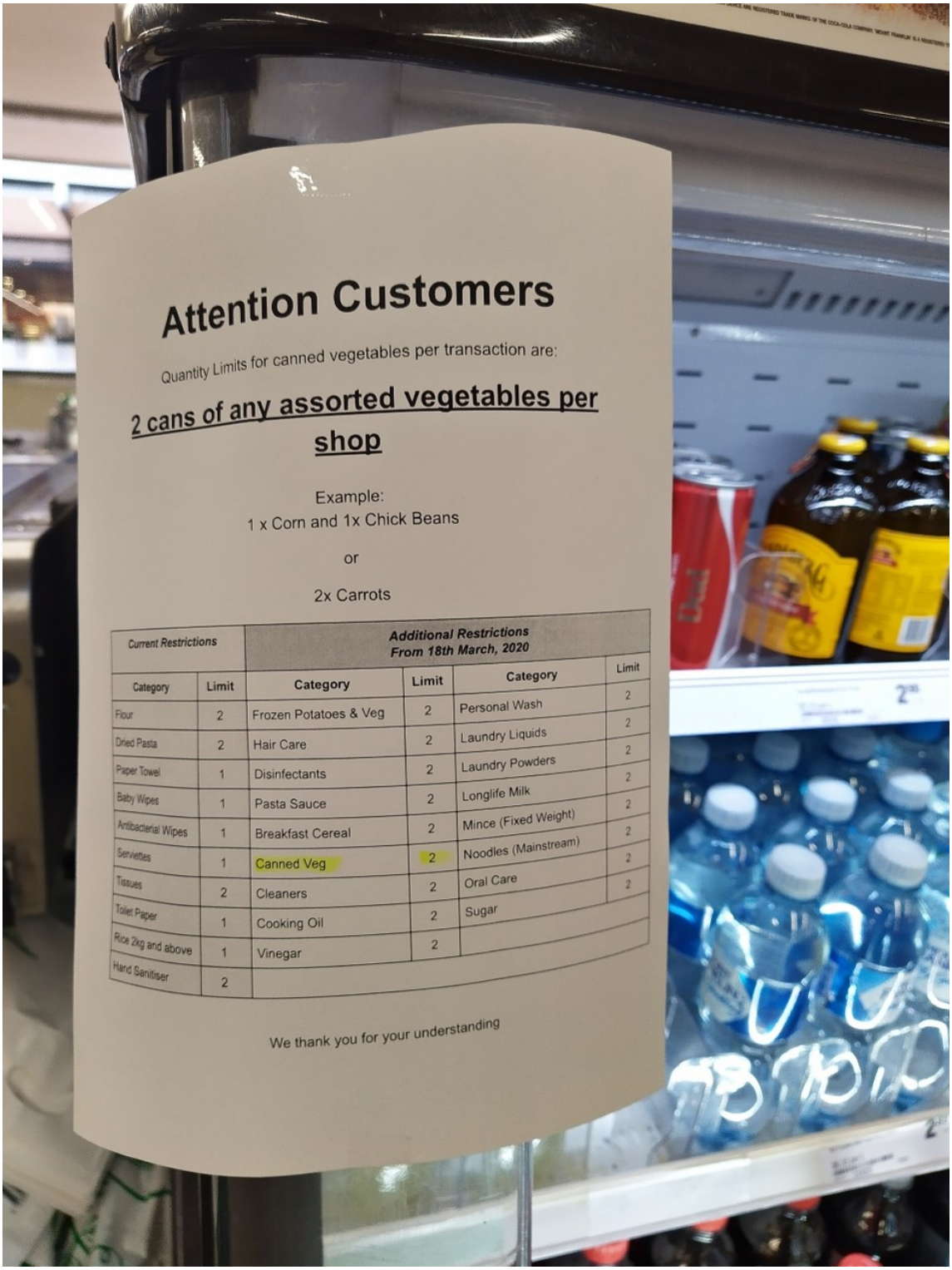
After about ten minutes in the mall I really didn't want to be there. It felt wrong, and totally not worth the risk. After touching the keypad to pay for a case and some adaptors that I will need when (if?) the new computer finally arrives, I felt very uneasy. I wanted hand sanitizer, and couldn't believe I'd left the house without it. I thought about asking the staff for some of theirs. I could see it behind the counter, but their bottles were almost empty, and had names and locations around the store written on them. I usually feel uneasy in public toilets, but they had soap and warm water, which is exactly what I needed.



Children's play area inside a mall in Canberra, Australia on Tuesday March 24, 2020. Image credit: M Harper Harrington

I also went to Dickson to buy some fruit from Woolworths, and some more hand soap from the bulk goods no packaging store. We are running out of soap very quickly. I must have washed my hands ten times before lunch, and for much longer than usual (the government is telling us 20 seconds minimum).

M Harper Harrington



“I thought nothing would be worse than those bushfires.”
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/i-thought-nothing-would-be-worse-than-those-bushfires/



Supermarket in Canberra, Australia on Tuesday March 24, 2020. Image credit: M Harper Harrington

There were signs up in every shop with details of how the virus is affecting them. Woolworths had half a dozen varieties, informing people of limits to the amount of things they could purchase, and reminding them not to get angry at staff. Another one, on the front door, said toilet paper is not available. The cafes all had 'take away only' signs and some of the restaurants are closed entirely. I stood on the unusually quiet corner of Bunda Street and Lonsdale Street, in the middle of Canberra. There was no music coming from Kokomo's, the night club's kitschy neon-pink sign was dead and grey. Italian and Sons says their open for take-away. As I stood taking photos the owner (?) manager (?), an Italian man not much older than me, approached from down the street. "Here, take one [a menu]. You can still get take

away."

"I was in there last week for my mother's birthday. It was so good."

"Well, you can still have our pasta and our pizza!" he said with enthusiasm, and only a hint of desperation.

Today I was genuinely scared. I don't want to go out any more. Inside the JB HiFi – a place I normally associate with killing time and indulgent purchases – the fear was palpable. It has infected me too. I have bought 1.5 liters of soap because there is no guarantee that I'll be able to get it; I hear reports of hospitals running out of protective equipment and people stealing hand sanitizer from hospitals. What is guaranteed is that I will need a lot of soap for the foreseeable future – and so will everyone else. I was panic buying soap.

At the weekly vegetable distribution (Southern Harvest Association, which sells food grown within 150 kilometres of Canberra) they have implemented extreme new safety measures. I got there early because I was in Civic (trying to buy a computer) to find Bronwyn ruling a 1.5 metre line away from the table she had set up – outside. Then she laid down some sticky tape, for us customers to stand behind. She dolled out the fresh, beautiful, locally grown produce in a sanitized plastic box, which I was then allowed to approach to fill my bag. She then disinfected it again and repeated the process for the next person waiting. The three of us stood way more than 1.5 metres apart the whole time.

Wednesday March 25th, 2020

The first thing I heard when I woke up this morning was "since 1933". I don't know what Sabra Lane was talking about on 'AM', and I don't think I want to. I'm getting information fatigue. Today was my first real day of social isolation. I only left the

house to walk the dog (once in the morning, and once in the afternoon) and I only spoke to Sky and Dianne, over the fence and well away from it.

I wanted to capture the last of the beautiful autumn sunlight, so when Elodie got home, I decided to eat the croissant she brought home for afternoon tea in our front court yard. I pulled the milk crate out into the light as she caught me up on another insane day at work. But we didn't get far before I spotted Claire, Sky's sister, over the fence. Sky followed, and before we got too far into our chat Dianne leaned over the balcony above us to join in. The poor woman has been cooped up for a week and a half with her illness (that isn't COVID-19 but involves a cough) and said that although she's getting better, isolation is taking a mental toll. "People!" she exclaimed. We traded stories about what was happening at work, and what we've been up to inside our apartments. Apparently Sky and Dianne are huge fans of 'Rue Paul's Drag Race', and we've all been using Zoom a lot. It's the most we've ever spoken to each other, and I remarked that this must be how our parents used to do it, before the internet. It's was a lovely, communal moment as the sun set.

We are in proper lockdown now. Late last night the Prime Minister (Scott Morrison) announced stricter 'Stage 2 Restrictions' that further curtail society. There are stricter limits on social activity, and they are clearly trying to stop as many people as possible from leaving home. The Prime Minister has said that 'everyone who has a job, that job is essential', but if it's that bad surely we should all just stay at home.

On 'The World Today' they interviewed a bride who has canceled her wedding because guests are now banned. Funerals are another problem, as attendance is limited to ten people. These are life-cycle rituals that define who we are, in relation to one another. And not holding them will mean we lose our sense of identity in society. Yet, paradoxically, self-isolation requires collectivism. We all have to do it, together, or it won't work.

This morning I called CJ and Pamela. I was supposed to take my drum kit from his

place to her place today and, whilst there, pick up some cane furniture she is giving away to him. In one sense this would be a transaction of goods – drums, garages, outdoor furniture trading hands – but in another these are social relationships. Like the Kula Rings, the importance isn't in the object, but in the set of relations it represents – one of my best friends, one of my mother's best friends, giving each other the gift of human company. I felt sad making the calls, and embarrassed, like I was letting them down. Social distancing is very unhuman, but this is what it means – going against our natural urge to be social.

An ABC News article titled 'The coronavirus shutdown is here. So what's banned in Australia and what's not?' (25 March) says: "Australians have been asked to avoid unnecessary social interactions". This begs the question, what is a 'necessary' social interaction? I can see that taking the drum kit over to Pamela's is not one, but it hurts to make this sacrifice. Social interaction is utterly necessary to humanity. There must be other ways to manage this crisis.

The school buses still pull up at a bit past three every afternoon at the high school opposite our apartment. They must be ferrying the few poor kids still going to school because their parents are still going to work. There was less than a quarter of the normal number of people on my afternoon dog walk.

"If the community doesn't drive this, and own it, then they'll have nothing." Dr. Norman Swan, 25 March 2019. I think these words, for Australia's celebrity doctor, show how necessary a socially-focused understanding of a viral epidemic is. There has to be people power.

Thursday March 26, 2020

Its only Day 2 of my mostly self-imposed quarantine and I'm already getting sick of it. Elodie was home all morning for her designated uni study time. It's not her fault, but

we distracted each other until lunch time. I hardly put finger to keyboard, and in the afternoon I was so down on having wasted the morning that I didn't have the motivation to get much more done.

When my cousin called about fixing up the shelf in the laundry it was all over. It was the only excuse I needed to stop 'working'. When he came over I was so happy to see him, and it's only been two days inside. "Do you want a cup of tea or a beer or something?" It's a normal, kind invitation, but today it felt subversive. Did he bring the virus in to my house? I doubt it, but Elodie cleaned the laundry and everything he touched in it with surface cleaner just to be on the safe side.

I'm getting itchy feet and I'm sick of hearing about this shit. I just want to shoot the breeze and waste time with someone I like for a very long time.

I chatted with Ian and Sky on the way back from my dog walk. Ian has booked in for a haircut, but apparently the hairdresser told him she couldn't guarantee that the salon would be open by the time he gets there. Yesterday the government said people were only allowed in hairdressers for half an hour, but today they backflipped. No one is quite sure why. They are obviously making political calculations. Apparently they have also relaxed the 'no more than 10 people at a funeral' rule.

Monday March 30, 2020

I didn't write anything in here over the weekend because I feel fatigued thinking about The Corona Virus, AKA COVID-19. It is affecting every aspect of my life and my society and the whole world. I tried to focus on other things, outside of my own head and aside from the news. I had modest success but, in the end, there is no escaping it.

On Friday afternoon Elodie came home from work early for her designated half-day of study. When I had finished up with my work, we cleaned the house top to bottom – the bathroom, vacuuming, mopping with bleach (which Elodie bought especially, she hates using chemical cleaners), cleaning all the door handles with a mixture of dish-washing detergent and water. Elodie has begun washing her clothes after she returns from work.

After that we took Blackjack for a long walk around the Lyneham wetlands, down to McCarthur Ave and back. I was having some problems at work, which I talked through. But I left all that outside, and faced the first weekend of quarantine alone together – Elodie, Morgan and Blackjack in a 1.5brd apartment.

We planned out our gardening tasks for the weekend, and had a beer in the last rays of the shrinking autumn sun. She made a nice meal and we picked up the Wu-Tang documentary 'Of Mics and Men' where we left off. It was actually a really nice night in.

On Saturday I did a huge amount of work in the garden. I scraped the mulch and leaves off the garden bed opposite the letter-boxes and raked in some gypsum and cow manure, same with the two side beds where the hedges were removed last week. Then Sky came over and we set up the raised garden bed out the back; it's a wicking bed which is supposed to save water by drawing it up from a reservoir at the bottom. After a quick lunch of last-nights leftovers, Elodie came to join us and we put seven new plants in to the letter-box garden bed. It was hard because the 'soil' was like solid rock. But we got there, and I added some new soil from the pile out the front that I had delivered on Friday. Then Elodie planted some bulbs, and we tidied everything up.

In the last light of the sun Ian, Sky, Elodie, Blackjack and I sat in the backyard – 1.5 meters apart – and shared a drink and some pizza. With the new restrictions we will not be allowed to do this again. That makes me so sad. I feel like I have come to know

them much better, very quickly.

We spent Saturday night on the couch. I figured out the 'House Party' app, and joined Stuart and Michelle in a video chat. Then Catherine joined us, then Elodie on her own device. I would not normally use such a thing, but I have to admit that it was a lot of fun. In fact we had each other in stitches. We 'shared' wine and played the silly games the app offers until it got a bit long in the tooth. It's hard to figure out the etiquette. How long do you stay? How do you leave politely? How do you keep from talking over the top of each other? This is uncharted territory and we have to figure it out as we go along.

We watched Episode 3 of 'Of Mics and Men' and then the latest installment of 'The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon: At Home Edition' before falling asleep – but not before Elodie saw the headline that Borris Johnson has the virus.

I spoke to Dina – for the first time in months, and months and months. She is doing ok, but very worried about her mother in Jakarta – it looks like Indonesia and the rest of the poor world is going to really suffer if the virus spreads. I spoke to Deane and felt much better about work after a day and a half away from it. I spoke to a friend about the possibility of collaborating on our burgeoning bushfire research. I spent a lot of time on the phone.

When I got back in the garden, to plant the last of the bulbs and clean everything away, I immediately got a headache. I was moving all the sore muscles in the exact same way I had the day before, and it wasn't doing me any good.

After I was done, we walked Blackjack to the Dickson shops so we could get some beer and chips. I bought a slab of Capital Trail Pale Ale from BWS. The poor guy behind the counter has to sanitize his hands after each customer. "Your poor hands," I said. "Dude, you have no idea. They are so sore they feel like they are about to fall off." There are big stickers on the floor showing how far apart to stand, and everyone

is tense. The check-out chick in Woolworths was wearing a mask and gloves and, unlike the normal scripted exchange they must be paid to have with each customer, she said nothing at all. She must be terrified. Before we left I said “This time last week we were sitting in Edgar’s sipping a drink in the sunset.” It seems so long ago.

M Harper Harrington



Image: Pharmacy in Canberra, Australia, on Sunday March 29. Image Credit: M Harper Harrington

New restrictions are coming so fast I can't keep up. And, perhaps more honestly, I

just don't want to know. I get it now: don't go out unless you have to, keep your distance from everyone, wash your hands, and keep surfaces clean. Having said that, I can think of a few new developments since Friday:

People arriving back from overseas (now only Australian citizens, the border having been closed to foreigners weeks ago) are now subjected to two weeks quarantine in a hotel room. There were reports about problems finding rooms for all of them, and feeding them, and how isolating it will be for them, but those are the rules now.

There has been a new raft of stimulus measures including the 'JobKeeper' program, in which the government will pay $1500 a fortnight in wages to keep people employed. My boss says this means there is a much better chance they'll be able to keep me on for longer. There are also new rules against eviction of tenants and, for banks, instructions that land lords are allowed to default on payments for the next six months. This is all very extraordinary, in line with the times.

But the big one, announced today, is that gatherings are now limited to two people. It sounds like they will start enforcing this tomorrow. So even if you're in a friend's house, there can only be two of you.

"The limit won't apply to members of the same household or family units, Mr. Morrison said." (SBS 'Public gatherings to be limited to two people under 'radical' new COVID-19 rules'). So who is a 'family unit'?

I called my cousinhis morning to talk to him about making a survey. I had an idea that it might be interesting to look at social networks in the time of quarantine – who are people talking to and why? How is it different to normal? And what is the value of this connection? All pretty basic stuff, but this is a new phenomenon, and it opens up a lot of ground that social anthropologists could cover. He has a lot of experience with social science surveys, because his PhD was based on one related to experiences of drought along the Murray-Darling basin. He basically said you have to

have a clear idea of what you want to know before you ask a single question, "you can't just ask people questions in the hope that you'll generate some interesting data – you won't." After our shop talk he asked me if I was "still coming around." I said I would go and visit him last week, before all this shit really took off, before the 'Stage 2' restrictions were announced. I didn't because I got carried away in my shopping and planning for lockdown. Now it feels like an obligation, a social obligation, and I am conflicted. It would only be two people, so we wouldn't technically be breaking the new, stricter rules (which come in to force at midnight tonight). And there is a good argument that seeing him will help us both cope with the isolation. But it is not 'essential' and I don't want to answer any tough questions Elodie or the police might ask about why I'm not at home; this is so hard. But it is the social aspect that really interests me. The obligation is to spend time with each other, to share and be in each other's company: that is the social contact. This is now a precious commodity. I feel obliged because I said I would go and hang out with him and I haven't. I know I shouldn't go, but I will, because to me the social obligation to my kin trumps the value of isolating myself to the point that I don't see him.

Tuesday March 31, 2020

It is beginning to feel normal now, like not going out is the right thing to do. The big news today is that the curve may be beginning to flatten which, if true, would mean the doctor I saw two weeks ago was wrong in his prediction that Australia would be like Italy by today. But perhaps none of us should speak too soon.

I stayed in and worked from home with Blackjack. The backyard smells like shit because of all the compost I put on it over the weekend, and there are flies everywhere. The big news today is that the government will indeed subsidize wages for every employee up to $1500 a fortnight, which will make it a lot easier for work to keep me on. Yay.

I went to Landspeed Records today. Dear old Landspeed. It was there before I knew what it was, and I've been going there as long as I've bought CDs. Some of my first would have been purchased there. Since I moved back to Canberra, in 2015, I would have spent thousands of dollars there. Their Facebook page said they were open reduced hours, and trying to make more of their online business. When I called up, the guy said they'd be open until Thursday, but then they'd have to make a decision beyond that. I asked what the protocols were. "Normally I'd like to come in and browse, but…maybe I could just tell you what I want?"
"Yeah, sure. I can even meet you at the back door and just hand it to you if you call me when you're there."

"I feel like I'm in a spy movie," was my quip, but it's actually very sad. They didn't do anything to deserve this, and they're probably not doing great at the best of times. I felt guilty being in Civic at all, but I wanted to do what I can to support them, and using the post seems just as exposed.

The vegetable pick up is now at the farm in Fyshwick. Bags are made up by the volunteers and left on a bench or chair for collection with metres between us all. So depressing, but so lovely out there, especially in this beautiful weather.

Thursday April 2nd

Well, my burst of optimism has turned to false hope. The NSW Government has announced that the restrictions will be in place for three months. My brother showed me a program, developed by the University of Melbourne, that predicts the trajectory of the virus in different places, and it isn't encouraging – https://benflips.shinyapps.io/nCovForecast/. The ramp up has only just started, and even if we have 'flattened the curve' from a worst-case scenario, it's still going to be dreadful. According to this site, in 10 days Australia will have between 9,500 and

15,946 cases… The ACT Government is building a make shift emergency hospital to deal with the expect surge in need.

It is bad enough that this is going to last three months and that thousands of people are going to die. But that this will last three months also means the economic and social consequences are going to be monumental. Even with all the new government spending people are going to lose money and not be able to pay for bills or fun things. This will have a knock-on effect that will see businesses go bankrupt. We are heading for a global depression, and the last one didn't end until WWII…

I worked from home (duh) and watched 15mm of rain fall outside. The Rolling Stones 'Beggars Banquet' helped. I feel like many songs of that album we're written by very talented people stuck inside (terrible English weather?) And it's not just 'Jigsaw Puzzle', but the generally unhurried vibe of most of the tracks (Street Fighting Man being an exception). Elodie was here too, and we obviously both had very stressful days. At the end, there is nowhere to go. We walked the dog and I pilfered a bit of old timber from one of the many houses in Dickson that are about to be demolished. She is doing yoga with an instructor on Magnetic Island, and I talked to friends on the phone. I've been spending a lot of time on the phone and it's really helping me stay sane, but the conversations all revolve around one thing…

Sunday April 5, 2020

Yesterday was the first time in four days that I left the house for anything other than walking the dog – it felt like a lot longer. I have never been quite so excited to go to the Fyshwick Markets. A weekly outing for groceries has become the highlight of my week. The twice daily dog walks are the highlight of my days. I know I'm doing better than most. I have a job, which is actually about as busy as normal, and I'm not sick. And I live with someone I love in a nice place. So I have a lot to be thankful for. But

the weekends are becoming more difficult, as this is when I really feel the constraint. It is not the least bit normal for everyone to stay at home alone on weekends.

It has dawned on me that I am going to have come up with some kind of routine if I'm going to make it through. Until now I have lived in the hope that these measures will only be in place for a couple of weeks. And if it's just a couple of weeks of couching it, then I figured I might as well lean in to it, drink a lot of wine and watch some of the excellent TV from the Golden Age of content. But it's obvious now that we will have to practice physical distancing for months. Our entire lifestyle is being forced to radically shift. I'm not sure how I will cope, but the government advertisements about the importance of exercise, healthy diet and staying connected through the internet are making a lot of sense. I've spent a lot of time in remote places where I couldn't really socialize for long periods of time; I'll just draw on fieldwork Morgan to get me through. Today I have resolved to get back to the novel, this really is the perfect time for writing.

A thrill ran though my body as I drove across Wakefield Avenue, I hadn't been this far in days. Alone at the wheel (Elodie at home studying) Courtney Barnett on the stereo; it felt like a normal Saturday. But my excitement about going to the market turned to anxiety as I approached: what if it's really crowded? What if they're sold out of everything? What if I catch something?

I took the first park I could find, on the street outside, opposite the mail sorting facility, and walked through the side alley where the toilets are. It was surprisingly quiet. Not dead, but surprisingly quiet for a Saturday around midday (it was cold and rainy though). I went to the Nut Shoppe first, for snacks and oils and cheeses. It's a small shop with a lot of different items all crammed in next to each other. I got impatient at a woman browsing the rack of spices. "Sorry, excuse me," I said as I leant over her to get some cayenne pepper off the rack. She looked at me with disgust, like I'd just groped her, and stared daggers as she took two exaggerated steps away from me. I felt like an arsehole.

The prices of some things appeared to be very high. They were selling bags of Laucke flour for $27, and in the fruit and vegetable shop (Go Troppo) a kilo of passionfruit was $14. I didn't look too hard, because we get most of our things from Southern Harvest Association. I was always expecting high prices because of the bushfires destroying all the crops. The virus/shutdown can't be helping that. But I got all I wanted, including a bag of mini mangoes for $5. I think there is going to be a gap widening between those who have a job, and those who are on government payments, which is likely to last a very long time.

There were 1.5 metre markers on the floors of all of the shops – circles, lines, signs. I took a few pictures. It's a bit confusing because, with so much distance between everyone, it's unclear which register you're actually lining up for. In front of me, a man and a woman had a row over who was in what line, and who should go first. Something along the lines of "No, your line is that one! For those registers!" and "well, you crossed over in to my line anyway!". Some really petty self-interest at a time when everyone needs to chill out. When I got to the front the check-out-check was having a word with the security guard "where were you?!" … "I was out the back helping moving the crates. Why, did something happen?" … "I'll tell you later." It must be a very tense time to be in retail, especially when food is concerned.

I couldn't even get in to the Asian Grocery. There was a sign on the door saying that they were only allowed to let nine people in at a time, and there were ten lining up outside. So, with arms loaded down, I headed home. But not before picking up a couple of vegetarian pies and croissants from Crust first; they were worth the wait! Ordinarily the customers at that place are like a football scrum wrestling for pies and cakes, but today it was all neat 1.5m boxes. We had to shout at the servers from our position in the queue, 1.5 metre away. Card only, tap and go. Do not touch anything. Yikes.



Image: Fyshwick Markets, Canberra ACT on Saturday April 4, 2020.
Image credit: M Harper Harrington.

In the afternoon Susan came over. She lives in a share house and with her and Wong broken up, doesn't have many friends around. She looked after Blackjack when we were away last month, and she had asked to come and walk him from time to time even before this happened. So we took him on a big walk. When we got back to our apartment, the three of us had to negotiate the awkward question of how much

hanging out was ok. It was still cold and rainy outside, so we invited her in. After a couple of beers we had to stop and check ourselves. “Alcohol lowers your inhibitions,” and “it’s just natural to gravitate towards other people when you’re drinking.” She stayed for a couple of hours, chatting while Elodie cooked up a mean batch of chutney with all the green tomatoes we had to harvest now the bush is dying with the change in the weather. Susan left around 8pm, early for a normal Saturday night. I’ve concluded that I must see some other people, even if it’s just one at a time and only for a couple of hours, or I’ll go crazy. Seeing my cousins and now Sue has really helped these past few weeks.

On the other hand, I’ve also concluded that it’s still really important for Elodie and I to make time for us. We spent much of the last couple of days in group chats with various friends and combinations of friends. It’s easy to piss the time away online, but maybe not so healthy. I’m interested in seeing how the etiquette develops around internet communications, as we figure out how to be in these social spaces, get what we need from them, but not have them become burdensome.

I’ve switched to night time showers because there is no need to be clean and fresh for greeting the world.

Monday April 6

This is really warping my sense of time. My birthday seems like months ago, and the bushfires and our trip to Vanuatu and New Caledonia (in February) seem like years ago. It was warmer today, and although the days are shorter, the sun was nice. It was hard to go back to work, knowing that I’ll be in the same place for an indeterminate amount of time. I tried to focus but ended up gardening in the middle of the day. Only for a couple of hours, and only because I really needed to get the quickly dying tomato vines out, and the seedlings in, before the cold really sets in. I felt guilty for

not working, but the reality is that with such uncertainty it makes little sense to focus on an uncertain task with an uncertain outcome for a definite eight-hour period.

Daylight savings has ended and it's getting colder. This is unwelcome every year, but with all this going on it's even worse, because even the things we are permitted to go outside for (exercise and go to the shops) will now be done in the cold and the dark, if at all.

There are a few people I'm worried about. Those who aren't stable at the best of times. If this goes on much longer they could be in real danger, and it has nothing to do with having the virus.

Wednesday April 8, 2020

Today the government passed the 'JobKeeper' bill, a $130 billion dollar wage subsidy program that will give $1500 a fortnight to Australian workers affected by the Corona virus. Six million people are expected to benefit, including myself. I am only eligible because I signed a permanent, full-time contract in February, weeks before this started to really affect us. If I hadn't been offered this life-line, I would now be without an income. I know lucky compared to all the artists, hospitality workers, migrants and international students who don't have the support I have from my girlfriend, parents, employer and government.

I went to get a flu shot today. It's getting cold, and the news is saying this is a particularly important season to get it, because if you had the flu *and* COVID-19 you'd really be up shit creek. So I called the pharmacy in Dickson (Capital Chemist) to book in for a shot. The woman sounded exasperated. "I'm sorry but we're not taking any bookings until the end of next week. You can try calling one of our other branches." I asked if I could just make a booking for a couple of weeks from now –

I'm not in any great rush – but she told me they wouldn't take any more appointments until they knew how much of the vaccine they would be getting.

It sounded weird, so I called Cincotta's Discount Chemist, also in Dickson, and they had three free appointments this afternoon. I made a booking and I've now had the vaccine. After I hung up the phone, I heard a news bulletin where the pharmacies were asking people to stop calling them about the flu vaccine because they don't have enough and are totally overwhelmed by the demands being placed on them.

The guy who gave me my jab was kind, and up for a chat ("so it must be a busy time for you?" I ventured). He told me they'd been totally bonkers, with people coming in to stockpile on medicine, but that was petering out now that they'd put limits on how much people could purchase. He said they'd been copping a lot of abuse by angry, demanding people. He gave the example of a 64-year-old who abused them because he wasn't eligible for the free flu shot available to people aged 65 and over (it cost $24).

M Harper Harrington

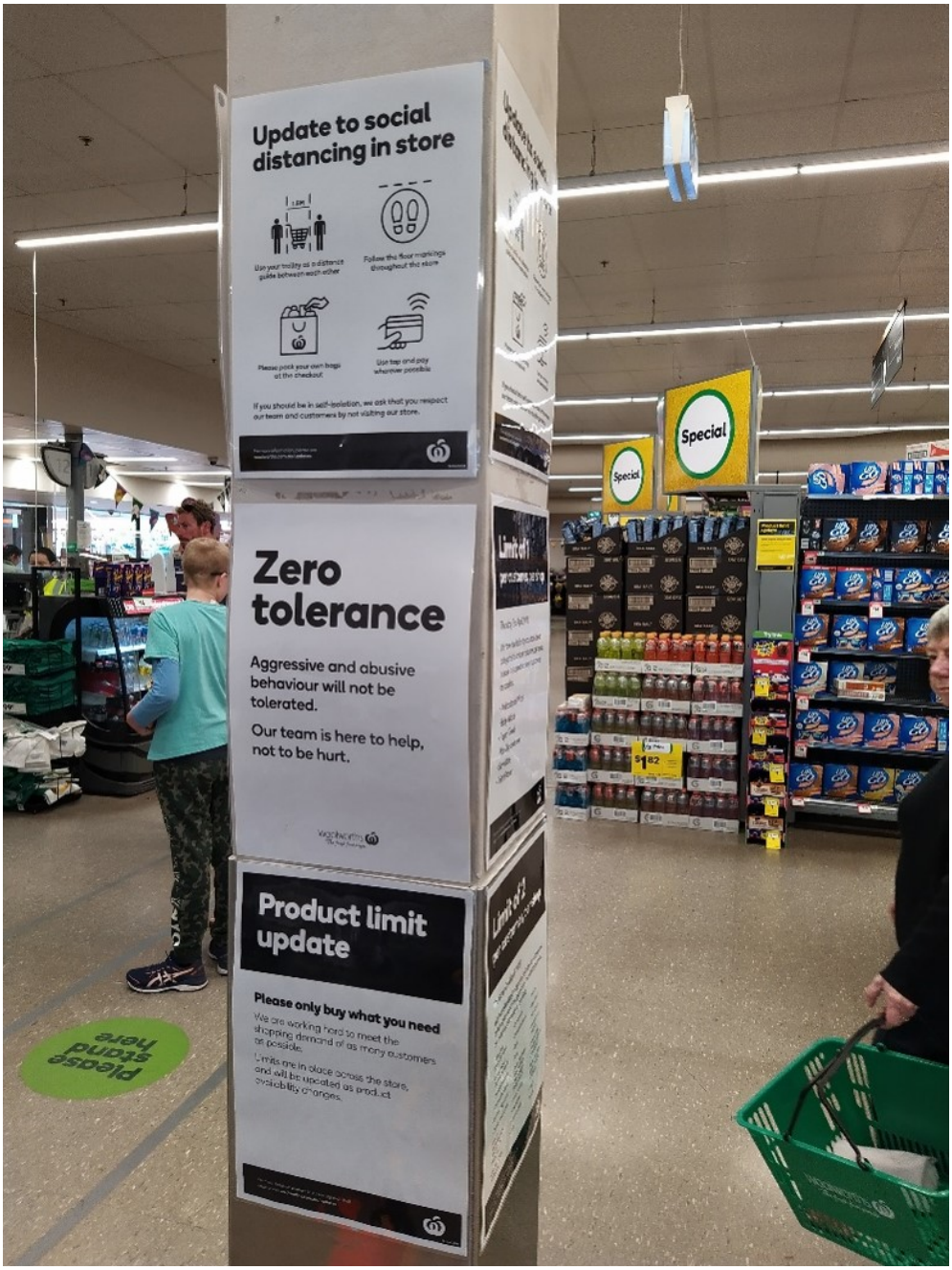


Image: A supermarket in Canberra, Australia on Wednesday April 8, 2020.
Image credit: M Harper Harrington

I went to Woolworths, which gets more intense with every visit. They have just one door open to enforce restrictions on how many people are allowed in at a time, and witches hats set up where you have to line up (although I didn't have to, probably

because it was a Wednesday in the middle of the afternoon). There were people counting every person who walked in and out, and a new team of security guards. I took photos of the increasingly strongly worded signs about purchasing limits and not abusing the staff, all of whom now wear hi-vis vest with a notice about standing 1.5m apart printed on the back. At the check outs there are big plastic screens in between the check-out chicks and the customers. They are all wearing masks. I hate being in there. On the plus side, they seem to be well stocked. I got everything I needed and didn't notice anything missing, although I didn't look for toilet paper.

M Harper Harrington



Image: A children's playground in a park in Canberra, Australia on Wednesday April 8, 2020. Image credit: M Harper Harrington

Thursday April 9 2020

I feel like my life has become one gelatinous lump of goop. An undifferentiated mass of work, phone calls, Elodie, Blackjack, the supermarket, and a couple of walks outside a day. It's becoming impossible to keep work separate from personal, social separate from administrative, emotional separate from organisational. This is not good. Normally, when things are bad in any one of these aspects of life, they can be contained, compartmentalized. They can only get so bad because they are a finite, discrete part of any day or week. But not anymore. Sure, I am trying to maintain boundaries and a routine. And I'm doing ok with that. I haven't started sleeping in really late, or drinking more, or working less. But it's not enough. Mum always said that a change is as good as a holiday and both are impossible right now.

It's the start of the Easter long weekend tonight and nobody is going anywhere. Paradoxically, we're told the social distance measures are working, and that Australia appears to be doing a very good job of 'flattening the curve', but that we all have to stay put and keep physically isolating (or else!) the virus will get out again. How annoying. We were going to go for a walk in the Brindabellas, but apparently even Namadgie National Park is closed. And the cops will be out on the road making sure people aren't going too far from home. Apparently a guy in Victoria was fined $1600 for mountain biking alone, aka 'unnecessary travel'. This is all so intense.

Today the government announced a Corona Virus mental health support program in partnership with Beyond Blue to try and 'encourage people to stay positive' – good luck to them, because that's an uphill battle.

Tuesday April 14, 2020

The Easter Long Weekend came and went without the holiday. We were supposed to go to Mum and Dad's in the Kangaroo Valley, but of course that wasn't possible.

Although I did take Saturday, Sunday and Monday away from the computer (hence the lack of diary entry). I worked on my book, which feels really good. I printed a copy of the manuscript a few weeks ago in anticipation of self-isolation, which really is the perfect time to pick it up again (I last put it down in October).

But the real highlight was our walk, up Mount Ainslie. After two rainy weeks, and a few very windy, cold days, it was Canberra autumn at its cool, crisp, clear best – splendid. After all the rain that has come since the drought broke in February the Limestone plains and looking beautiful green. Canberra is not a heavily polluted place at the worst of times (except during the bush fires, unfortunately) but I could see the Brindabellas clearer than I ever have in my entire life. From the top of Mt. Ainslie I could make out the contours of the hill sides and see patches of green trees, and black stumps where the fire burnt through. It was a wonderful couple of hours escape. There were a lot of people on the mountain, which was great to see. We've been meaning to do that walk for weeks, months, but it's only now that we've been forced to slow down, economically and socially, that we found the time.

This weekend felt like the first time we could think about what happens next. Up until now the immediate crisis has demanded our attention. All any of us have been able to do try and cope with the outbreak. There has been no room for anything other than prevention. But with news that we're 'smashing' the curve, there are already rumblings that the restrictions may be eased sooner rather than later.

So, on top of the mountain, we could see the future, and it's exhilarating. World power is shifting, I was already shifting before this, but the pandemic has given it a big shove. Could this be the end of globalization, at least in the hyper form we've had it lately? I hope this will be the turning point for the environmental crisis. Seeing those mountains was worth not being able to fly to Melbourne for.

Thursday April 16, 2020

Last night Elodie pointed out that this is now the fourth week we've been doing this. Next week we'll be in the second month of stay-at-home lockdown. The time has passed slowly, the time has passed quickly. I really have lost sense of it. It feels normal now. The first couple of weeks felt really confining, and I felt myself putting up resistance, but now it just feels like normal, like what we've always done. Perhaps it's even better in some ways. We say hello to the people near us more, we all appear to be exercising more, we've all slowed the pace of what was an overheated, over-hectic, over-fast world.

I have no sense of when these restrictions on our movement will be lifted. The media reports are so conflicting – an outbreak in North-west Tasmania has closed two hospitals there, and the USA looks like a nightmare (India and Indonesia too); but we're apparently 'smashing the curve' and cases in Australia, and Canberra in particular, have been low for weeks. Apparently Germany and Spain and Italy are already beginning to lift restrictions, so we can't be too far behind them. The national cabinet is meeting tomorrow to discuss how and when to lift restrictions. But we're warned it will be a slower process than putting them in place. And perhaps that's a good thing, for our souls and mother nature.

Tuesday April 21, 2020

Just after I wrote that last entry I read some breaking news: the restrictions will be in place for another month. I felt a mixture of resigned depression and the comfort of certainty. As I said, this all feels normal now, and I feel the second month will not be as monumental as the first. Although my mood still oscillates. On Friday night I picked up Elodie from work with Blackjack. We went for a walk in the Nara Peace Garden, but the sun went down as soon as we got out of the car, and the wind down

by the lake was very cold, so we didn't stick around long. We came home for Friday night cleaning – our new routine – and take away pizza from Mozzarella and Co (who appear to be doing just fine, thank you). It was a nice night in, with someone I love. But then we did the same thing on Saturday (minus the house cleaning or the take away) and I felt confined and bored. A change of scenery really does refresh the mind. But I made the most of it, and watched the King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard live concert film 'Chunky Shrapnel' which was well worth the $16 ticket price (it was only up for 24 hours, which I think is clever marketing). Elodie spent most of the night on the Zoom to her girlfriends, one in Townsville and one in Darwin.

I spent most of the days on Saturday and Sunday revising an article on the research I did on the NLA last year. It was due for publication on Monday, and I wasn't able to get it over the line without a lot of hand wringing and hair pulling. All up I spent about 16 hours – just between Saturday and Monday – to edit, format, check references, and fill out the publisher's ridiculously convoluted and outdated submission form.

But I did manage to go and see my cousin and aunt over in Woden. My cousin is more or less stuck in Canberra until further notice. She should be off training for the Winter Olympics but, like everyone else, she can't travel, and most of the training facilities are closed, including the one in Victoria that she is supposed to be at now. So she's at home with mum. It was great to see them both. At least her grounding has given me more of an opportunity to see her than during the normal run of things, when she's only here for a week at a time. I gave her the elbow knock, which was incredibly unfamiliar (in the purest sense of the word) but when I tried to do the same with my aunt she hugged me, so I then hugged my cousin. It felt really good, and a little devious. We caught up over a cup of tea and then took Blackjack for a long walk. I remembered all the walks I've been on with family through Canberra over the years. The principle emotion as a teenager was restlessness, a sense of the finiteness of Canberra and a desire for something bigger and more exciting. But this

day it just felt really comforting to see a familiar place on a lovely, clear, crisp autumn day. The leaves are turning colours, and the earth is a lovely combination of green and red. In such a crazy, unpredictable time, we're very luck to live with such an abundance of bushland, and relative peace.

Elodie had one friend around on Saturday afternoon, and another on Sunday. Both times they went for walks with Blackjack and stayed for a chat afterwards. It was great to see some other people, but I had to focus on getting the article done, so I felt distracted.

I am feeling less of an impulse to reach out and connect to people, after a month of practicing physical distancing. The first few weeks were very tough to deal with, but I am now in a routine, and used to life with the pandemic. Where there was initially a strong desire to talk to people a lot – old friends, current friends, family – about what was happening, I am now really valuing my own time. I am finding there is 'a lot to do' – gardening, things around the house, work, working on the book, spending time with Elodie, walking the dog, reading, cooking, sleeping. It's enough without being constantly on the phone. I have been watching a lot more television than usual though.

We don't really know what's going on with the virus. It seems like all the indicators are going in the right direction, but we're also being told we can't change any of the restrictions just yet (for another month or so). But, in the news, Virgin airlines has gone broke and the government won't bail them out. Another item said that consumption of toilet paper is starting to drop, and we can expect to see supply return to normal in about six weeks (that's still a long time though). Apparently the price of oil is so low people are paying others to take it off their hands. I pray this crisis will help our ecological crisis. The hospitals are going to start doing elective surgery again, after a ban that has lasted about a month. So things are slowly starting to thaw.

M Harper Harrington

Friday April 24, 2020

This morning we went in to Civic to sign some papers at a lawyer's office. The Ernst and Young building would have to be one of the busiest buildings on one of the busiest streets in Canberra, and 8:30am is peak hour. Not these days. I counted six people and even fewer cars over the ten minutes we stood waiting in the cold shadow of the building to be buzzed in. Elodie had to call the receptionist, who came down and pressed a button for the lift for us. She told us to get in the lift, but she waited for the next one. Up in the lawyer's office – an entire floor – there wasn't a single person, until the receptionist joined us. The lawyer and an assistant eventually arrived and we were signed and done in a few minutes. The lawyer explained that NSW has just approved regulations to witness contracts via video link, and she's hoping the ACT will do the same. But until that happens, they're coming in on Friday mornings to do this work in person. A bottle of hand sanitizer stood empty on the receptionist's counter as we left. It was eerie.

We went to the post office, past a cluster of closed restaurants, including PJ O'Riley's, a large pub in the centre of town. It had giant posters pasted to its outside walls announcing that it was open for take away and home delivery, which made me think that pubs are really better with a crowd.

So it seems that while the ACT is thankfully escaping the virus almost entirely, it's have huge economic impacts.

Michelle came over for a cuppa yesterday evening; she brought peanut butter cookies, which were delicious. Both her uncle and aunt back in the UK have the virus. The aunt appears to have recovered, but the uncle had to have a tracheotomy because he was coughing so badly that they couldn't get the ventilator down his throat, so they had to bypass his mouth. Yikes.

Another weekend is upon us, and now I really see that we don't have any extra time, it's just that we have to spend it differently. Between Elodie's study and my manuscript there are still massive constraints on our time, so even if we could go out we wouldn't have much time to do so. Distance has shrunk, but time remains constant.

Monday April 27, 2020

It really feels like we're on the brink of a big change away from physical distancing restrictions. It's not just what's in the news (a lot of stories about various changes that are coming in weeks, not months) but what's happening in my own life. On Friday we cleaned the house and stayed in – our COVID-19 routine. And on Saturday we went up Mount Ainslie alone and stayed in at night (I haven't watched this much television in years). But yesterday we went to Elodie's friend Joan's house, and we were there for five hours. We went for a walk on Mount Majura with her daughter and dog, and then had a few drinks and some cheese with her husband and son. When she asked if we'd like to say for dinner I let Elodie answer, and only partly because it was her friend asking. It still felt wrong to be there, in an enclosed space, at a dinner table, in a family home, for an extended period of time, for a non-essential purpose. But why should something so human make me feel guilty?

It's not just me. There were six of us there, and four adults making informed decisions. We all chose to be there, and to stay there, and I think this shows that the desire to be social is beginning – slowly – to outweigh the desire for safety and the urge to self-protect. The truth is that we need other people, from outside our own kin (defined, in this case, as the nuclear family) to stay sane. We need to swap stories and experiences and see other ways people do things to grow and learn and be nourished. And sitting around the table for a few hours at a time, chewing the fat, is a great way to do that.

Thursday April 30, 2020

In the warm, bright aisles of the Ainslie IGA the shelves are fully stocked and Canberrans walk with a spring in their step, despite the grey weather outside. It's clear that people are relaxing, and I sense that the worst is behind us – at least us here in Canberra. Today the ACT was declared free of COVID-19. Of course it doesn't mean it will remain this way, or that we can fully relax all restrictions and our boarders tomorrow, but it's obvious that we have the upper hand. It is clear the USA, UK and, probably, places like PNG and Indonesia have a long way to go, but I'm confident that we here will be fine. Deane wants the survey up next week, so work is going well too. We had a long staff meeting today, it lasted two hours again. We are clearly all in need of some contact.

Monday May 4, 2020

I have had a very social weekend. I visited people in five different homes, and on Saturday I went to Civic. The ACT government announced on Friday that non-essential shopping was now allowed, and the NSW government now permits two adults to meet two other adults in their homes, plus however many kids there may be. It's been a week since there was a new case of COVID-19 in the ACT, and late last week we were declared the first state or territory to have zero active cases. So I wasn't the only one out and about. Despite the freezing wind, rain, and generally gloomy skies, there were a lot of happy customers in Civic. I saw people walking their dogs, hanging out, and buying a lot of non-essential goods. Landspeed records was as busy as it usually is on a Saturday, and the owner, who is usually sour, gruff and taciturn was warm and friendly. It looks like they will weather the storm. I guess that, like me, people have more money for records now that we can't go out.

Then I went to my cousin's to chat about the survey I have in mind for work. He had some good suggestions and he clearly knows his stuff, having used survey methodology for his PhD. Then we had a beer and watched a bit of TV. It was tempting to stay all evening, but I left just after 5pm to get home for another Saturday night in. I made pizza dough, and we got a bit merry. We watched 'Bad Seeds TeeVee' – a 24-hour YouTube stream of Bad Seeds footage from over the years, which was great background sound, and sometimes really enthralling. And then, later, 'Howl's Moving Castle', which I haven't seen in years. So, despite the strong urge to be out and about, I really wanted to be at home with Elodie, making pizza, drinking wine, and passing the time. The lock-down is not all bad.

On Sunday I was finally able to move my drum kit out of CJ's garage. It has been there since January 2019. It's took until March this year to find somewhere else for it to go, and the day I was going to move it was the day after they really made it clear that we weren't supposed to do anything 'non-essential' (see above, Wednesday March 25). It's taken over a month to for the three of us to feel like it is something that is ok to do. On Friday Pamela texted to ask me to come and move to cane chairs I offered to take off her hands, and on Sunday CJ had time to help me take the kit over, and bring the chairs back. When CJ realized we were two streets from one of his old mate's house we dropped in for a cuppa, which is an unusual thing to do even before the virus. But we were all feeling the comradery and the warmth of the comfort. While we were moving stuff he wanted to take a box of things over to Michelle's house (so he could finally have his garage back and make something for themselves in it). So we paid her a visit too – it was a very busy, and very social afternoon.

And that was after spending the morning at my brother's house with his wife and children to celebrate his birthday. We ate croissants and a delicious chocolate cake that Elodie made, and drank tea in the beautiful winter sun. We video-called Mum and Dad, and Mum clearly really wanted to be there. She said she'd see us next week,

and Dad went “what for?” She hadn’t told him about her plan to come to Canberra. So things are changing. The ice is more like incredibly cold water.

Today the US Defence Secretary publicly stated that there is evidence to support the theory that COVID-19 originated in a lab in Wuhan, but the US spy agencies have said the opposite.

Monday May 11 2020

I can hear the idling school buses and the revving of P-plater motors coming from the College across the street. On Friday I saw one girl in a school uniform and this morning three more. The private schools have opened.

On Saturday night Elodie and I went to Michelle’s. It is the first time we have left the house for a ‘night out’ in six weeks. The cabbie on the way there told us he’d had one customer in an hour and a half, and the driver on the way back had just three all night. He urged the government to get the football going, because he gets a lot of customers going to and from the stadium. We ate Japanese, home delivered from an expensive place that we could afford because they were having a special take away menu to stay in business.

Yesterday was Mother’s Day, and despite Scott Morrison asking us to not hug our mothers I did, my father too. Hadn’t seen them since March 17th – seven whole weeks. Went around to my brother’s place for morning tea. My aunt and cousin came too. A global pandemic may have changed some things, but family dynamics remain the same.

Afterward we (Mum, Dad and I) went to Costco, which was as busy as it ever is. The staff wore masks, and there were the little stickers everywhere to tell people to stay 1.5m apart, but people’s behaviour – including my own – was about the same. I felt a

little anxious being in an enclosed space with so many people; what if someone really did have it? I think this is the crux of where things are currently. I feel a bit confused about what is ok and what is not. We have 'smashed' the curve, and aside from a couple of clusters (at a meat works in Victoria, and an aged-care home in Sydney) that have been contained, haven't had any significant cases for weeks. So we're told we can go out again, but should be very careful when we do so. So is it over or isn't it? Only time will tell, but I suppose it will be the case that there are more outbreaks, but on smaller, localized scales.

After Costco Mum and Dad came back to our place for a light lunch and a piece of cake with Elodie. It is always nice to have them in our house, but especially so after all this time.

On Friday the Prime Minister released the details of a strategy to reopen the economy – and society, he hastened to add – in four stages. We're at stage one right now, which means up to five adults can visit each other in their homes, and a few other things that don't directly affect me. Restaurants can have seated customers, but only if they're 1.5 metres apart, which means they're more or less still closed. The trend is clear, the new normal is emerging.