Eugenie Reidy

"'We've got a moat' – Coronavirus in an Island State."

Tasmania, Australia, 15 April – Late June 2020

Eugenie Reidy



Photo: Eugene Reidy (MERCURY 20 March 2020; cf. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-australia-tasmania-idUSKBN21714C).

I'm Eugenie Reidy, 37 years old, Australian. I trained as an anthropologist and worked in international development before becoming employed by a Sydney-based organisation that supports Australian Aboriginal communities. I had my first child in December 2019 and moved to the island state of Tasmania for maternity leave, because my husband and I bought a quiet little house here a few years ago. A few months after that, I was due to be back at work in Sydney. Of course we stayed in Tasmania, both working from home. It began as a short stay in one of the smallest and most localised community we'd ever lived in; and it became a much longer stay in an even more localised one.

Wednesday 15 April 2020: COVID's getting real

It is becoming more sombre now, as the reality of long-term social isolation kicks in.

In the beginning it was all a bit exciting. It was like being part of a dramatic news story, and it was a situation that suited the introverts or socially 'flakey' among us. No longer did I need to come up with excuses for not seeing people, or feel guilty for not visiting people with the baby. Gone were the flashes of FOMO [fear of missing out] that haunt us since we became part of an over-connected, over-performative social media world. No one is 'doing it all' anymore – I don't need to compare myself to women doing 'a better job' of juggling new baby with work, vibrant social life, glorious adventures outdoors, and more.

I was a happy homebody, enjoying the simplicity of the very limited options each day presented. I was pottering at home, tidying and cooking or reading, strolling locally,

and reaching out to people by WhatsApp or Facetime. I felt safe from any fear they would suggest an *actual* meeting that would require me hoiking the baby into the car, hoping I'd got the timing right between naps and feeds, and driving off to meet someone I probably wasn't keen on catching up with anyway, with baby crying in the car there and back.

That was last week. This week, my stay-at-home life has lost its charm. I appreciated a short break from the carousel of life, but would rather it hadn't stopped completely, and more importantly indefinitely. I am flat in the mornings. I realise that, like most people, I get huge energy from actual in-person social interactions, even if they're never perfectly balanced. Less profoundly, I realise I miss the exhilarating moments of spending money in shops – is it a case of, "I spend therefore I am?". I miss the sense of reinvention that comes with each different encounter, or purchase, or plan. Now, my many imagined selves have been packed away and it feels as if there is just 'one me'. The one at home in full view of her husband, child, self.

Also, I am worried today about the impact of the social distancing on my baby son. He was just getting into his new social life, smiling and laughing with people and enjoying being picked up. I was proud of how non-nervous he was about strangers, charming them with his smile and passing easily into their arms. I thought it meant I was doing a good job as a mum. Now I'm scared that when this is over, he'll be insecure if not being held by a parent. What if he becomes one of those clingy children who aren't much fun, and could be behind in his social skills and development? A 'Corona kid'.

Thursday 16 April 2020: The funny side

I reached out to the neighbours, inspired by the online movement around taking your bins out in costume. The premise is that these days, our bins go out more than

we do. Someone with a quirky sense of humour, a woman in Queensland I think, took her bins out in a ballgown and started a Facebook group called Bin Isolation Outing. It went viral. I texted two neighbours to join us in a synchronised and costumed bin drop. At 6pm we met in the street, keeping the 2m distance. It aches to see kids trying so hard to remember to do this. And we had a good laugh at each other's costumes.

My husband and I were in horse-riding outfits, me 'riding' a wheelie bin and whipping it with a kitchen spatula. Our neighbour's girls dressed as old ladies, with eyeliner wrinkles on their foreheads. Could this have been a subliminal reflection that they were aging under isolation? Their dad was in drag. Again, is it over-interpreting to think this shows how closet desires are surfacing under isolation conditions? And their mum was in a wonder woman costume. Surely it's easy to spot the meaning there, since she is juggling like never before – home schooling, home entertainment, home cooking, *and* a new baby – and no doubt is consciously or unconsciously screaming for recognition.

The other family came in costume too: little girl in princess dress, little boy in football strip, mum in sexy cowgirl outfit, and dad in no costume at all. Interestingly, the dad is an extreme introvert and does not seem to be enjoying the current conditions. He must feel like his island state has been invaded.

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I did not manage the other coping strategy I had planned today – a photo of our baby dressed as Mahatma Gandhi. Never before have I joined so uncynically in popular culture. But with so much more time on smart phones and a whole new (empty) horizon for entertainment, I'm genuinely interested and impressed by what lots of people are doing in isolation.

Mimicking art masterpieces, 'the so-called COVID Classics', is a good form of home

entertainment, better than Netflix and jigsaws anyway. We did a home impression of a Sidney Nolan painting from the Ned Kelly series last week, and a portrait of the baby in the spirit of Picasso. It was a good use of time and a point of conversation with friends doing the same.

This so-called 'corona humour' shows there is rightly a lot of pride in 'seeing the funny side', in sharing laughter in the face of adversity. I feel a bit uneasy about it though, knowing that the true extent of the global pandemic's catastrophe will be felt when coronavirus gets into major slums, refugee camps, and the world's vulnerable communities. It's knocking at the door but it's not there yet. I saw Yemen has its first case, what a nightmare. The Amazon has cases. So does Gaza, despite pre-emptively going into shutdown weeks ago because they know exactly what a tinderbox they are. African countries are holding their breath for when it reaches their slums. So while we ('we' being the mostly global north) are pleased with how collective humour is making the situation more bearable, I'm not sure it can be sustained as this situation gets worse. I'm not sure I'd want to be seen riding a wheelie bin in costume, or setting up a spoof art scene, by someone for whom coronavirus is a mortal threat, or whose remote and endangered way of life is facing an existential threat.

On that note, one more Google search of the local caseload. I only have to type 'ta' into the search bar and I get 'Tasmania Coronavirus cases', to be able to watch the cases ticking along. There were 165 today. And those are just the ones they've tested, taken from only the people known to be at risk and/or symptomatic. So any way you look at it, it's an under-estimation. I need to stop checking this number last thing at night.

It's all relative

Meanwhile my husband spoke to his brother in Brussels, who along with his wife and ten-year-old daughter hasn't left the house for a month. He is fed up. When my husband shared the local corona news from here, i.e. that we're now at 180 cases thanks to a cluster among health workers in the north west, he said his brother was a bit non-plussed. They are at 1500 new cases a day! So we might be anxious, but it's relative. It made me wonder if this is how Australians felt during the World Wars: they felt they were making sacrifices, living with stress and anxiety and potential loss of life, but to mainland Europeans they were very far from the frontline and having it easy.

Friday 17 April 2020: Mistrust in the streets

Went to town today with my mum, braving a trip to a still-open toy shop and then the Post Office so she could send a parcel to her locked-down grandchildren in Sydney. A café was serving takeaway through a window, like an ATM, with hand sanitiser to use and a marked-out area on the pavement showing how far back you had to stand. Only contactless card payment accepted. They were cheerful and it was a treat to get a proper coffee, but we felt a bit lost on leaving with our takeaways in the crisp autumn air. Where to drink them? It would have been nice to sit. We found a very cold stone bench, reasoning that the virus wouldn't last long in such a hostile place. We didn't last long there either.

Passing people in the street, they mostly gave us a wide berth. The trick is to still show humanity, to smile and greet people even as you veer wildly out of their way. I'll admit I hold my breath if it feels less than 2 metres. When I smell a person's perfume or aftershave, I'm reminded of airborne transmission and hold my breath a little tighter and longer.

In the post office a middle-aged woman seemed to be doing the 'corona policing' act

of watching where everyone was standing – i.e. on the little spaced out crosses on the floor – and how close to each other they were when the very small queue moved. It irritated me, this self-appointed prefect. She seemed to be looking for bad behaviour as if the virus moves in a moral plane. Like HIV or something, as if it relates to people's behaviour or character.

Saturday 18 April 2020: Virtual family gathering

Last night we had a family 'pub quiz' on Facetime, via our laptops or phones. This is something of a fad at the moment, according to screenshots of tiled screens shared on social media. And we all know more than usual about fads these days, not only because we have more time but because most of us are spending more of it on social media. So the spoof music videos, the remastered classical paintings ('COVID classics') and the bin isolation outings – just to name a few. It was quite fun, and oddly was a more purposeful connection than our family have had for a while. How ironic. We did our 3 rounds of trivia, laughed at the bad wrong answers, toasted each other and then rang off promising to do it next week.

Sunday 19 April 2020: Clear calendar, clear mind

My mum is one of the many people I know who seems more content. Yes there's the baseline anxiety of COVID-19, especially as she watches a lot of news, but there's not much 'other anxiety'. She has early onset dementia, and for at least the last year has been incredibly anxious socially and when it comes to what I call 'life admin'. She has a big physical diary that appointments get written in, and she has a smart phone that friends message on, as well as medical centres, hairdressers and others, but still she was missing a lot of appointments. She would get so flustered every time, like she was failing at life. She started going regularly to her various doctors, unannounced

and unscheduled, to check if her appointment was that day, or soon. And she would walk to friends' houses to do the same. It was really sad to see her tying herself in knots just trying to stay across the daily schedule.

But now... Well there's nothing to go to anymore! Being part of a lot of 'elderly people' activities, from singing groups to bus trips to film society, they were the first to close. And her friends are older and have been warned to be extra vigilant, so there is no socialising going on. Suddenly she has absolutely nothing to keep up with. If anything, she just has to worry about opening the door when a delivery arrives, since we arranged for groceries and various other things to come to her. It may not last but so far she is very happy with this simple new life. She goes on a daily walk, calls friends, sits in the sun on her veranda, and watches a lot of murder mystery programs on TV. And her mind is noticeably clearer, her disposition happier. I would never have guessed.

We did another 'COVID classic' to share with friends, this time the baby was Gandhi. And I enjoyed reading an old paperback, listening to an audiobook, Facetiming a couple of friends and doing some cooking. I may not be pushing the boundaries of human potential but I'm feeling pretty whole. The baby loves it of course, just him and his parents and a cosy home life.

The long-denied sabbatical

Spoke this evening to my father in England, who is for the first time in many many years enjoying a quiet rural life. He has chosen to spend 'isolation' with his partner in his house in rural Dorset. For one month they have organised and cosied the house, prepared and planted a vegetable garden, and gone on a daily walk. It is the sabbatical he never allowed himself, the retirement he would otherwise have skipped through endless work projects.

"*The weather has been absolutely sensational, we've gone on a walk every day. And the trees! You wouldn't believe how many varieties there are. There are old ones which have never been tended but they're just beautiful*", he told me.

My dad is not a sentimental man, he is pragmatic and always busy. I don't remember him going on a walk and I certainly don't remember him commenting on nature. But nature and its residents are getting a break, and leaning in to each other.

Monday 20 April 2020: Bringing our whole selves to work

The workplace revolution we have been promised for many years is flexibility. Women are particularly vocal about this, proclaiming the importance of being able to 'bring your whole self to work', the value of being trusted to work flexibly, from home, and in a way that balances your personal and family life. I remember Ariana Huffington in Thrive, a corporate feminist's guidebook, was particularly good at explaining this. I'm paraphrasing but I remember her saying something like, we have lived through feminist revolutions for the right to work, then for the right to lead at work, and now we need a revolution of how work is done. Whether mothers or not, it is women who will reshape the workplace for the benefit of them and men. They will redraw the boundaries of offices, desks, working schedules and more. I thought this sounded good when I read it, and could see whispers of it in female colleagues and bosses I knew. But now it is well and truly here, a globalist COVID-led revolution of the workplace that can never really be rolled back. Today I was on a video call with the CEO and her other direct managers, all of us at home. In the background were real human rooms, mess included, and flashes of dogs barking and children on the move. We were bringing our whole selves to work! I somehow hope it will get more whole, more real and more chaotic as time goes on – our CEO needed a dose of reality when it comes to who we are, and this is providing it.

Tuesday 21 April: Lockdown waters run deep – how memories and dreams have become more vivid

I saw a meme on social media: "*Coronavirus is not a good reason to get in contact with your ex*". And it's true! I haven't yet been tempted myself but I know a fair few people who have reached out to their former partner/lover/spouse, and showed me or shared with me the results. The most recent was a relative who texted his childhood sweetheart and first wife from many moons ago, attaching a glorious late 70s studio photo of them together. She wrote how her heart had skipped a beat, how stupid she had been in her youth, and how sorry she was. Something similar happened to another friend who contacted her long-lost Japanese ex-boyfriend, only for him to also say what pangs of regret he has about their lost love. Another friend in NSW arranged to spend a precious 'iso walk', which can only be done with one other person, with an ex she moved out of living with some months ago (long before COVID).

I think there's two reasons it's happening. The first is that people often reach out to former loves or close connections when 'big or bad things happen'. It's such a good excuse to scratch the itch. The other is that people truly do have new swathes of time to themselves, in their homes, and one thing a lot of folks are doing is wading through their past. Old diaries, old photos, memories both physical and online. I've done it myself, reading a 20 year old travel diary with my impressions of India as an 18 year old. I had never had the time or the gall to look before, fearing it would be mortifying. I was pleasantly surprised at my youthful expressiveness and observations, and read bits to my husband who was a captive audience in the house and couldn't even pretend to be busy or to have anywhere to go!

On the same theme, I've noticed a lot of friends sharing social media posts of old photos, sometimes with captions like, 'remembering the great outdoors' or 'this time

last year', but often more honestly with something like, 'while in quarantine I've been going through old photos…". My husband got contacted by a woman he didn't remember, on Facebook, who said she'd been trawling through her archives and found a lot of holiday pictures from a campsite in southern France at a time when both her and his family had holidayed together. She sent dozens of brilliant photographs of his family – fishing, barbequeing, in and around the pool – filling in a gap in time which my husband and his family had no photo recollection of.

It seems a unique moment in time, where people have the time and inclination to face their past, dig it up from the dust, and reach out to those they shared it with. All in synchronicity. No wonder people are having unusually vivid dreams. This was reported so much on social media (e.g. the hashtag #pandemicdreams) that the BBC picked up on it. Their talking head, from Harvard Medical School, concluded that it was a result of people having had enough sleep (for a change), having anxiety about the virus, and being more *emotional* during this major life event. So beneath the quiet surface of people in isolation, there are surely some very profound reflections taking place. People have, often for the first time in their life, the time and space to face who they are, who they have been, and perhaps who they want to be (or be with). As the expression goes, still waters run deep.

Wednesday 22 April: The rise of localism

We had another happy bin night gathering, dressed up idiotically and with beers this time. The children did a good job of respecting the boundaries between each other (across household groups), more so than last week, which made me feel sad. May they not internalise these social protocols.

More households joined this week, some in costume and some with just a beer. We looked around proudly at our group, glad to have good folks as neighbours.

Eugenie Reidy

Lockdown has really been a time for the triumph of the local. Your happiness now depends on the people, green spaces and cafes in walking distance. For the first time, unable to pop in the car for daily jaunts and errands, I've pounded the pavements and got to know the local area. All my face to face conversations have been with neighbours or locals. I've become an active and proud South Launcestonian.

It's been interesting to watch this 'localism' in the media too. Tasmania was quick to take its own stance and emphasise (plus act on) its physical distinctness from the rest of Australia. There was thrill across the island when our gutsy Premier Gutwein announced (long before other states) that he was closing the borders. Our local newspaper headlined it rather gloatingly with, "We've got a moat!" – see pic.

Then as the crisis took hold and case numbers picked up, it became a story of comparing regions *within Tasmania*. We get case number updates according to north, south, north-east and north-west. I'm in the north, and we watch closely our numbers and have been glad to see them at the back of the pack. But we are right next door to the north-west region, and they have had a major outbreak. More than half the state's cases are there, having been ignited by the death in hospital of a returned cruise ship passenger – a man in his nineties from the 'floating petri dish' or 'death ship', the now infamous Ruby Princess. Health workers and fellow patients became infected, it took off. Gutsy Premier again showed his bold side – a hard lockdown, heavily police enforced, with army drafted in to deep clean two hospitals which were shut down for the occasion (a big call). But what was interesting was the regionalising narrative, especially where we are. People and papers talked with new suspicion about the NW, hoping they would stay put i.e. not bring their infected selves here. A family friend complained that since their Kmart and Bunnings superstores had been shut down, they would drive to ours! There are a lot of large, low-income families in the cities of the NW and Kmart is a magnet for them given its cheap, near-disposable clothes and household goods. We shuddered and hoped they

would not be so bloody irresponsible.

Localism had slipped quietly into tribalism.

Thursday 23 April: COVID politicians – saviours, jailors or killers

Last night two of our neighbours asked each other, at a distance, the million-dollar question. When is this going to end, and how?

With the novelty of staying at home having worn off and the nerves of many wearing thin, this is on our minds. It's a big deal for free-spirited bush lovers in a place like Tasmania (one neighbour for example is a mad keen wilderness fly fishermen) to be told not to move or be subject to police checks and legal punishments. People love to disappear into the wild, off grid and out of network, it's a proud way of life. Now you risk a 17,000 dollar fine or jailtime.

And so, to know when it will all end, we listen to the politicians. And as our jailors, they have become increasingly the subject of discussions, and of character profiles (or assassinations) in the media too. Our Prime Minister is out of his depth, like most world leaders, and pretty un-inspiring, so it's not thrilling to listen to him – and even less thrilling to have your life be beholden to him. Our state Premier is much better, a straight-talking good communicator and a bold thinker who inspires confidence and compliance with the stay-at-home measures. He was the one who chose to overreact in the early days by closing the state borders, prompting other states to follow when the cases started rising.

But there are better ones. A lot of people I know (myself included) are holding New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern up as the gold standard. She leads with big-hearted compassion and with clear-to-understand science. Angela Merkel gets praise too for her direct style of communication and leadership. I read a good article on the stand-

out job of female leaders (New Zealand, Germany, Taiwan, Denmark) and how their countries are doing better. It concluded that this wasn't necessarily because women are better leaders in this time, but because to be in the apex role of top politician, they have to be several times smarter, stronger, bolder and better than their male equivalents.

At the other end of the spectrum there's Johnson and Trump of course. My dad in the UK is depressed about Johnson and his useless advisors, while our friend in New York stated plainly, "Our President is literally killing us" Today we watched Trump advise that injecting disinfectant could be a good cure for coronavirus, to the horror of the medical community including those unfortunates whose job it is to stand next to him as redundant 'advisors'.

Back to watching my neighbours square up to the big question. I recognised the anxiety in at least one of them as he considered just how completely and absolutely reliant we are on government policy. Politics and politicians have always affected how we live of course, but probably for the first time in our lives we are *truly captive*, and the most *basic* elements are privy to far-off decisions. We don't have the luxury of looking the other way as the people voted in to lead our countries take the wheel. No wonder it's fascinating, and terrifying, to try to understand who they really are.

Saturday 25 April 2020: Unexpected family closeness

Today is ANZAC Day, where typically we go to a dawn service and remember our grandfather and the many other brave (often unknowing) young men who trooped off to fight for Australia, NZ or other Commonwealth countries in a war. 'Gunfire breakfast' at sunrise is an egg and bacon roll and a coffee with a dash of Bundaberg rum in it. It makes you feel glad to be an Aussie.

This year the Royal Servicemen's Legion (RSL) had the good idea to launch an online

campaign called #LightUptheDawn, encouraging people to just have a moment outside at dawn with their family, perhaps with a candle or a poppy or both. Not the same of course, but it was very well taken up and so many people shared that they'd stood in their driveway. Several including my boss and my brother had a bugler playing The Last Post on their street, or just the music playing. There was a lot of heartful sharing of people's experiences on social media.

We had a moment of remembrance with family on the weekly video-conferenced pub quiz last night. That pub quiz is still going strong, and oddly I feel closer than I used to to my mum's family who live here in Tasmania but are hard to see regularly. People have less excuse now not to gather, they also crave a social moment, and perhaps the anxiety of the situation makes people reflect on and appreciate family more. I don't know, but again the irony is that our family seems to be closer together not further apart. Everyone is so cheerful to see each other, so jovial and supportive. It's a definite silver lining of this weird time, and one I'm not alone in feeling.

Monday 27 April: Health worker heroes (except the ones at the dinner party)

Just 4 new cases in Tasmania yesterday, still linked to the NW cluster. One more death, an old man in the NW. Tassie's mortality rate has been very high on account of the older age of the population.

Things seem to be relaxing a bit. The streets look less deserted and people look less stressed. We even popped out to a framer today. We saw others moving quickly about, we didn't see any masks. We did speak to a friend who repeated the worry that people from the NW are visiting 'our Bunnings'.

Poor NW folk are a bit pariah'd – the causes of the outbreak there (which has affected well over 100 people) are not known but there's an investigation and there's a lot of speculation. Somehow a rumour started about there having been an 'illegal

dinner party' of health workers that triggered the spread. However it started, it prompted a wave of backlash against the people rightly lauded as heroes in the rest of the world. including vicious 'trolling' which the Premier had to call out and ask people to stop. There have been statements since denying any such gathering took place but the mud seems to have stuck unfortunately.

Meanwhile, in the rest of the world there's a tide of huge respect for health workers – people clapping them in New York, 2 minutes silence for fallen health workers in UK, editorials about how they're 'redefining heroism'. Mind you the nasty NW treatment does seem isolated and specific. My neighbour thanked our other neighbour, a nurse, the other day, which I was very touched by.

Tuesday 28 April: Faith in apps and vaccines

Today I downloaded the CovidSafe app, along with millions of other Australians. It detects via Bluetooth all the devices (= people) you are near, records up to 21 days' of data of that, and your network of contacts (and theirs) can be tracked and quarantined if you test positive. There were some privacy concerns but everyone I know has downloaded it. Privacy qualms are easier to dismiss when the stakes are high like this.

I unfortunately keep being drawn to half-baked reports of the severity of the coronavirus disease, the long-term health effects, and the serious manifestation it can have in children ('kawasaki' syndrome). As time passes it is an increasingly alarming prospect. Rather than hoping to be only mildly affected or that treatment options would develop by the time I get it, I am now focusing on the vaccine as the closure event. I should be following more but I did hear the phrase 'this race for a vaccine' on the radio today – may the race continue.

Wednesday 29 April: Going bush – Aboriginal people empowered on country

My work is with Aboriginal communities in Australia and a lot has revolved around how they are coping with the pandemic. They are 'going bush' as much as possible, especially where elders are concerned. Elders aren't just treasured old people, they're the cultural leaders and chief knowledge holders. They are already disproportionately affected by lifestyle diseases like diabetes and renal failure, and many live in crowded houses with many family members. It would be catastrophic if their communities had an outbreak.

One group of cultural elders I know of, all senior artists at an art centre in the remote Kimberley region, were 'gone bush' very quickly, some time before the first case came into the region. (Incidentally it was imported by a health worker, for as well as heroes they are carriers – it's a tricky line to walk). This group of elderly Aboriginal people piled their things and their dogs onto the flatbed of a truck and left town for the remote country of their ancestors. No more of the fast food and pub and welfare office of town. In a photo shared by the art centre, they looked like the happiest roadtrippers you've ever seen. And since the move, they've shared pictures of themselves painting out in the open, roasting kangaroo tails (a delicacy) over an open fire, lying around with children and dogs looking sated. The actual accommodation looks awful, grimy old blocks that are little more than a concrete slab with a roof structure above it, but you wouldn't know from their smiles.

I think they even got government funding for the move, as money was allocated to Aboriginal communities to protect them from COVID-19. On the art centre website is a picture of a painter's table in long grass under a big blue sky, with the banner: "Our COVID-19 response plan: Out on Country!"

I've heard about lots of other Aboriginal elders going bush at this time. And younger people too. A young Aboriginal woman I know, a city-based mother of school-age children who is deeply proud of her heritage, did the same thing in far north

Queensland. Suddenly her Instagram account lit up with sun-drenched pictures of her children spearing crabs, swimming in a waterhole, and collecting juicy grubs from under tree bark. It's the cultural retreat they would never have scheduled.

There's a lot of pitying media coverage of Aboriginal communities' 'situation': how uniquely vulnerable they are, and what terrible damage an outbreak would wreak or how food and other types of insecurity are setting in. And yes, the vulnerability is all too real. But actual reports I've seen are quite different, quite empowering. At least among those who have the option to live on country, the narrative is of people content in their connection to the land, to places inhabited by their ancestors and good for their children. I like to think that the regional towns, by extension, are less able to lure drifting folk into unhappy times chasing a drink, a high, or a continued tough time.

For all of us, it's peeling our life back to what we really have, and who we really are. Hopefully it's also giving many of us a moment to reflect on – or better still, choose – who we want to be. It's inspiring to see Aboriginal people empowered in their choice to revert to country, where they are relatively safe as well as culturally charged and content. As well as it hopefully shielding them from the virus, it will be interesting to see what other positive effects there are. And how much of this 'new normal' is left in place when the dramas are over.

Thursday 30 April: History unmarked – COVID cheats Columbus of the anniversary of his invasion

There was another apparent plus for Indigenous Australia on my mind today. The 29th April 2020 was due to mark the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's arrival in Australia on board The Endeavour. The Australian government has spent 4 years planning a 50 million dollar commemoration, including a replica ship making a

replica journey.

They have tried to be tactful about what it represented, i.e. not gloat in the face of Aboriginal Australia's clear sense of being invaded and devastated by the event, and not use the term 'discovery'. The tepid term, 'Looking back, looking forward', was being used. Still, the whole thing caught in the throat of many and protests were planned. They were likely to be noisier than Australia Day protests, where statues of Cook (and particularly their inscriptions about him 'discovering this land') get defaced, and people take to the streets with banners reading 'white Australia has a black history' or ' always was, always will be, aboriginal land' – and more simply, 'Treaty now!'.

Well, COVID has put paid to it all. Today was the anniversary and it passed with barely a whisper. You wouldn't even have known. Pretty remarkable to see the controversy and debate evaporate like that, eclipsed by lockdown life and corona-politics. The $50 million (or what was left) was no doubt diverted. No idea what happened to the boat.

Friday 1 May 2020: Will we waste the crisis? And what of our relationship with China...

Corona politics are interesting. Just before this all started everyone seemed to be focused on the climate and the need for a revolution. That got parked, but now it's surfacing again. I hear friends or follow activists who are saying that this is the perfect moment to identify and achieve the new normal, i.e. leave the bad habits behind and shape a more sustainable future. With international travel and aviation looking impossible and then severely challenged in future, a better greener future could be forced on us. As someone put it, 'never waste a crisis'.

But now there are also murmurs in the other direction, suspicions that politicians

are using 'the cover of COVID' to get their policies across the line and safeguard their interests. In Australia that involves them shoring up the coal and non-renewable energy industry, despite it being desperately antiquated and constantly lamented by younger generations and sizeable chunks of the more progressive population. A big mining tycoon is apparently interested in buying the airline Virgin Australia, and we are supposed to see this as patriotism. Unfortunately, the golden opportunity for leaving bad habits behind and embracing a new *and improved normal* might be happening in individuals' lives, but it doesn't seem to be happening in the bigger machines of policy and industry.

There's a nasty political spat between Australia and China at the moment. Australia appeared to back up Trump with calls for an enquiry into the source of the virus outbreak, and made calls for China to close 'wet markets' that looked very much like it pointing the finger. As the war of words escalated, a Chinese newspaper editor described Australia as "*like the chewing gum on our shoe; sometimes you just have to get a stone and remove it*". Others called for Chinese consumers to think twice about buying Australian wine, eating Australian beef, sending their children to Australian education institutions. Ouch.

This exposes an ugly truth where Australia enjoys China as a critical trading partner but is quick to show reservations that are close to racism when the going gets tough. Don't forget the 'white Australia policy', dominant for the first half of the twentieth century, was aimed largely at blocking Chinese immigration into Australia. Unfortunately there are plenty of reports of Chinese Australians being subjected to racism here since the pandemic started. And with the outrageous Trump making references to 'the Chinese virus', you can see how that finds validation. I hope Tassies are bigger than this.

Saturday 2 May 2020: 'Bicycles are the new toilet paper' – family time conquers all

A *lot* of people out walking, like us, in the one major park still open: Cataract Gorge. It's quite a renaissance for the modern family who now, as well as playing games and doing puzzles together, goes walking and biking and exercising together. Some health-related official commented on how pleased he was, what an impact it could make on the distribution of lifestyle diseases.

I read somewhere that 'bicycles are the new toilet paper', because so many people rushed to buy them and (combined with slowed down trade) this resulted in a national shortage. Then there's the jokes about dogs being fed up of being walked (which I can't quite believe – they must surely be hoping these days never end).

I must admit I'm not hating it either, and I feel like when it ends, my little family will be harder to hold and cherish than now. I'm pretty sure my sister-in-law feels like this too. Her husband has a job that sees his steaming around the city in his car for meetings, having professional lunches and drinks after work with people, and not spending enough of the week at home. Now he works in the rumpus room downstairs, popping up at morning tea to have coffee and banana bread with her and the children. He's up again at lunch, and helps feed the children or play with them. Then he's up for the evening, nice and early, and they all tumble around in their nest together.

My sister-in-law absolutely loves it, it's the family life she always wanted. She initiated a family morning walk before work, and shares pictures of the happy gang. Gone is the tension around her husband always being home late, or gone too early, or generally being too much of a professional 'player' and less of a family man. I bet she's secretly hoping there will be just enough cases in their area/state for the lockdown to continue. Another friend said the same thing, that life was just about 'family and food' and she loved it. She's also a mother of three. She said it reminded her of when they all lived on a cattle station, before the children grew up.

It's like people feel they are stepping back in time, or stepping sideways into a less

busy space where family reigns. Many will be sorry to give this up, or will at least try to keep it partially in place. I can understand that.

Sunday 3 May 2020: Survivor's guilt

Spoke to my friend in England yesterday who lost her job in a documentary film company, can't visit her mother, and is wearing a mask when she leaves the house. The UK has had about 200k cases and 28k deaths now. I feel horribly blessed to be in Australia, and Tasmania within that. We've now had 3 days in a row without any new cases in Tasmania. People are still observing social distancing and the economy is definitely impacted but lives are not too far from normal and certainly for me and many others it's not grim at all. I feel a bit of 'survivor's guilt' about it. I keep telling my husband we have to be kind and particularly generous this year because we have been over-blessed. I know it's not over yet but that's how I feel now, with my nice life rather at odds with the world chaos.

Sunday 10 May 2020: Simple social souls

It's a while since I added an entry. Days just sort of bleed into one. Watching the tally of cases, keeping in touch with people, eating, shopping, sleeping. A few flashes of creativity, the odd walk, the odd moment of serendipity when you pass someone outside and have an exhilarated chat while worrying a little that you might be slightly too close.

I have never known such neighbourliness. It feels like the 1950s. We are still doing our bin night gathering, with much enthusiasm. But we also pass things around each other's letterboxes – magazines, jigsaws, jars of chutney. And when we can, we talk to each other in the street. Today was my first Mother's Day and I got a note and

small gift from all three of the mum's I know who live around us, having given them a little token each too. I honestly don't think this camaraderie would have happened without the weird world of COVID. It's definitely a silver lining. I already feel nostalgic for it, imagining a world where we'll once again be tearing around in our cars 'too busy' to stop and catch up with the folk who live in the houses close by.

Letting down the drawbridge, or getting back into a social life, is going to be interesting. Some people are absolutely desperate. Others, even 'sociable' ones, have admitted to me that they're liking the nuclear world they're in and are not mad about it being brought to an end.

My colleague today told me she felt reluctant about getting back into non-family socialising. She lives in NSW where the Premier, under pressure to make a stand for the economy, announced partial lifting of lockdown conditions to include up to 5 people being able to gather. She said a number of her friends rang to book her for dinner. She is vivacious and highly social so this didn't surprise me. But she told me that she didn't want to say yes, that she "just wants to wallow around with her family for a bit longer". She told each friend who called that her family was limiting to one visit per weekend. How funny, how unimaginable a few weeks ago.

Monday 11 May: World War COVID

There are lots of war references around at the moment. Yes, it's the time of annual commemorative days like ANZAC Day and VE Day. But I'm sure there have been more reflections on it this year, across the age groups.

People have been sharing black and white pictures, anecdotes, stories, and particularly their own reflections about past wars. They imagine what the world war-affected generations must have gone through, what they sacrificed, what they endured and suffered and lost.

I suppose it's because people have time to reflect, more so than other years, but I think it's more too. I think people feel they're living through a unique time: an anxious time, a time to protect and defend yourself and your family, and also a time of much national narrative. We are not a globalised world any more, we are a world where every day the casualties of individual countries are listed against each other – UK's high death toll versus Italy's, versus America's. Iran's post-lockdown crisis versus South Korea's. New Zealand's and Taiwan's brilliant female leaders compared to dreadful male leaders in UK and US. Consciously or subconsciously, I feel like people are in a wartime mindset, channelling what they know about that from WW2 and surfacing the iconography of that time as they do so.

Thursday 21 May: Can we please have a silver lining for animals

As a vegetarian, I really hope there is a silver lining in this for animals. Not just in the temporary easing of people and pollution pressures on their habitats, although that is a thrill to see, but also in the way they are trafficked and consumed. Wuhan announced a ban on eating wildlife. Woohoo Wuhan! Maybe it could spread further across China too? Imagine the impact that would have for not only local and regional but even global wildlife? The critically endangered pangolin, unlucky feature of wet markets in Asia, might stand a chance of dodging extinction.

There's a pressure to not blame China for this outbreak, to stand together as one united world in the face of a global threat. But assuming the laboratory leak theory isn't true, the most plausible explanation is that the new virus broke out into the human population through wildlife for sale at the wet market. My heart bleeds when I think of those places, or worse see pictures of them. Desperate claws and bills and beaks and whiskers poking through the bars of cages, destined to be fresh meat or medicine. My heart surges with hope when I think that one result of this catastrophe could be an end to this heinous trade.

A vegan celebrity, musician Bryan Adams, caused a stir with a social media rant that climaxed with, "*I should be on tour right now but thanks to some f**king bat eating, wet market animal selling, virus making greedy bastards, the whole world is now on hold – my message to them, other than 'thanks a f**king lot' is go vegan.*" He got hammered for racism and apologised, sort of, saying how he loved all humans. A lid was kept on the blame game (just). But in the reporting of the incident the news media did what it does best: it poked at and widened a little fault line. Knowing that tensions in a time like this have to go somewhere, and 'othering' is a very usual place for them to go, coverage of the vegan rant fanned a little flame into a bigger one. I'll admit that as a bleeding heart vegetarian and animal lover, I found myself agreeing with part of his message. I too (but privately) despise those who eat complex sentient beings, not to mention endangered and cruelly trafficked ones, and plunder our planet at any cost. Yes I nodded (but to myself only), eat some pulses and vegetables instead. Stop with your cruel greed, and don't take us all down with you.

Friday 22 May: Mental health issues

We are slowly back to normal. No new cases for a week, and restrictions are gradually lifting. Today I even sat in a café for a sandwich, albeit feeling like an exhibition, stranded in space in the middle of an empty and very clean floor.

The tension is still here though, People are easing into each other's company but are guarded. And the 'stuck at home' syndrome is still here, having got markedly worse in the last week. People are flat. One by one our neighbours texted on bin night to say they weren't feeling like coming out in costume for a drink this week. I was relieved as all I wanted to do was continue being a hermit indoors too.

The weather is getting colder and the days shorter, which is part of this malaise. But so I think is the realisation that this is going to blight lives for a long time to come.

There's global news which is absolutely wretched – Brazil! Pakistan! – plus local reports of the battered economy and jobs horizon. And there are the less tangible patches of gloom, like realising how long it will be before we can see family and friends abroad.

I really feel for single people, especially female friends my age who are questioning whether this will be the death knell for their hopes of finding a partner, settling down and having a family. First restrictions have to lift, and then the now-embedded phobia about human contact. A NY Times article put it horribly accurately when it wondered on behalf of single people what that 'first kiss' post-lockdown will be like, given that the official health advice is, "you are your safest sex partner". "Put on a mask and chat" was another piece of advice. All the while (for women at least), biological clocks are ticking.

The irony is that anyone single right now is likely to be wanting a partner more than ever. The same NYT article described pandemics as 'relationship accelerators'. Certainly I've got some friends who right now are madly dating, via zoom and other apps, and very focused on finding that life partner.

Anxious times for all but certainly for anyone looking for love. A friend's colleague, who is single and also gay, made the comment, "Now straight people know what the HIV fear is like". He was not coping well with lockdown and ended up taking sick leave for mental health strain and alcoholism.

It used to be the tension between public health and the economy that dominated debate about when to open the country up. Now it's increasingly about mental health too.

Saturday 23 May: The future's gloomy

It's the unknown future of this virus that is so alarming. We used to liken it to Spanish Flu, a one-off flare-up that was scarring but finite. Now people talk of it possibly becoming 'embedded' in human populations like HIV. We used to say confidently, "until there's a vaccine" as though there definitely would be one and it would work. Now we listen in horror to reports of researchers chasing a moving target as the virus mutates and the vaccine trials race to keep up. And with flu season upon us – albeit nothing like any other year, hardly affecting anyone on account of no one going out – we are reminded again of how vaccines do not always match the strain you are exposed to. This was the gist of a conversation with a neighbour as he set out to walk his (by contrast) very cheerful dog, and assured me he had no plans to have the flu jab.

It's very possible there never will be an efficacious vaccine, isn't it? And every time we travel anywhere, we'll be trying to dodge the dreaded coronavirus which could not only ruin the trip and send us into intensive care (or worse for some people), but also leave us with lifelong health impacts. These are the gloomy spectres emerging now.

Thursday 28 May: 'Premier firm on closed borders' – our proud island state

Localism continues to triumph. Our Premier is gutsy as ever, and the local media lap it up with a kind of separatist frenzy. I'm sure he doesn't intend this, but people love to pitch him against the Prime Minister, celebrating his 'independent' stance and in particular his tough line on opening up the borders.

The PM naturally wants to see the country open again, the economy get back on its legs. But from the start, our Tassie Premier has protected public health first. We were the first state to close borders, we took tough measures earlier, non-locals were told to leave the state or quarantine on entry, our Premier spoke in daily press

conferences about not being complacent and seeing this through carefully. And now he is refusing to be drawn on when the borders might re-open.

It's his nature, but he also has a lot to lose – Tasmania has a very old population so the relative coronavirus mortality rate is much higher than other states. 13 deaths so far. That's not a big absolute number, but it's 5% of the total cases and at one point there was a 10% death rate. All the deaths have been old people with health issues who'd been on that death ship the Ruby Princess (cruiseliner).

Anyway, the strict border closure has really ignited a proud islander mentality. I think the headline yesterday was, 'Premier firm on closed borders'. I wonder if other states have experienced the same, a redrawing of membership lines where we feel much more locally defined. By extension, the boundaries of xenophobia have shifted, even those in the 'next door' state are others now, to be kept out until the threat they pose can be neutralised.

Friday 29 May: Aching, breaking world

Meanwhile elsewhere, the horror unfolds.

Over 100,000 deaths in America which is now besieged by protests following atrocious killings of unarmed black people by police. Fury spilling into the streets and looting underway.

Africa staggering under the economic rather than health effects of the pandemic. Our friends in Kenya wrote this morning to say their property had been attacked by 50 armed young men. Those men had been made unemployed by local flower farms which supply Europe with flowers, roses mostly. They have taken to illegal fishing on the lake, which in rainy season has expanded a lot. They come onshore on people's properties, sometimes to hunt game there. So our friends experienced that, and a

local Kenyan man who works for them was the first to tell the intruders that they couldn't come onto private property but he got beaten up for it. The pack of men continued towards the house and our friends locked up and vacated by car with their young son.

It's a scary proposition, hordes of unemployed people facing a very uncertain future, needing to survive, taking things into their own hands. Pan out and it means economies collapsing, and with them the trade links and supply chains that prop up our world. We might be dodging the worst of the health and the direct socioeconomic effects here in our corner downunder, but the desperate times will catch up with us.

Saturday 30 May: A spaced out 'new normal'

Things are now very much going back to normal albeit in a kind of 'spaced out' way. Cafes and hairdressers see people, but in fewer numbers and with weird and inefficient looking gaps between people. I sat down slightly nervously in a café for coffee, in a takeaway cup. The traffic has picked up again – no longer do cats lounge confidently on the pavement and I think I'd be killed if I repeated my cycling stunt of April where I rode from one side of town to the other without stopping at a single red light.

I was beginning to think that I loved the calm quiet, the sense of life on pause. I had no FOMO [fear of missing out], I was bunkered down with my husband and child and didn't have to feel possessive that work or imposing friends and relatives were taking them from me. I was sleeping more, feeling calm. Not to mention feeling lucky compared with how the rest of the world was experiencing coronavirus. I was sort of hoping the lockdown measures would go on a bit longer... But now, with things starting to open up, I'm feeling a surge of relief and happiness. It's good to see life

springing up again, like spring shoots through winter soil.

I admit I'm using the loosening measures strategically, like choosing who I want to hand my baby to! For those who I've never fancied sharing him with, particularly a neighbour who is always trying to take him off me and has a habit of turning her back and walking away with him (I don't know why, it cuts me to the core), I keep a firm distance and a firm hold on him. For others who I love, like friend who had us round for a delicious soul-warming roast dinner the first day we were allowed to gather as 5 people, I hand him over smilingly and enjoying watching him perched with a new person and bringing joy to them.

Late June: 'Not over by a long way'

This is my last entry, even if it's not the last of Coronavirus.

Over the month since I wrote in this diary, we Tasmanians have resumed an almost pre-COVID life. There are no active cases, and the last recorded new case was in mid-May. There is now a surplus of hand sanitiser on the shelves of many shops, including sleekly labelled Tasmanian brands produced by local whisky distilleries. Back in April you couldn't buy the stuff for love nor money. We've sat in cafes for coffee and lunch using actual (non-takeaway) crockery and cutlery. Although we did have to sanitise our hands at the door, place ourselves where tape crosses on the floor indicate safe social distancing, and leave our contact details for tracing if needed. Critical proof of a return to normal, my hair is looking normal again after a much-needed trip to the salon where like many others I booked a 'repair'. This was after several doses of supermarket dye and a trim with scissors so blunt I may as well have used a knife and fork (there was a very funny internet meme of 'Corona Lisa' with grown out white roots and visible split ends, which was a pretty good summary). And finally, in our street, close to town, we have had to compete again for

parking spots since professionals based in town are no longer working from home.

But outside our little fortress, things are not good. In the next door state of Victoria there's been an uptick of cases linked to security guards at quarantine hotels. And beyond Australia the numbers (even probable underestimates as they are) are truly frightening. There are massive second waves in countries that experienced thee first shocks (Iran for example, from what little is known) and where pressure to restart normal life and the economy has meant restrictions were lifted. America is beyond terrifying, its President joyriding through the crisis like a horseman of the apocalypse. Globally there have now been at least 10 million cases and at least half a million deaths, but health experts say that the pandemic is 'far from over' and in some places is only getting started.

Meanwhile, no advance on a vaccine. Plenty of effort and investment but clearly it's no small task. And treatment options, in places fortunate enough to have a still-functioning health system, don't seem to be advancing at a pace that would reassure you if you got infected and needed treatment. There was a crappy bit of news today that America had bought the entire global stock of a drug known to be effective, manufactured by Gilead which is also, weirdly, the name of the vile dystopian republic that book and hit series The Handmaiden's Tale is set in.

So the world seems to be buckling under coronavirus and we are only cosy because our little state is fiercely insular, both geographically and politically. Our Premier continues to earn huge local support for defying all calls to open the borders. Even when it's the Prime Minister calling. The media delights in quoting him saying things like, '*Last time I checked, Scott Morrison wasn't the Health Minister and he certainly wasn't the Premier of Tasmania. Our borders remain closed until the health advice says it's safe to re-open*".

So we are closed off, and island life can just tick along. I suppose. It's sad to have to forget about the world for a while. I've no idea when I'll next see my dad in the UK, or

the niece in Sydney who I've not yet met. Let alone travel or holiday. A carpenter who visited our house today told us a young client had cancelled her round the world trip and was having built-in wardrobes fitted with the savings (poor thing).

When we do move again, it'll be with face masks, gloves and a huge sense of paranoia probably.

Worse than the abstract prospect of heading into the world again is the more real prospect of the world coming to us. Gutwein can't hold out forever, sooner or later our drawbridge will have to go down. There's talk of 'border wars' between Australian states trying to protect themselves from each other's outbreaks. Nationalism has risen globally, and within countries 'regionalism' or 'localism' has too. You think you disapprove of these things until the stakes include coronavirus.