Melody Bishop

“I never thought living in a small town would have its perks.”

Devon, England, 20 March – 18 May 2020

I am a postgraduate student in the UK studying for an MSc in Medical Anthropology. I originally come from the South East of England but a couple of years ago moved with my family to take over a townhouse hotel in Devon. I stayed in Devon with my family over lockdown since my University advised students to travel home.

20th March 2020, 2pm – A small town in Devon, England

I am currently sat by the window of a small hotel lobby. I am not supposed to be here. In fact, I should be 300 miles away; however recent advice from my University caused me to jump on a train 2 days ago carrying as much luggage as I possibly could.

The hotel in question is a family business owned by my parents for the past (nearly) 3 years. We live above the business in a tiny attic space. There are 5 of us (plus a dog), so this arrangement certainly has its challenges, pandemic aside! I am the eldest of three, with an adult sister at Art college and a brother in his final year of GCSEs. He is currently at what may well be his last day of school – 3 months earlier than anticipated.

I am waiting for today’s guests – the brave (or foolish?) few who are not yet self-isolating – a middle-aged couple from up North. I wonder why they are coming. They only made the booking a couple of days ago, so perhaps they are visiting relatives while they still can? I suspect I will find out soon enough.

The town where I live has an ageing population, with an average age of 45.3 (compared to the UK average of 39.3). We know that people in this town will die due to the coronavirus. Someone in the local community has set an unofficial action group on Facebook. My mother and I would like to volunteer to help the community, but we are concerned that the constant influx of guests may have rendered us carriers.

Around the time of each new press conference, our email notifications go wild, signalling a slew of cancellations. We have become accustomed to this, but it still hurts a little. I know we should shut the hotel – so do my parents – but whilst there are still guests wanting to stay, we have to remain open. Financially we have no choice. In the hotel industry, we need to make a profit in the summer months to tide us over the winter. My mother fears that at this rate we will be broke by 2021 and that the leap of faith we took in deciding to run this place will all have been for nothing. I think we will be forced to close within a fortnight, probably within a week. This would be fine, because then we will be able to claim on insurance.

My academic background is in Biomedical Sciences and Medical Anthropology. Given this knowledge, I feel incredibly guilty that I am not able to properly self-isolate. My train journey here was nearly 7 hours long and although the train staff were wonderful, spraying surfaces at every stop, I fear that keeping the seat next to me empty may not have been enough of a preventative measure. But my parents need time off – all the staff have gone, many of them immunocompromised – so I simply must greet guests face-to-face. Regular handwashing is aggravating my very visible eczema. Guests have commented on it, which makes me feel terrible. It is for their sake that I am suffering! Frustration is the word of the week.

This virus seems to be exacerbating people's fear of "the other" even on a local scale. A fight broke out in the Co-Op last night and my dad had to intervene. We can only hope that, once this has all blown over, the community can re-build itself and that tourists won't have forgotten about our beautiful little corner of the world... Nothing

feels beautiful today.

21st March 2020, 1pm

After I had written yesterday, the news came that all cafes, restaurants and bars were to shut. This was an incredibly emotional time for us. We gathered around the lobby computer in silence and my mother began to weep. Nearly 24 hours later, we are still not sure as a hotel what services we are allowed to provide. Can we feed our guests? My mother cried for a long time before pulling herself together and poring over employment contracts to see how we can make the most of the 80% wages paid promise.

From the Newsfeed of The Guardian March 20 at 17:09:

“Cafes, bas, pubs, and restaurants must close tonight

Johnson says the government is strentheing the measures announced on Monfay to avoid unnecessary social contact.

Following agreement of all the four nations of the UK, Johnson said all cafes, bars, pubs, and restaurants must close tonight.

Nightclubs, theatres, gyms, cinemas and leisure centres must also close on the same timescale.”

I have just been to the chemist to get a prescription filled for my eczema, as the last thing we’d need is for it to get infected – especially as the nearest Minor Injuries Unit

has closed due to staff shortages. The retail section is closed off and someone was complaining that they needed suncream for an upcoming trip! I don't know what planet they are living on.

We have decided as a family that we will offer our rooms to those carrying out essential travel. Tonight we have a man arriving to collect his 80-year old mother and all her belongings, to take her back home. We are going to leave each room unoccupied for at least 3 days before another guest is permitted to stay. Other businesses are doing takeaway, but we think this is a better way for us to help. Room rates will be very low. Other hotels have shut because of staff shortages, but we are the entirety of staff now!

My dad gave a speech last night about how we should all try to wake up early and make the most of the day. I'm sorry to say we laughed at him. My sister's boyfriend has arrived and we are going to walk the dog together later, to our favourite cove. Life goes on.

24th March 2020, 6pm

New, stricter legislation has been announced in the UK but it doesn't feel like much has changed. Went out on the boat yesterday before we were limited to one walk per day. I'm fluctuating between being super productive and doing absolutely nothing. My family are at each others' throats already and it's only day one of lockdown... I find myself emailing a lot more than usual, and messaging people I haven't spoken to for ages, which is nice.

25th March 2020, 3:30pm

The weather is gorgeous and we are making the most of our tiny outside space. My mum is excited because the garden centre is offering online deliveries. We are discussing plans to murder the seagull population just in case food runs out. My brother is flexing because of his run that he dragged my sister and her boyfriend on. I resisted. Week 1 of the COVID-19 FutureLearn course run by the LSHTM occupied me today. Finding it hard to understand the legislation regarding business owners. Learnt the phrase "infodemic" today – basically "too much information" syndrome. The fact that so many different news providers are all writing about the coronavirus means that it's been hard to find official guidance online. Also can't seem to find out how much funding is available to pay part-time workers like myself.

Knowing that we are only allowed on one walk per day has actually made me look forward to going outside more. Maybe when this is all over, people will have more appreciation for their environments.

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28th March 2020, 6pm

My parents decided that tonight we are to have a Saturday celebration down in the hotel restaurant (just us of course), partially to keep morale up but also because we need to get through some of the food supplies. I don't want to look forward to it in case it ends up just being stressful for everyone.

The other day I neglected to take a walk and felt terrible later that evening, so today I

made sure to have a potter about. The smell of honeysuckle by the bandstand was divine. I've started listening to In Our Time (Radio 4) podcasts about random topics.

My parents went to Sainsbury's as we were running out of normal food. They said it was very stressful, with a lot of people ignoring social distancing measures. My mum disinfected everything she'd bought with spray before putting it away. Boris Johnson has tested positive for the coronavirus and no one seems to know what to think. One good thing today is that I now know I will be paid for the work am unable to do at present. However I have been forced to email my landlord asking about the possibility of lowering my rent, as I realistically cannot afford the full fee at the moment. This is the first time in my life that I have been unable to pay for something. It's not a nice feeling.

5th April, 6pm

I have been very unmotivated for this past week, hence the lack of entries. Today however I feel a bit better and have decided to start learning Japanese as a way to enrich myself and pass the time. I cannot wait until it is safe to travel again. I have also started to play piano again, which I haven't done for years.

I'm concerned that I am becoming touch deprived, as I am not much of a hugger and my partner is hundreds of miles away. This will surely be a problem for many others. I saw something about disruption to grief rituals on the news. In November I learnt about the impact 9/11 had on different cultures, in that people were forced to speak the names of the deceased when this is not deemed respectful in their culture (cannot remember which culture). Never thought I'd be watching something similar unfold, with the measures surrounding funerals hitting people hard.

I feel a sort of relief that my grandma, who sadly passed away from complications

due to a brain tumour last year, is not around to see this. I am glad we were able to commemorate her death back in October 2019 amongst friends and family and my heart aches for those who are unable to do so in this COVID-19 climate.

11th April 8:30pm

Tensions are rising – my dad has taken up smoking again. We have received a small business grant, which is a huge relief. I've mostly been sleeping this past week but am starting to be productive again. Boris Johnson PM was in intensive care with COVID-19 but I understand he is now out of hospital. Number of deaths per day are in the 900s – terrible.

"Tensions are rising – my dad has taken up smoking again."

13th April 5pm

It has been beautifully sunny for the past few days so much of our time has been spent on our small terrace. My family are acting quite sentimental (myself included), reminiscing about when we had a huge garden to explore. I am having trouble sleeping, but when I finally fall asleep, I find it difficult to wake up again. I'm trying to tell myself that it's alright but I still feel a little guilty. I want desperately to plan for the year ahead (after I graduate in September) but everything is at a standstill. I feel

lost, which is ironic, as this is the longest I've been sleeping in the same bed for what feels like years.

My parents seem to find the daily death statistics to be reassuring – almost like its proof that the government has it all under control (which I very much doubt). I am reminded of a quote from Christopher Nolan's *The Dark* Knight – "Nobody panics when things go according to plan. … Because it's all part of the plan."

16th April 6pm

It's been officially announced that lockdown in the UK will go on for another 3 weeks minimum. I am unhappy because my sister and her boyfriend are moving back to Torquay to be with his mum… this isn't allowed, but my family got really cross with me when I reminded them of this. Have decided to be democratic and let it slide but I'm feeling quite uncomfortable about the situation.

19th April 5pm

It's been nice with two fewer household members. The 4 of us remaining are getting along fairly well. Today we went drove to somewhere nearby for a long walk (after checking we were allowed to do so). It has rained literally once during the whole of lockdown – the sun is definitely lifting people's spirits. I should be partying with friends in a couple of weeks and singing with my choirs, the highlight of my student life. I'm grieving for the lost term. This experience has given me a possible PhD area – experiences of "grief" when a typical death has not taken place. I'm applying for jobs – have sent off an application to teach in Japan – so I hope things will improve soon.

22nd April 6pm

Nothing much has changed in the last few days. My mum is feeling sorry for people living in the cities who cannot easily access nature. I think people are increasingly realising the importance of getting out into fresh air and I wonder what the impact will be on anti-climate change efforts, when this is over of course.

I never thought living in a small town would have its perks, but the ease by which we can go out on a walk without literally bumping into anyone is something I no longer take for granted. The South West still appears to have very few cases compared to the rest of the UK, which is something my parents keep reminding themselves of. I can't seem to see the relevance of this information and have been very cynical of published statistics, but I don't know how much of that is just me feeling frustrated.

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24th April 1pm

My degree leader has asked if I would be willing to share my diary entries with an undergraduate student who has changed their dissertation last-minute to have a

focus on COVID-19 in their town. I'm pleased that I might provide some assistance to them. It has been ages since I saw my friends' faces (with the exception of my partner) so we are thinking of doing something (online of course) this weekend.

26th April 7pm

I'm looking forward to taking part in a pub quiz via Zoom with some Uni friends this evening. I feel bad for not sorting something out earlier, but suppose we are all responsible for making the effort. There's been a lot online about how you're a bad person for not reaching out, but I think this narrative is harmful – everyone is struggling and I don't see how playing the blame game will help anyone. The weather has taken a turn for the worse – good for my assignments that are due in the next couple of weeks, but bad for the general family mood! My sister is back from her boyfriend's house, and he will be joining us tomorrow (Monday). I still feel uncomfortable about this, but it is true that the risk is incredibly low. I am also looking forward to attending a SoMA Symposium (Edinburgh Medical Anthropology) tomorrow on the theme of COVID-19, which will take place digitally tomorrow. I have a job interview for teaching English in Japan on Tuesday, which is a bit nerve-wracking! But yet more evidence to show that life goes on, even in lockdown.

5th May 10pm

I haven't felt much like writing for writing's sake recently. I have several assignments due next week which are taking up most of my time. Today we have been told that the UK has the highest death toll in Europe, but people are still itching to get out of the house. The fact that in the South West there have been very few deaths, and apparently none whatsoever in my town, is obviously reassuring. But apparently my

town is in the top 5 worst hit in terms of loss of business – makes sense as we are a famous tourist town. We have no idea when the hotel can open again and its all a bit crazy but at the same time all a bit boring.

18th May 1pm

I've finally submitted all my assignments but have become so disillusioned with the concept of reading/writing for pleasure that I've neglected everything else.

Lockdown was eased a little on Wednesday (13th) so now we can take unlimited exercise – the Harbour authorities are allowing boats to be used so we had a lovely picnic on ours yesterday and swam off the side. Drama – yesterday there was helicopter circling the town. We have since discovered that a bunch of city-dwellers made their way here and were bragging about it in a shop, which started a fight! And apparently the same bunch were having a party and got into trouble on the rocks and had to be rescued, "met" by the police and told to bugger off. People are supposedly renting out their Airbnb and the caravan park is operating underground. What a bizarre time.