

So Much Heart: Seven Stories

By Philip Palios

Monday - Arrival

"I am going nuts. It's been four days working from home now, I can't take being home by myself all day anymore. I've got a train ticket to Paris for tonight, I booked it a month ago, but with everything going on, it's probably not a good idea to go. It's just that the ticket's not refundable. Such a waste."

Carina interrupts me, "So you're coming to Dumfries then. Right?"

The thought enters my conscious mind for the first time. "That's not a bad idea."

I hang up the phone. No plan, no train ticket, no place to stay, but certain where I am going. My hesitation about the Paris getaway leaves me without even a packed bag, but I do not rush or panic, my heart takes over.

Seven hours later, I am in Dumfries. Despite having not lived here for six months, it still feels like coming home.

First stop: A pint at the Coach with Jay. Next, Carina's flat where two becomes four and dinner is served. We are swapping stories of our various failed or troubled romances and I realise this is the first time I've had my heart on the table in months. These are the people I can be an open book with, we are all there for each other.

The group expands to six when we venture to the Dougie and quickly run into other familiar faces. It's reggae night, beats blast and booze pours. Mitch joins us, justifying the outing with "This might be the last time we can go out in a while!" I laugh the idea off.

We venture on to the inevitable hole in the wall, our group merges into the mesh of a night out and there is no longer us and them, we are one. Room packed, people dancing, laughing, singing. Coloured lights twirl. It's raining outside, the smoking shelter is packed full – too loud for conversation inside, but plenty of it out here. So much catching up, exciting news, hug upon hug. New encounters, so many wonderful people. We share our sorrows, joys and general confusion about life with eyes devoid of judgement.

Closing time arrives and we disperse. Three of us go on walking as slowly as possible, unsure where to next, but not ready to go home. A moment's reflection on the day blows my mind – to wake up with so much fear and loneliness, and now here, with a community full of loving and inspiring people. Thank God Carina called this morning.

Tuesday – Where to Sleep

From my first morning coffee to an herbal tea before bed, my waking moments were spent in Lin's living room with all of their housemates. We were merging co-working and co-living into pure community. Plenty of breaks from our vocational pursuits were had for yoga, jam sessions, walks, shared meals and movie nights. While the world became more uncertain each day and shops began closing indefinitely, our hearts grew into greater synchronicity.

But there was not a spare bed in the house, so I slept in a room I rented across the street. Then the news of lockdown arrived. 'Stay home' they said. I remembered how I felt on my own in London and shuddered at the thought that I would be forced to endure the same madness. Whether seven minutes by foot or seven hours by train, it suddenly didn't matter how far my community was from my bed.

For the first few days, I defied the rules and continued my daily journey between the two places, but a sense of guilt for putting people in both houses at greater risk overcame

me. I went on a grocery run in preparation for isolating without my community. But that night, at what I thought would be my final dinner with the people that had lifted my spirits for the past two weeks, hearts intervened.

“You can stay in my room, I’ll sleep on the floor in Nat’s room.” Lorie, Nat’s sister said. Nat nodded in approval. She had only recently moved into the house after finishing uni, not knowing what to do next. Her first week had been spent on Nat’s floor, until her present room opened up.

I was humbled by the generosity, but insisted it wasn’t fair for Lorie to sleep on the floor and have to share a room with her sister for what could be months of lockdown. Yet the sisters persisted, Lorie claiming she preferred her mattress pad to the lumpy mattress anyway and Nat assuring me she enjoyed having her sister in her room.

It was stunning how quickly the impossible had become possible, all I could do was thank them and share how excited I was to be entering lockdown with friends I loved so much. We opened a bottle of prosecco and sang along to REM’s *It’s The End of The World as We Know It*.

Wednesday – Birthday Party

When the beginning of May rolled around, the disturbing realisation that I would be celebrating my birthday during lockdown struck me. Sadly, with each passing day, the duration of this new normal continued to surpass my expectations. Hoping to make the best of it, I created a Facebook event and as I started going through my Friends list I invited more and more people. With each name and face that I saw, I was reminded of how I met that person and all of the memories brought me joy. Even though I may not have spoken with some of these people in a while, I sent them an invitation because the thought of seeing them again felt wonderful.

To my surprise, an overwhelming number of people accepted my invitation and I spent the days leading up to the virtual party in anticipation of seeing friends I had not seen in quite some time. While I still disliked Facebook, I was glad that it enabled me to easily keep in touch with people and connect.

The day before my birthday, we received news that the government would be slightly easing the lockdown restrictions, allowing a few people from two different households to meet outside and enjoy each other’s company from a safe distance. Even better, this change went into effect the following day – just in time! I raced downstairs to tell my housemates the good news.

“We could invite Kat and her flatmates and do the Zoom party from the lawn at the top of the hill! We’ll sip Campari spritz and watch the sunset! Plus we can make non-alcoholic ones for Kat and Lin!”

“Is that even possible?”

“Yeah, just like some cranberry juice and-“

“No, I mean the Zoom.”

“Oh, hah- right , yeah we can use my hotspot!”

And so reality ended up far exceeding the expectations I had set when I created the Facebook event. Seven of us gathered on the lawn; two households separated by a two metre blanket with a laptop in the middle. We popped open the prosecco and launched into revelry. When I unwrapped a gift from Lin, a hand-made chapbook of their poems and

illustrations, I was elated and threw out the rulebook, diving across the blanket to give them a hug, which was returned without hesitation.

Friends appeared on the computer screen throughout the evening, some from a few streets down the road, others from down south, several from Germany and Norway, even friends far off in the US and Bolivia joined. I heard their stories, from restaurants re-opening in parts of Germany to police patrols and the lack of any social safety net in Bolivia. I wanted to reach through the Internet and hug everyone who had joined the party.

My heart fell open when the poetry reading started. I had asked everyone to bring a poem they would like to share and was happy to see that many people picked out special ones for the occasion. Even better, they were shared not only in English, but French, German and Spanish too. The magic created by these poets that was channelled through my friends filled me with gratitude, whether near or far I could feel the love that connected all of us that night.

Thursday – *Solidarity and Gratitude*

“I don’t think they really do it here.” Lin was on the phone with their friend in Birmingham, “It’s a small town, you know...”

The banging of pots and pans from outside drew their conversation to a pause. “Oh wait, maybe.” We all stood up without speaking a word and opened the front door, where we saw the couple next door making as much noise as they could with their cookware. The five of us crowded together, arms outstretched toward the street, applauding the NHS workers putting their lives on the line to fight the worst pandemic in over a century. For some reason, the absence of a parade of doctors and nurses I thought was required before it made sense to join in the national outpouring of gratitude no longer mattered. So what if it was just our two households and so what if the river was the only thing that heard us.

The following week, we didn’t hesitate to be at the door when eight o’clock rolled around, cheering our hearts out and pleased to hear some folks across the river joining in as well. The NHS did not need to be right in front of us to feel the effect of a nation showing solidarity while in isolation.

When Thursday of the third week of lockdown arrived, we upped our game – grabbing our instruments – accordion, djembe, guitar, trumpet and cello – and joining the symphony of our neighbour’s pots and pans along with a variety of percussion coming from across the river and other folks applauding, hooting and hollering.

I reckoned that as our communal gratitude continued growing we would be heard from one end of the town to another and the same would happen across the country. No matter where NHS workers were, I had no doubt they would hear our shared chorus of love.

The following weekend, during my regular video call with Roz, I learned that she had been in hospital for four days since we last spoke. Her COVID-19 test had come back positive and it was likely her partner would also catch it. As she recounted the experience to me, she focused on telling me about how great the doctors, nurses and other staff were to her. Not once did she talk about her suffering, but as she struggled to breathe and could only speak in brief sentences I knew she was still recovering and must have been quite ill over the past week. She said she had some equipment to evaluate her lung capacity and breathing that they gave her when they sent her home and it would probably be several weeks before she fully recovered. I told her how glad I was that she was getting better.

Roz was the first person I knew to have caught the disease and seeing how much she struggled, a young woman in good health, I no longer could think of COVID-19 in the abstract. I regretted my foolish violations of the lockdown restrictions and vowed to take this pandemic more seriously.

When the fourth Thursday came, I was at the front door cheering louder than ever before, my shouts full of love for the NHS. Love for the fact that my friend was still alive.

Friday - Brave New Words

‘Stay tuned – we are getting through some technical difficulties and will be going live soon.’ The status update read. Me, being a bit of a tech nerd, wanted to jump in and help, but the lockdown made that a bit challenging. We were planning to have a watch party on Zoom when the pre-recorded video went live in lieu of the monthly open mic night at The Stove, so we could watch it all together and then if people wanted to, they could perform live afterwards. When it was nearly an hour past the start time, we messaged the organisers to see if they wanted to play the recording over Zoom since there seemed to be issues with Facebook. They agreed that the show must go on and even though it wasn’t ideal, our proposal would make it work. Within minutes of starting the video conference, it was taken over by a malicious robot drawing penises on the shared screen and typing obscene remarks. We added a bit of security to the equation and were finally up and running.

As each performer took the virtual stage, it was inspiring to see how much effort they put into producing heart-warming videos – it was as if we were traveling to a separate house concert in the artist’s home for each one, connecting us in a much more intimate way than the ‘real’ open mic stage we were used to.

When the recorded performances concluded, there were over a dozen folks hanging around, eager to keep the night going. More poetry and music was shared, often by means of friendly peer pressure. When the pressure was applied to me, I picked up a poem I had written the night before. It went like this:

A robot recently told me
If you control the building
There’s no point having the building

Sometimes I open up the control panel on my laptop
Or slam its lid shut while a zillion apps are in the middle of
Algo-rhythm-ing

Sometimes I quit my job and buy a plane ticket

It’s because I want to control my life.
If you have no self-control, you are insane
If you have no life-control, you are human.

The universe, God, whatever we want to call it,
The collective sub-conscious, or maybe the vast
Network of energy connecting us all

It intervenes. It scrambles the free-will and says

There's more to this than you can understand.

It takes our meagre actions and weaves them into its web

Well, that's my experience at least.
I've been trying to fight it all my life.
Still do.

Did I think I would be here today,
Doing this?
Normally, yes. But at some point
Always
No.

Those are usually the magical moments.
Not always good
Sometimes completely tragic
Sometimes miraculous.
Sometimes, strangely, both.

When I got to the final stanza I couldn't hold my heart in anymore and it began pouring out of my tear ducts. The last words barely escaping before I collapsed into Nat's arms, grateful to have a friend to catch me.

Saturday - Haircut

Shaving does not come naturally to me. At best, I shave every 2-3 days, but more often I might only shave once in a week. When lockdown started, I was in such shock about the rapidly changing reality that my facial hair was the last thing on my mind. Once a week had passed, I decided to just let it keep growing until things were back to normal.

I was foolish, but no more foolish than everyone else really; thinking that surely within a few weeks or a month at most the virus would be under control. But every week revealed how mistaken we were. Weeks to months, it became clear that we would be lucky if there was any semblance of life in February come December. My beard was growing longer than it had ever been before and was starting to become uncomfortable. When I looked in the mirror, it also became clear that I was looking more and more like someone who had been living in the forest for a while. Lockdown meant I wasn't seeing many people in-person, but I was on video chats every day and was starting to become self-conscious of how I looked.

My hair was also becoming unwieldy. I imagined it becoming stylishly long, but much like my beard it lacked any sense of style – it was just ever-expanding into madness. But my hair was far less annoying than my beard. It didn't itch and it didn't make eating increasingly difficult. I was fine letting it continue to grow until it was safe for me to see a barber.

Lin saw things differently. Despite never saying anything before about their hair or beard bothering them, they announced one sunny Saturday morning that they were shaving off their hair (but keeping their beard). I was shocked by such a brash change, opting to go for bald rather than a trim. Was this spontaneous or was there something under the

surface known only to them? I knew I had a habit of letting my beard grow out in the past when I was feeling down and then once I got over whatever was troubling me, I would shave, rejoicing in my clean face. I much prefer to be clean shaven, even though plenty of people say a beard suits me. I think just as many or more prefer me without facial hair. And who cares what everyone else thinks anyway? Lin certainly didn't.

Midway through the ordeal, Lin took a lunchbreak with a mohawk. It was like encountering a stranger in the kitchen. My conceptions of who this person might be on the inside changed completely. The generous, intellectual adventurer was gone and a rebel rocker had entered the house. I knew it was still Lin, but I couldn't think of them the same way with this new appearance. It was only more extreme when I wandered into the living room that afternoon to see the project complete. Lin's locks sitting in a bowl and my new bald housemate sitting on the couch. Usually I would associate baldness with either a monk or businessman having a mid-life crisis, and Lin would fit into the former rather easily, but the beard left hipster as the only suitable stereotype. But it was still Lin. I wondered if something had changed on the inside, if this symbolised some sort of spiritual growth, but I didn't ask.

Two months into lockdown, I went to Boots and purchased a beard trimmer. The day before, I had turned in my notice to the heartbreakingly evil corporation I worked for and notified my London landlord that I wanted to terminate my lease. I decided I would stay in Dumfries and write.

Sunday - Leap of Faith

White collar (sans the white collar) work has felt inevitable throughout my life. Before I was old enough to legally drink in America, I sat in an office staring at a screen for over forty hours per week. When I turned 24, I knew that corporate life was not the life for me. I wanted to learn more and see the world before I died. I wanted to do work that healed, rather than destroyed our crumbling planet. I decided university was the best place to start, but after a few years of that I was overcome by fear – fear that I could never have a comfortable standard of living outside of corporate life and that I was only delaying my inevitable return to it. So I dropped out and got a six figure salary. I told myself this wasn't my fault, it was just how the world worked.

But no amount of material or chemical comfort could ease the pain that grew in my heart. I kept seeing things get worse: growing poverty, inequality, ecological destruction, and so many other wrongs that my employer, its employees and its customers tried to ignore. I broke down and went back to university. When the same fears of inevitable corporate life returned and put my continued studies in jeopardy, I learned that I couldn't conquer fear on my own. I sought out help from my friends and family as well as mental health professionals.

Accepting that I couldn't get past fear on my own changed everything for the better. Rather than return to corporate life, I excelled in my studies and was fortunate to be in a programme that offered courses at the intersection of social justice, ecology and literature. My writing also took off: I published my first novel and a chapbook before graduating. Everything was going well, but financial uncertainty put me on edge as the end of my studies approached. I applied for a long-shot scholarship to do a master's degree in Scotland and also applied for a job at a monolith tech company. The tech company called me back first and I decided a bird in hand was worth two in the bush. Fear won.

And then I got the news that I had been selected for the scholarship, news beyond my wildest dreams. I took advantage of the two-way door I had once again entered and booked travel to Scotland. My dream of learning and seeing the world was now a reality, even though I had done so much to fight it with my lack of faith. In Dumfries I met other writers and artists who ignited my own creative energy. As my masters course drew to an end, I helped facilitate the creation of an anthology of new writing from the region. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

But fear never gives up. "Give it a chance. Stick around. Let's work on more projects together." My dear friend Nat told me as I was fretting about my uncertain future. I ignored her and flew back to what I once again thought was the only way to make a living: punching the clock for the richest person on the planet.

And then all of this happened. A strange and tragic twist of fate, COVID-19, ended the notion of mass transit and office work – thus breaking my work down into the simple truth that it could be done from anywhere with an Internet connection. To Dumfries I went.

This was not a risky move, it was an opportune one. As with many crises, the richest men in the world took advantage of it to increase their fortunes, and as one of their employees, I was along for the ride. "Damn, look at how much our sales have jumped!" My department director reported in a meeting, quickly following with the lie, "but we would never celebrate during a global health crisis." Right.

I was back in Dumfries, living with close friends, including Nat, spending as much time as I could being creative while in isolation, but still slaving away at the computer for 40 hours per week. Worse, I came to the realisation that the moral hypocrisy between what I was doing with my life and what I was trying to write was preventing me from writing it.

On a daily basis, I would complain about how much I hated my job and my housemates lovingly put up with it. At dinner one Sunday, Lin talked about their own struggle finding a job and not wanting to enter the corporate workforce or do some other bullshit job. I always thought this problem was uniquely mine, but quickly saw that there were many people who chose to accept less security and a lower income in exchange for their own well-being, body, mind and soul. They found opportunities to do good that paid the bills. Their life was not as comfortable as I was accustomed to, but they were living a life that wasn't causing their soul so much pain it required endless material comfort.

I decided I would quit. It was no longer a question of if, but when. Not soon after making my decision, a group of my colleagues were fired for speaking out about the lies our company was spewing about caring for warehouse workers during the pandemic. My colleagues provided first-hand accounts from workers revealing the lack of social distancing and PPE at warehouses. Worse, they often had no health care or paid sick time. I was shocked. All of the official communications within the company were touting how much management cared about the warehouse workers and was watching out for them during this time of crisis. In reality, they were covering up the fact that if putting people's lives in danger was what it took to keep the money rolling in, they were willing to accept that. I was not. I turned in my notice.

"You quit? You quit! Yeahhh!" Nat, Lin and my other housemates rejoiced that I would be joining them in pursuing work that does good. I was surprised when even my parents supported my decision. Celebrating was difficult for me, despite my confidence in having made a big step in the right direction. You can't jump out of a window and immediately start celebrating, you have to land on the trampoline first.

So here I am. I've taken the leap. I have faith I will find work that aligns with my values. I have faith there's a trampoline down below, but I can't see it just yet. At the moment, I have the love of my friends and family supporting me. I'm writing more than I ever have before, and even getting paid for it, so I'd say that's a good start.