

134 Days

by Phil Cummins

March 6, 2020

Our eldest son, having been supported by us for years and now recently graduated, has finally commenced gainful employment as an architect with a Dublin-based firm. We decided to broach the thorny issue of ‘rent’ with him.

“But that’s a quarter of my salary!” said P—, clearly shocked at our proposal of €100/week to continue living under our roof.

Parents and son have since taken a step back to allow time for reflection on these new pecuniary arrangements, although I suspect he’s hoping that such talk of rent will dissipate. We’ll give it a few days before completing that sentence for him: “That’s a quarter of my salary... for room-with-ensuite, electricity, gas, cleaning, laundry, groceries, Wi-Fi, parental taxi services, Nespresso capsules, and Chinese takeout. Cash or IBAN, son. It’s your choice.”

March 7, 2020

Everyone is talking about the coronavirus. Italy has just quarantined millions of people but I suspect the horse has bolted. My sister called to enquire if we’d all still be travelling to the US in June for a family wedding. I had no answer.

March 10, 2020

P— has decided that his hard-earned wages would be better spent renting a flat in Dublin rather than lining his parents’ pockets. He arranged to view a place along the North Circular Road this evening. F— and I took a peek on Google Street Maps. Having bought our first place together in Stoneybatter many years ago, we pleasantly reminisced over a glass of wine about how some houses along the North Circular Road were actually quite nice. One

quick glance told us this was *not* one of those houses, a fact P— later confirmed using his extensive palette of urban linguistic skills.

“I’d be afraid to take me shoes off in that fuckin’ dump!” he declared, showing us the photos on his mobile. “It’s a converted hallway with a bed, cooker, and shower unit all in the *one* room.”

“I think that’s what they call compact and bijou, son,” his mother chimed in.

“The toilet’s basically in a wardrobe. *A wardrobe! For 850 quid a month!*”

We let him rant on and nodded our heads understandingly as good parents do. (I’ve always said the best thing you can do with an infected boil is to just let the pus run out.) Crude variations on the f-word like fucking shyster, fucking bastard and, my personal favourite, thieving fuckhead, flew around our living room like angry bats. The poor slum landlord’s ears must’ve been burning. Our man-cub has clearly been traumatized by the Dublin flat-hunting experience, so we’ve settled on €10/day for him (and his lovely partner, A—, the other half of love’s young dream) to continue availing of the five-star accommodations being offered up by his parents here in Kildare.

March 12, 2020

The pandemic seems to be raging. This thing’s going to burn the world. Children seem to be resistant but older people and those with underlying conditions aren’t faring too well. Antarctica seems to be the only safe haven. All European flights have been banned from entering the US. The Irish education system has ground to a halt and a nationwide lockdown has been announced. Terms like ‘self-isolation’ and ‘social distancing’ have become the new mots du jour. Love’s young dream have suspended their flat-hunting and we’ve promptly reeled in our youngest lad, D—, who was staying on campus in Limerick. It appears that all five of us will now be working out of home for the foreseeable future. How uncanny that this lockdown is coinciding with Lent, a traditional period of quarantine and repentance, a time to express remorse for our collective sins. When it comes to Mother Nature, we have much to atone for.

March 14, 2020

Despite my innate anxiety, I feel compelled to click on my various news links for a daily dose of pandemic gloom. Civilisation seems to be pausing. Planes are grounded, borders are sealing up, the hospitality industry is bolting its doors, and entire sectors are being laid off globally. A new recession is being talked up. The message is clear: stay in your homes, practice social distancing, don't congregate, scrub your hands, don't touch your face, beware the bug. Hand shaking has morphed into this weird little dance that involves elbow tapping. I find I'm constantly scanning myself for Covid symptoms, checking my forehead for a temperature, feeling my neck for signs of a sore throat. It sounds like an absolute wanker of a dose to catch. In my mind every cough is laced with coronavirus, every headache has Covid's insidious fingerprints all over it. It's emotionally draining. I've never washed my hands so much.

March 16, 2020

Running has become my antidote for pandemic anxiety. I went out for my daily jog along a nearby deserted country road only to have two squabbling crows fall out of a tree and land on the ground right in front of me. I almost tripped over them. It felt like an omen, like I was living inside a chapter of Stephen King's *The Stand*.

March 17, 2020

There's something about Irish pubs remaining closed on Paddy's Day that screams 'THIS IS SERIOUS SHIT!' It's like the entire country has been placed under anaesthesia. F— and I went for a drive but stayed sitting in the car with our coffee and sandwiches, chatting quietly and admiring the scenery.

Our Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, addressed the nation on the evening news and didn't pull his punches. The situation was grave, he said. Everybody had to play their part to help 'flatten the curve' and avoid overburdening our health service. Never will so many ask so much of so few. His tone was calm and dignified, his message brutally honest: the worst was yet to come, many will get sick and some will die. I never thought I'd say this but the days of Brexit seem positively halcyon. We ended up watching *Four Weddings and a*

Funeral on Netflix afterwards for about the tenth time. After Leo's sobering words, we needed something to cheer us up. And it did.

March 29, 2020

F— has transformed our conservatory into an online classroom from where she continues to educate her secondary school pupils. In an effort to maintain domestic harmony as the lockdown grinds on, she's also prepared a 'To Do List for Bored People' and hung it on the kitchen wall in an effort to motivate the three young adults also living under our roof. My personal favourites:

- Fill a coal bucket
- Clean a toilet
- Groom a dog (outside)
- Grab a duster (and use)
- Music – please don't deafen yourself if using headphones
- Go into the garden and get some air
- Write a letter to anyone stuck at home (p.s. that's everyone!)
- Clean the oven (you don't have to go the whole hog, but every little helps)

April 1, 2020

P— emerged from his architectural workspace set up in our living room and solemnly announced that off-licences were to permanently close by 9 p.m. this evening because the government no longer deemed the sale of alcohol to be an 'essential' service.

"The stupid gobshites!" I barked. "Folks need booze to make life under lockdown tolerable. That'll cause public unrest." In my mind I'd already begun contingency planning for an off-license raid that very afternoon in order to protect the line of supply, thinking perhaps I could empty everything out of the car boot to make a bit more room. I broke into a sweat. I even imagined a Sunday morning-style barricade being erected across either end of the supermarket booze aisle.

“That would be an April Fool’s joke, P—,” said his mother without looking up from her jigsaw puzzle. Tragedy averted. Ever the cool head is our F—.

April 4, 2020

I read with admiration how one chap in England is running the length of a marathon in his little back garden to raise money for charity. Another is pacing up and down his stairs until he’s covered a distance equivalent to the height of Mount Everest. Mad!

April 7, 2020

Social distancing feels like having to unlearn one’s primal impulse to touch. The human compulsion to hug or shake hands is as innate as breathing. It’s as if everyone has been rendered negatively charged, electrostatically repelling one another if they come within two meters.

To stave off cabin fever, F— produced a set of magic markers and encouraged us to write a ‘word-of-the-day’ up on the kitchen dresser windows, ideally one defined by the events of the day. Here are a few samplers:

- Scrofulous – just popped into my head whilst listening to a cringeworthy TV interview with UKIP right-winger, Nigel Farage.
- Gustatory – in reference to gustation (tasting), something we’re doing a *lot* of to help us cope with lockdown.
- Banjaxed – that would be our broken downstairs toilet seat. (There’s an obvious link here to Gustatory.)
- Flimflamery – whenever Trump or any member of the GOP speaks.
- Zoonotic – the author of our collective lockdown misery, Covid-19.
- Sequestration – when your entire world shrinks to a house containing two corgis, a cat, and the same five people day-in-day-out.

April 10, 2020

Bottle recycling banks are overflowing. This is a snapshot of life under lockdown, oceans of booze sluicing down people’s necks to help them cope

with being indefinitely house-bound. Livers being marinated and kidneys pickled so that brains can be numbed.

April 11, 2020

Stillness is all around now as towns and cities have retreated into a sort of hibernation. I read that conflicts have abated and skylines are clearing of smog, fish are once again becoming visible in urban waterways and people claim that birdsong has never seemed louder. As I jog out early along the Carnalway Road, feeling like the only person on Earth, the morning is eerily calm and yet I sense a quiet hysteria thrumming beneath everything.

April 13, 2020

I went out to the back garden to write this afternoon and get away from the general noise of the house. In one of the nearby housing estates, however, some git chose that exact moment to kick off with an electric guitar and a big speaker to croon out some corny showband numbers in an attempt to cheer up the unhappily sequestered denizens. An appalling din. My already fragile mood plummeted.

I'm also desperate for a haircut. Human hair clearly didn't get the 'cease-and-desist-from-growing-until-the-pandemic-is-over' memo. With barbers closed, hair growth has been proceeding unchecked. P— has already taken the electric shaver to his younger brother's head and has been eyeing up my own increasingly shaggy locks the same way a lion eyes up an ageing wildebeest.

April 15, 2020

We've renamed our postal van the 'Green Van of Happiness'. When most daily human contact beyond the front door involves Zoom, the sight of a real live postman is a reminder that the world continues to turn, even when he's only delivering bills. Today he dropped in a nice shiny bandwidth-chewing Xbox for P—, the very same lad who railed against the unfairness of his parents charging him rent.

April 16, 2020

I picked out a new toilet seat from the window of our local hardware store. I spotted it as I was passing and immediately called the number posted on the locked front door. Once I'd paid by credit card over the phone, the front door opened a tiny crack and a new toilet seat slid out on the pavement in front of me before slamming shut. If I was buying drugs, I bet this is exactly how they'd sell them to me. The downstairs loo now rejoices by the way.

May 2, 2020

Coming home from Tesco (where, annoyingly, very few people were socially distancing), I spotted a Zimmer-framed old man scraping loose paint off the capping stone along his waist-high garden wall. He was inching along at a pace just south of continental drift. Christ! Folks will do *anything* to keep busy. The sight of him reminded me of my own father, whose thirty-second anniversary falls today. He would've turned eighty this year. A tradesman to his toenails, he wouldn't have coped well with the inactivity imposed by this lockdown. I called my mother, who is cocooning in her apartment in Ontario. She told me how much she hates this day.

May 9, 2020

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I paid my son €15 to cut my hair using a beard trimmer and nail scissors. P— donned an ankle-length butchers' apron especially for the task, looking not unlike Sweeney Todd. The others laughed and took pictures on their mobiles. Even the two hounds enjoyed the spectacle. This was primetime entertainment.

May 25, 2020

Going out for my walk this evening I spotted our three young adults laughing and playing frisbee just across the street from our house. My heart sang! It was such a life-affirming thing to see. They weren't scrolling on phones or binging on boxsets, just occupying themselves with this innocent pastime, their way of coping with the boredom of lockdown. The sight of them made me smile and filled me with hope.

May 26, 2020

Letter to the *Irish Times*:

Sir, – President Trump has been sternly criticised for a recent trip to his golf course as his nation struggles to contain the Covid-19 outbreak. However, given the widely reported flaws in his handling of the US federal pandemic response, in conjunction with the steady diet of misinformation that he appears to openly peddle with apparent impunity (hydroxychloroquine cures and Chinese conspiracies to name a few), one could argue that it might actually be better for everyone if he ‘remained’ on the golf course. – Yours, etc.

Unfortunately, my insightful observations on Trump’s golf outing didn’t make the letters page today. The *IT* did, however, publish the views of some readers who were complaining about the unrealistic height of the sexual bar in the new TV adaptation of Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*.

In other news, our overburdened Wi-Fi committed hara-kiri today. As P and I stomped around the house complaining about the impossibility of getting work done under these conditions, F— calmly resolved the situation by lifting the phone to switch broadband providers. We’ve now jumped to 100-mbit/sec. Our internet’s moving like shit through a goose now. Yay! F— strikes again.

May 28, 2020

Whilst out walking, I was hailed by a friend strolling in the opposite direction with his dog. We spoke briefly to one another from opposite sides of the road when he reminded me to enjoy the forthcoming bank holiday weekend. It stuck in my head all the way home: *There’s a bank holiday weekend coming up? How did I not know that?* The days are all homogenous now, I suppose, indistinguishable little pockets of time to be lived through, each one its own little Groundhog Day. This lockdown, like gravity, seems to be bending time.

May 29, 2020

Race protests are flaring up across the US following the death of an African American man, George Floyd, during an arrest in Minneapolis a few days ago. Whilst handcuffed and lying face down on the ground, a police officer kneeled on his neck for up to five minutes during which time he was repeatedly heard

to say, “I can’t breathe.” The entire incident was captured on a mobile phone and came with a double warning on YouTube. It was one of the most distressing things I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t bear to finish it. Didn’t these guys learn *anything* after LA?

June 2, 2020

Our eighty-seven-year-old neighbour has gone stir crazy. Cocooning for the last three months under the watchful eye of his daughter, he attempted to make a break for it with his walking stick on the pretence of needing to buy butter in the local corner shop. Luckily she managed to intercept him before he got too far beyond the garden gate. He wasn’t the least bit happy: “I’m sick and tired of all this bloody cockatoin’,” he snapped. His word for cocooning (cockatoin’). Absolutely priceless!

June 6, 2020

D— is twenty-one this weekend. Obviously he can’t have a party, so we’ve decided to celebrate amongst the five of us. F— ordered in catering and included meals for six other local families. She delivered a family-sized meal and bottle of Prosecco to each house along with a bag of party favours and typed instructions that they celebrate our son’s twenty-first in their own way and video the proceedings for us on their mobiles. This is one of her superpowers: spreading joy.

June 12, 2020

I’ve pulled something in the arch of my foot whilst out running and now it’s absolutely killing me. I’ve spent the day hobbling about the place, trying to disguise the fact from F—. She’ll only call me a feckin’ eejit for not changing my trainers sooner. (I’ve had them for two years and the toes are poking out, but they’re comfy.) She’ll insist that I rest up for the week but the thought of not being able to run for that long is unbearable to me. Running has become my Ctrl-Alt-Del button during this lockdown.

June 14, 2020

After three months in lockdown with us, P— and A— are understandably desperate to get their own flat. They've been scanning Rent.ie on a minute-by-minute basis as vacancies grow. Having lined up some viewings, they hope to vacate the upstairs love nest soon. D— is already eyeing their larger bedroom and expects to take up residence within minutes of their departure.

We took them for an apartment viewing. En route, a Tesla went belting past us on the M7. We spotted it pulled over a few miles later getting ticketed. Clearly delighted that justice had been properly served, P— laughed triumphantly and made some amusing comment about the miniscule dimensions of the Tesla driver's penis.

The apartment itself was located near the Royal Canal, not the most salubrious part of Dublin it must be said. Situated directly behind Croke Park, the area itself was beshitted with litter. As they went inside to view the apartment, F— and I waited in the car. Moments later a ten-year-old scamp wandered past leading a bedraggled looking donkey before turning down one of the old council house streets. He probably stables the poor nag in his back shed and races it around the streets at the weekend. I decided not to tell P about this.

June 24, 2020

Working from home continues to be a challenge. My attic workspace is flanked by two angled Velux roof windows facing east and west, respectively. Unfortunately, the afternoon sun from the west beams right in on my computer screen. I tried to remedy this today by pinning up a large piece of poster board to the window frame (not recommended when you're standing on a rotating chair with wheels.) As I was logging in for my staff Zoom meeting, the whole thing detached and came flapping down on top of me. I should really buy proper window blinds.

June 29, 2020

After months of keeping us physically and psychologically propped up, the pressure finally got to F— today. She's given so many tiny fragments of herself away to others: fragments of comfort to those who are ill or who've

suffered bereavement; fragments of advice to those with worries; fragments of time to those who need listening to. She suddenly turned to me from the top of the stairs all flustered and teary: “I’m tired of trying to hold up the sky. I want my Mammy.” I thought my heart would crack. And so I mammied her for the rest of the day in my own clunking husbandly way, but I’m a pitiable substitute for the dearly departed real thing.

July 6, 2020

D— has passed all of his first year college exams. Hearing the bellow out of him this morning after checking his results online, I thought he’d awoken to find a severed horse’s head in his bed.

Later on, I watched in horror as RTE news showed footage of a jam-packed Temple Bar last night. Now that restrictions have gradually been eased, crowds of thirsty revellers were staggering about the streets in close proximity brandishing pints. We humans are hard-wired to seek release but this seemed so fucking selfish: grog and social distancing cannot co-exist! Healthcare workers must be howling in frustration at seeing all their courageous labours treated so contemptuously. New infections are going to surge. It’s inevitable.

July 11, 2020

After multiple viewings, love’s young dream have finally found a little place in Dublin and are moving out next week. F— decided to give them an old coffee table of ours to help get them started with some furniture. Emptying out its drawers, she got an attack of the weepies when she found an old primary school Mother’s Day card from D— with a teabag stuck inside informing her that she deserved a nice cup of tea for being such a great mammy. This next week will be tough on her as her first chick leaves the nest.

July 15, 2020

The Green Van of Happiness delivered a new pack of hand-sewn face masks of varying sizes and colours today, all made by my sister. They looked like little bikinis, the latest must-have facial fashion accessory for humanity’s new

normal. As I now get used to wearing one, I wonder if the world will ever spin the same way again.

July 17, 2020

I lay awake in the early hours thinking about how the morning would bring our son's final day living under our roof. Every parent expects (and hopes) that their kids will eventually move on, but nobody warns you about the emotional sucker-punch: how you will reminisce and stress and worry; how you will have to learn to navigate the echoes they leave behind, their departure a reminder of your own spent youth. Since graduating from college we've come to know P— as an adult, one who fledged his architectural career in our living room during a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. This altered world is not the one we expected to launch him into, with all its threats of viral surges and recessionary gloom, but I believe we have a moral obligation to remain hopeful, to not abandon ourselves to apathy and despair. The future will bring what it will bring and we will meet it with our heads raised.

July 18, 2020

Moving day. Rising at dawn I found F— writing a letter to our son, words of wisdom to be read only after he'd moved into his own place. Was it only 134 days ago since we first broached that thorny issue of rent with him? Seems like a lifetime. Tears were spilling down her cheeks as she told P— how she loved him all the way to the moon and back. Reading her letter, I visualised the cuddly figure of Little Nutbrown Hare that survived his childhood and is now permanently perched (minus an ear) on the bookcase beside my attic work desk, its arms spread wide in a fearless and joyful embrace of life. She expressed incredulity that the elder lemons of the family, parents and relatives now passed on, didn't prepare her for the unique heart wrench of this day. It defies preparedness, I suppose. But as with so many other things that have befallen us all in recent months, it can be tempered with resilience and love.



Phil Cummins is a Dublin-born academic and writer living in County Kildare. His fiction and essays have been long/short-listed in various international competitions, including honourable mention (2020) and shortlist (2022) for the Fish Memoir Prize. His writing has featured in various anthologies and literary magazines.