

In my room

I write and read. By saying this, I mean I am pleased with the presence of books and unpopular as it may sound but still I pander to poetry. I am fully aware that to enjoy these things, I have to be in the company of silence. I was okay with that. But once, I found a frightful face of it, in my very room. Yes, just in my room. It brought me away from writing, from reading, from many things actually.

They say, to cut time, sleep is an effective trick. It can be a good strategy to take when you want to fast forward things. Just like when you want to get to that day of your first travel abroad, a dream date, or an important occasion of your life. I wanted to have more sleep at night and even on other times of the day for the hope that when I wake up, it is the time that I am no longer a COVID-19 person under monitoring (PUM). But sleep was trouble. Most of the time I could not get it.

Shortly before Cebu City declared a lockdown, I found a way to come home, in Santa Fe, an island town in the North, around 4 to 5 hours away from the city. But it was a few hours during the day of my travel when a multitude of people rushed to the terminal to catch a ride home. Like me, they were also trying to elude the city's lockdown but consequently infringed a primary protocol: social distancing. The volume of passengers that ambushed the terminal got the attention of media. It was all over the news. People literally were already rubbing elbows with each other, all determined and competing to get that seat on the bus.

Consequently, the event caused alarm to towns in northern Cebu, the towns that passengers are expected to arrive at. IWith the flood of people in the terminal, just one infected person is enough to put everyone's life at risk, including the ones waiting at their homes for a family's arrival. With the worse possible scenario, all people who arrived to their hometowns from the city that day were tagged PUMs. I was one on the list.

So, if you are a PUM, you have to be home quarantined or isolated for 14 days—a

window-period for the novel corona virus' incubation based on studies. As part of the community protocol and in case no testing is done, a PUM takes the isolation to make sure that he or she will not infect other people in case he or she contracted the new deadly virus. I was in my room, played the waiting game and took the vicious circumstance of staying for probable worse and the dreadful unknown.

I surrendered to the unknown and panicked and suddenly believed that vitamins have super powers. I ordered for rather stronger and costly vitamins for myself and my family. I also asked my mother and younger brothers to disinfect the entire house and had them make sure all traces of my arrival were cleaned up while I pressed myself in the shadows of my room. The disinfection routine went on like the sea would not see calm if we don't do it at least twice a day.

From what I read, part of the home quarantine protocol is for me to use separate utensils for food and not to join people like in meals and casual chats. So I had my meals alone. I followed the advice strictly to give myself a chunk of reassurance and peace of mind. I had my fair share of having meals by myself especially on busy days in the past. But during those quarantine days, meals felt different, they were unsatisfying, empty and tasteless. It came to my senses that food shared with others becomes more delicious. Sadly, I bet it is.

On the other hand, I also put it as a social responsibility to adhere to the advice of the local health department. It can be called like that, but at some point, it can be love, too. This new virus is clearly not a type we can be compliant about. It is an invisible enemy, as they tagged it. I may have gotten it. If yes, I may put my family and everyone in my neighborhood at great risk.

I received regular visits from the local and barangay health unit to check my body temperature and to ask me questions related to the viral infection symptoms. Everytime Nang Nene, a barangay health worker, shows me a normal temperature figure, I get a tiny bag of relief back to my room.

I was already with my family in one roof, however protocols made me feel severed more

than ever. So I just wanted all these to end. I thought I could have the quarantine time to have more sleep—a thing usually deprived of us on days when we have to juggle works. But, sleep in the contrary became scarce, elusive.

Anxiety does something real loud to us. It haunts us, even more on nights when silence smears through our existence. Amidst the susurrating electric fans and the teeming desire to get a sleep, I had the times that I heard every beating of my heart. I couldn't stop but notice and attend to it, check its rate, scrutinize signs of my being alive. These were the times when I started counting my breath and tried to confirm its cadence. While, a tiny pinch in my throat had brought me to scenes of ventilating, hospitals and much worse. It was actually during those nights of trying to doze off that I realized how much I care for my family despite the frank flaws in our relationship. My worries piled up. I become concerned about not just my health but also theirs. I kept on asking: What if I got the virus and brought it to them?

In our country, mental health is hardly given attention. When one is seen to experience mental sickness, one is ostracized. Because of this, we then suppress the idea that we are not well mentally, or we hide matters about this. The fight against it becomes alone. And the sad truth, many have failed the fight. Anxiety took its toll on me because I know to myself that health care is expensive in this country, it is even poor in my island. I recalled my parents' age, they belong to the most vulnerable group as studies say. It made me more disquieted. So, I could not tell anyone what was going on on my head. If I did, let's say, maybe I could be laughed at and will not be taken seriously. I was afraid I might appear like a fool then.

I write and read a lot. I know that to enjoy these things, I need quiet, I need silence. There were times that I really go after it. I find it, like when everyone's hyped up during the weekend, example my brother putting the speaker's volume high to enjoy his favorite songs, my nieces running all around the house screaming, playing, and enjoying their visit. Occassionally in times like these, I chose to sneak out of the house and spend my early afternoons at the office or go to a public beach to read my book or to try to thread the lines I have in mind. But the silence that the quarantine brought, penned me a different cover. It was not the kind I usually look for. Rather it was the one I normally wanted to

survive from. It almost had the same face with pain and dread, with horror and shade.

I tried to make myself company with rolls of movies, playlists and mobile games. But, dire forces still prowled. Every credits frame, playlist gaps and end of matches break were all tiny rooms for worries to creep in. During these times, I often decide to put the lights on, open my door and at least have a view outside. These were the nights that I feel so lucky to see house lizards moving on walls and kept me thinking that I am alive and life still surround me in the depth of the night.

The thought of writing about the silences of my quarantine never occupied an iota of space on my mind. I didn't even want them in my head. The point that I am writing about this now, means that I got through it and more importantly did not get the virus.

So let's take this, I dread with anxiety and was consumed by it. But on the latter days of my isolation, the time wherein I started to see brighter lights entering my room, I thought of the people who are actually sick of the virus. They are for sure alone, physically struggling, probably fighting for every breath while severed from their families. I wonder how much weight of mental dread they have to overcome on top of the physical pain. With all the health advisories fleeting around media platforms, we have heard less about keeping our minds well. This pandemic is not just about the physical body, it is also about our minds. Day after day, most of us are becoming balls of anxiety, waiting to explode. And we cannot simply wash this with soap and sanitizer away.

The quarantine helped me appreciate the chances in the past of having trips, whether for business or personal. Our ability to move, our potency to travel, is one way, if not the best, to experience the best of life: to find what other places have to offer, to be surprised by the existence of things you have not imagined, to see new shades of colors in different skies and horizons, and to trace perplexing plains and landscapes.

However, we have to note that our very own mobility brought the virus to where it is right now. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 forced us to a state of immobility, prison and trap. As for me, and may be for many others, it was not just my physical body that was confined to a specific space but also my mind caged in a long moonless night. For some

time, I forgot to see tomorrow as a new bright day and thought of it as a cliff, a void, a dead end. However, there were things that made me better: smiles and Hi's from my niece, short talks with my brother from a distance, my parents checking on me if I have yet eaten my meal, and the assurances from my cousins who most often than not drop by at our house teasing.

This point of my life proved me that a travel need not go far at all as my favorite travel writer, Pico Iyer, puts it. Travel, for me now, is about reaching one point from another with freedom, sometimes carelessness, and guilt free. Whether to be yourself or to lose yourself. Just like getting into the sala to share the sofa with my brother and get thrilled by the movie on TV, or steal a moment over dripping water on the faucet from my mother, to wash my hands, while she cleans the pan in the kitchen.

I learned to appreciate these very short trips because of the quarantine. Now, I feel I have so much gratitude to pour for the years I have had travelling to some places in the country and in Asia. But more importantly, I have to be thankful, above all, to share this seemingly whole different dashing world I discovered—our house—with my family, safe and well against the threat outside.

I know that the entire Cebu is still in community quarantine and the menace of the virus dawdles. Meaning, it is imperative that we all stay at home. But despite the attendance of limitation and confinement, I should learn to adjust to this new normal. Well, I remember, I have learned better from my own quarantine. Guess, I can sleep better now, write, and read my books again, with silence, in my room.

-Jessrel Escaran Gilbuena