

Coo in the time of COVID

written by Guest Contributor | August 14, 2020



Ollie and Allie were born on Thursday, June 11, 2020. Their arrival was as unexpected as when we first knew of their existence.”

It was back in late December, just before the turn of the decade, when I found out I was about to become a dad. A new wind was blowing across the globe. News about a new virus was still starting to spring from other continents. An air of uncertainty hovered around any wary individual’s soul. The impending outbreak here in Mindanao of the Novel Coronavirus better known as COVID-19, the deadly respiratory disease, was just but a rumor back then. A gossip, even. Fast forward a couple of few weeks later, in January, Manila had its first confirmed case: a 38-year old Chinese woman. Here in General Santos City, the new virus was just a mere subject of jokes and, at times, a little bit of ridicule. “Why is she lecturing us about COVID-19? That virus will never reach us here,” said a guy next to me while a nurse gives was giving a talk about awareness of the new disease. Still, a couple of months later, on March 5, the first confirmed case of a patient without travel history was reported, and it all went downhill from there. What the populace failed to foresee was that the total number of cases would reach almost twenty-three thousand as of this writing.

Back then, we revel in the unfounded belief that we were untouchable; that we were impenetrable; that the virus will remain in China. And back then, we believed, or hoped, that by the time my girlfriend would give birth, by the time we welcome my beloved children into this world, the pandemic would be over. But a little over a thousand deaths, and four thousand seven hundred thirty-six recoveries later, the end is not yet in sight. And now, my little angels: Ollie and Allie would have to live through it all.

F in the time of P

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The date was May eight. It had been about eight weeks since I last went out of the house when I urgently needed to buy a new laptop to get better-paying jobs. Back then, we lived as though we were prisoners inside our own home. My mother, a health professional, was so stringent at implementing the lockdown inside her household (My father is in Ethiopia, working as an engineer.) When I think about it, my life in quarantine mainly revolved in just a couple of things: working and earning money. And for good reason: my girlfriend's due date is coming up and I only have a month left to prepare. I was already in the working class; a thread in the entire fabric of the workforce.

As I rode my old, trusty scooter, I recalled that day's plans. The motor felt and sounded different after being grounded in the garage for almost two months. It was decided that changing the engine and gear oil would be the top priority. Next, I'd go to the bank where I'd have to withdraw some money. Then finally, I'd go to the mall to pick up a couple of components for my brother's new computer set.

Before I reach the intersection of Dacera avenue and Yumang street, I came across a Land Transportation Office checkpoint heavily manned by uniformed traffic personnel. A motorcyclist with a female passenger was flagged down by one of the enforcers. Based on what they were wearing, I presumed they were employees of SM Gensan, the biggest mall in the city. They slowed down and went off the road, over to the side of the officer, where, perhaps, they would be asked a couple of questions. Under normal circumstances, I might have just went on without as much as a glance or even a hint of curiosity. I wondered why I became sensible to these kinds of things. Maybe everybody becomes this way when they start working. Perhaps, if I wasn't going to become a father during this pandemic, I might have acted differently. But at this point in time, who knows what's normal and what's not? I just continued along the way and hoped that the two wouldn't get penalized.

In the city, the atmosphere was surprisingly close to where it was before the start of the quarantine. The Enhanced Community Quarantine was lifted by the LGU just a few days ago at that time, shifting to a more relaxed GCQ or General Community Quarantine. Essential businesses were now allowed to be open, restaurants can now resume their operations albeit for take-away orders only: you order then you go home or you place your order online and have it delivered right at your doorstep. Except for a number of restrictions still in place and the lighter than usual traffic, it's as if anyone can say that everything has returned to normal.

Except that it hasn't and perhaps, it never will be.

Into the Uncertain

Our local government imposed the lockdown on March 16. The city was given a three days' notice to prepare, to stock up food and other vital supplies. Looking back, I couldn't exactly remember what had happened before the lockdown was announced. Coronavirus was rapidly spreading all over the world and the casualties were high uncountable. Over the side of Europe, Italy was bound to succumb to the virus. The world just couldn't keep up with the sheer number of infections. There were rumors that a lockdown would come into play, of course, but I couldn't exactly recall what had happened. Before, I was a struggling student trying to crawl out of the first year in law school. My brother, who was in the first year of senior high school before classes were suspended, said that we in the College of Law were the first to cancel classes. I agreed, at least to some extent. I just knew that the rest of the school year was inevitably cancelled and all students should get passing marks subject to some guidelines.

Two weeks before the lockdown, I remembered that most of my professors weren't coming to class anymore. We'd go to school only to find out the moment we arrive that they wouldn't hold a class that night. But still, there were those who insisted to continue their classes but I couldn't remember those nights if they did come. Perhaps, I was at home pretending whatever there was left to pretend.

One thing I do remember fondly was that me and my coworkers from one of my prior remote work planned to meet up in Davao City where they reside. The schedule was laid out, the places were arranged, and everything else was prepared. Heck, even our coworker from Manila booked a flight to join our little get-together. The only thing left was to wait for the day to arrive and move along with it. And then it happened. The confirmed cases in the country began to trickle. Slowly. Little by little. One by one. "What should we do?" I asked them. There were still a few more days before the planned date. Davao City then confirmed its first cases. "Maybe we should just wait and observe and play everything by ear," said Paul, one of the more senior members of the team. "If the number of cases in Davao reaches five, then we cancel it."

Then it hit. And it hit hard. As the number of confirmed cases all over the world seeped in in greater numbers, our sense of security and certainty slowly dripped away a tempo. We felt that the end is near. (for our employment, at least.)

I was employed as a remote content writer working eight-hour shifts per day back then. Coronavirus was already taking its toll in China, where our company's factory was. With law school suspended, It finally gave me time to work on my '66 Volkswagen Beetle. I began to work on things that kept on being postponed on ordinary days. It was one of the things that made the lockdown more bearable. Or so I thought.

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I was sitting right there on the rear part of the Beetle, sticking insulating aluminum sheet on the car's interior when the Survivor's *The Search is Over* was interrupted by a Skype Notification which sounded like muffled bubble wrap bursting between one's pressing fingers. It was my Singaporean boss. "Hey, Kurt," the message began, "I was checking Hubstaff when I noticed..." I didn't finish it, it was all I needed to know. Nor did I finish plastering my car's interior with aluminum: I have to look immediately for a new job in the soonest possible time—a few days of delay meant not reaching our target budget and putting the babies in jeopardy. My coworkers and I had already sensed that something was amiss at work. Tensions ran high during shifts and we had no idea why. We all sensed that people would get fired. But we didn't expect it to come this soon.

In the end, the three of us were laid off from the company simultaneously, with our ex-boss citing "many anomalies" during our work hours. We were not given the chance to explain nor were we given convincing evidence that merits our termination. Without much explanation, My coworkers and I convinced ourselves that we were unjustly fired, or so we believed, since the company was already sinking anyway as the factory, which was located near Wuhan, China, couldn't produce our product anymore. Five days later, my girlfriend Chinny would also be forced to resign from her work.

Perhaps one of the hardest-hit sectors of the economy was the tourism industry. Hotels, resorts, beaches, aviation, cruise ships. Basically almost tourist attractions and travel-related sectors of society were forced to minimize their operation or even forced to shut off completely to avert greater losses. Chinny had been working as front office personnel at the local branch of a well-known chain of hotels by a certain international brand for four years prior to resigning. She was about five months pregnant at that time and the hotel didn't have enough guests to sustain their business in the meantime. As their company regulations don't allow pregnant women to continue working on the front desk and also due to the city-wide regulation of restricting pregnant women, persons with disabilities, and immuno-compromised individuals to stay at home, she was the first to get the ax, albeit in the covert way of voluntary resignation: a month earlier than we have computed. It goes without saying that we would have to reset our financial estimations before she would give birth sometime in June.

Pitfall

There are 7.3 million unemployed Filipinos all over the country through the month of April according to the Philippine Statistics Authority or PSA..."

Both of us went unemployed and unable to find work for a good part of March and in early April. There were 7.3 million unemployed Filipinos all over the country through the month of April according to the Philippine Statistics Authority or PSA. In addition, 13 million Filipinos had jobs but were not able to go to work due to the restrictions and preventative measures designed to sop the virus on its tracks. At some point, the two of us—young, underprepared, parents—joined those numbers.

Already running behind schedule, I spent the next few days poring over Facebook and other platforms for any job openings. My search history was filled with the keywords “Hiring Content Writers.” I wanted to get a job as a writer. I thought it was the only thing I can do well. But for a jobless, penniless man trying to raise enough money for two unborn children, even the most shabby type of jobs that promises a stable income can be most enticing.

One of the jobs I tried applying to was a chat moderator for an adult dating website. In fact, I’ve already joined a group conversation where “team leaders” orient prospective applicants. I found out that customers were mostly old to middle-aged men trying to rejuvenate their youthful vigor on nonexistent women behind nonexistent webcams. The job is pretty much fixed and monotonous: you are given a script, copy it, and paste it on the chatbox to entertain the titillated geezers. The end goal is to entice them to enter their credit card numbers and who knows what the company will do next. Thankfully, that’s the furthest I’ve gone with the whole process.

Remote Job, Remote Hope

Over the next seven days after I was fired, I’ve sent emails to more or less twenty companies and recruitment officers while filing up about fifteen application forms online. Among all of them, fewer than ten considered my application. Some of them gave me paid trial assignments only to never communicate with me again. I even tried to gamble with applying for U.S.-based works even if it meant working in the graveyard hours: something that I have never done before. But that was during the height of the escalation of Coronavirus cases in the good ol’ U.S. of A. Three of the prospective new bosses did not continue with the hiring process and I was left to pursue other things.

One of the jobs I applied to was a content writer for an Australian-based Digital Marketing Company. I sent the boss a message through Skype only to have him reply a week later when I was starting a five-article trial period for a blog site. The boss, a bald Australian man with a thick heavy Australian accent, got on a Skype video call with me the following day. At first, I struggled to understand his Australian English after hearing it personally, in a conversation, for the very first time during the interview. Except for the profanities and swear-words that he frequently uses, it was

really a tough learning curve. He had this strong personality and he meant business. "Do you mind if I swear, mate?" he asked. I was okay with it. After all, I'm used to hearing it a lot from movies and I understand that it might just be the way things are for them.

Over the next few minutes, he shared with me what his expectations were and what were the things I had to work on, and during that time, I slowly adjust to his way of speaking: I understood him better and there were less clarifications than earlier. He also shared his experience with other Filipino content writers. "Some of them are too soft," he said, "they'll leave the moment I say some ill remarks for their work."

"I'm hoping that you're the one," he said, "...I'm thinking you're the one."

I hoped that he was the one, too.

One thing I liked about that job is that I got to work in Philippine time. I'd report in at seven in the morning and finish at four in the afternoon. Eight hours of work with an hour off for lunch. But that was about the only thing to like about that job except for the two Filipino coworkers who really took me under their wing (we still check on each other sometimes.) The boss and I just couldn't hit it off. I was used to writing for an American audience and I was still adjusting to suit the Australian taste and the boss just couldn't hold back his steam whenever he felt I was doing it the wrong way even if I was just following exactly what he has told me to do.

That was only the beginning. I still haven't begun to talk about the mental anguish that boss brings. We'd start every day with a meeting: the boss, my two coworkers, and me. The boss would delegate the day's task and give us updates about our new website that was being built at that time. Sometimes, after every meeting, he would talk to both or either of my coworkers.

But there was never a time that he'd let me off the hook. Every morning, he'd get on a video call with me where he would check articles that I had written the previous day. That meant having to endure an earful from him face-to-face. He'd call it trash and rubbish and useless and all other sorts of stuff and that he might as well throw it on the garbage can. Out of the webcam's view, my feet will fidget off the floor out of fear and anxiety. I remembered he told me to write the way I wrote my sample articles: conversational, a little bit of persuasion, and a little bit of humor. And then he would rip me apart for doing it that way. It might not have been perfect but I could say I was trying my best. But I guess, it's just the way things are whenever your money and your business is on the line. He said he is that way because I have a bright future and he wanted to get me on the right track. I sure hoped he knew other way than that, though. After all these things, the boss let me go after two weeks because of the Coronavirus situation in Australia.

In some way, it was a relief. It really felt close to being in law school being scrutinized—the words you use, the way you speak, the way you lean back on your chair, the way you stand and answer the question—by the strictest and most fearsome Attorney. I would've died early if the classes were to resume and I'm still working for that Australian boss. Did I think of

resigning? Plenty of times. But I just thought that it was the best bet to augment our savings. I couldn't find other full-time jobs elsewhere and the money for my children's safe delivery was the top priority. But then, if I quit, what would it say about my character? I just couldn't stand being a quitter—and feeling weak and powerless. For someone who is attempting to become a lawyer, there's no place for someone that pitiful—and even more so for a young man about to have two babies to feed, clothe, and raise into decent human beings, even if I have to work under a disparaging boss. I guess having a really thick face and a stomach for criticism really helps during this time.

For the next few weeks, I accepted various small-time writing works, earning \$10 at most for a five-hundred-word article. Then, I proceeded to finish the five-article trial period I accepted weeks ago and managed to land a job which pays by the hour and well above my previous rate to boot. Though I also encountered a few problems there, I still work there until this day.

“New normal”

They were discharged on my birthday, June 17, the following week. That day, I withdrew from the bank what little amount of money I had saved from the last five months.”

My daughters Ollie and Allie were born on Thursday, June 11, 2020. Their arrival was as unexpected as when we first knew of their existence. During that day, Chippy went to her final prenatal check-up only for the doctor to find out that one of the babies' heart rate fell below what is normal. She was rushed to the hospital for a stat Cesarean section. For hours, I, together with her family, sat outside the Operating Room Complex waiting, hoping, suffocating on the warm, sweltering air of the lobby filtered by my sweat-drenched disposable facemask, unsure whether the money we had saved would be enough. If it wasn't, from whom or where would we get more money? Occasionally, I'd go to the fire exist, remove my mask, and get a lungful of fresh evening air of my birth month, knowing I'll have to share it with two others soon—two others which I would call my own.

As the cold air crept into my fatigued body I remembered the events that transpired that same evening: receiving the message, driving the first few miles to the hospital with a flat tire, and climbing up and down the stairs as I bought newborn stuff that was left at home: baby bottles, newborn diapers, infant formula—the rest of the memory and details were lost in a flurry of phone calls, chats, and text messages among my parents, a few relatives, and a select group of friends. Later, I would exert the last of my strength replacing our van's flat tire before purchasing something for the

new mother too: a packet wet wipes and a manual breast pump and eventually going home for the night.

They were discharged on my birthday, June 17, the following week. That day, I withdrew from the bank what little amount of money I had over the last five months from my salary and income from other gigs. It was, miraculously, barely enough to cover the bill. On my hand were a number of stiff, new, warm yellow bills. And dozens more of blue-colored bills, too. It was the biggest, thickest wad of cash I ever held in my entire life and I had to give it away. Needless to say, it was one expensive debut for me: something that can never be exchanged for any amount of money.

Even before the pandemic is over, I'll be setting foot in a new, uncharted territory traversed and explored by thousands, or even millions of men before me. Fatherhood. What does it mean? It might mean having to confront the ice age, the shifting tectonic plates, typhoons, wars, revolutions, earthquakes. Perhaps facing the most dangerous volcanic eruptions, the greatest tsunamis, the world's deepest floods, the longest famine. Surviving. It meant survival. And now, like my great-great-great-grandfather and my father before me, I'll be the one to face this perilous times in order to ensure that my kin lives on: two tiny human beings, the manifestation of life's biggest meaning and its tiniest detail. And they'll live on as millions before them.

By the time this pandemic is over, I'll be setting foot in a territory traversed by thousands and even millions of men before me: Fatherhood...

In hindsight, my actions of working during the quarantine weren't dictated by the virus; nor even my strict medical professional mother; nor the tight government-imposed lockdown. It wasn't dictated by being practically a prisoner inside our own house, locked inside a gate left unopened for weeks at one point. They were dictated by two tiny infants the size of a liter and a half of plastic Coca-Cola bottles, weighing about four pounds each, give or take. They emerged that night of June 11 through the heavily curtained door of the Operating Room Complex, clothed in white garments, with eyes closed as they peacefully sleep. They were so light, so tiny, so small, they were held by a midwife with just a single arm. They looked so innocent, a bundle of bright, beaming beacons enough to bring hope to their father. And I hope that they won't become like me; that they would become the best version of their selves; and I hope I would be enough to guide them through it all.

For others who experienced this wretched pestilence, the term "New Normal" refers to life after quarantine. Social distancing, face masks, alcohol, isolation. But for me, the term transcends more than the virus and the pandemic themselves. It is a life of new responsibilities, of new

commitments: the life of being a new father. And a lungful of fresh, new air will sometimes be enough.



Kurt Joshua lives in the Philippines and writes Creative Nonfiction. He received his first writing fellowship for essay at the Davao Writers Workshop and in the same year, received a Special Fellowship Grant from essayist Wilfredo Pascual for the 3rd Nueva Ecija Personal Essay Writing Workshop. In 2019, he served as the Camp Director of the 1st SOX Summer Writing Camp and was the Manuel E. Buenafe Writing Fellow for the 26th Iligan National Writers Workshop that same year. His essay, To Pull a Hook, won the inaugural Lagulad Price, a region-wide essay competition organized by Cotabato Literary Journal in 2018. Every once in a while, he updates his blog at www.kukunotebook.wordpress.com.