

Never Quite Alone

By Chadwick Co Sy Su

Even as I know full well that it is likely to cause offense, I must confess something. I am almost certain it will raise your hackles. You would probably call me insensitive. What I am sure of is that I am not the only one who has this in mind. After all, with 7.8 billion people in this world, it is impossible for me to have a monopoly on this thought: I am thriving in this time of quarantine.

I am fortunate to have a job; I am truly wont to consider it a sinecure. I find the job simple and devoid of the stress that I found in what seemed to be a lifetime ago in the private sector, and it pays me weekly. I am a lowly academic and I have more than two and a half decades before I queue at the state insurance office to sign the documents that will lead to my pension. For now, I continue to work. I read textbooks for the day, whenever that is, that we will return to face-to-face classes. I am supposed to write well enough to represent the department. Because of that, I write letters and policy briefs that go through committee approvals. Most of the time, I write for myself, articles that I dare submit to academic journals and anthologies.

I am fortunate to have another job, one that requires only a stable Internet connection and my ability to make sense of numbers. I am an amateur trader. On any given day, I look at charts and patterns, and put my fortune and future into financial instruments. While my positions are mere drops in the world's usual bucket of trillions of dollars, I make enough to keep mind, body, and soul together. This other job has given me the pecuniary comfort necessary for me to remain a civil servant well into old age. That I have both jobs gives me freedom, an ironic possession in this time of confinement.

I am fortunate to have been married to the same person for almost a decade and a half now. Lord knows I have not been the best spouse. Between the two of us, I have caused more disappointment and tears. Yet we have spent every single day of the quarantine in a strange dress rehearsal for that far-off retirement. I am thankful for my

spouse, she who has made a house into our home. Because of her, I can work simultaneously on a motley of endeavors. We have a world all our own, uninterrupted by children, because we chose never to bear them.

Yet I must confess something even more likely to cause offense. I may have been wrong in saying that you would howl and call me names because of my insensitivity earlier, but I am certain now that you would do so. In the quiet moments of any given day, and there are plenty of them, I imagine myself alone, without my dear darling spouse. I do not have another person in her stead.

I imagine myself just that: alone.

If I were alone, I would likely be a renter, not a homeowner. I would not have found much incentive in working myself to the bone to aspire for a home of my own. I would be content with a small place, preferably a clean and well-lit one, to paraphrase Hemingway. I would have just one car instead of the five parked and unused outside our home. Maybe, just maybe, I would have a motorcycle instead of a car. Statistics say that motorcycle riders are four times more likely to die in an accident than a car occupant. I will take my chances, because no one will miss me anyhow.

I cannot cook to save my life, but in this other life, in this alternate universe, I would probably have learned to cook. Still, I have never been confident with my hands. I would probably have horrible results from my misguided culinary experiments. With my tendency towards efficiency, more popularly known as shortcuts, I would probably cook a whole coterie of meals in a whole day to last me an entire week. When I could no longer stand my own work, I would rely on the technology of online ordering and the physical effort of a fellow motorcyclist who would deliver sustenance.

I would probably have gotten a PhD in my early 30s instead of my mid-40s. I would have learned to live with the modest salary of an unrecognized academic. I would be an academic, and an academic alone, with no side hustle or moneymakers. That other business would not exist at all. I would not endure the daily wrangling with numbers

and six-figure losses. Instead, I would be reading a book or two, even three on a particularly good day. I would find a way to schedule the meetings I would have to attend around my reading time. When I do attend those meetings, I would not have to mind someone watching a movie. I would not have to move to another room. There would be no need to lower my voice, because I would be the only one at home.

When there would be no meetings to attend to, when my eyes would be weary from reading, I would listen to music, with anything from Whitney Houston to Charlie Puth filling the silence. On another day, Paul Anka may make me sing lustily; on a weekend, it would be Ariana Grande. Some other day, it would be a fugue or a piano instrumental that would bounce off the walls of that little space I rent.

There would be movies and drinks on tap. I imagine myself sipping wine while watching James Bond films or chugging cola while being amused at the inane comedy of Jim Carrey. I would save my muscles from atrophy by lifting dumbbells, the weights, not the ones that I work with. Maybe, just maybe, I will have a set of kettlebells, too.

The bookends of these assorted activities would be two and nine in the morning, the seven hours of sleep I would allow myself. Because nobody would mind, I would sleep naked, with a ratty shirt and a pair of boxers within easy reach should, horror of horrors, I would have to come rushing out the door posthaste because of a fire or some other emergency.

And then I realize that I can think of all these things precisely because my spouse is with me. In the life that we have made together, we have decided to focus on the things we are individually good at. She has made and kept our place an environment where I could be at my best. Even in the worst of places, I have been able to make do. While I have done wonders in places that were just good, life has been great because I was never quite alone.

Thus, I stop my silly daydreaming. You can pat those hackles down now.