

Insights

Tony Sutton

The Covid-spreading farts of death ...

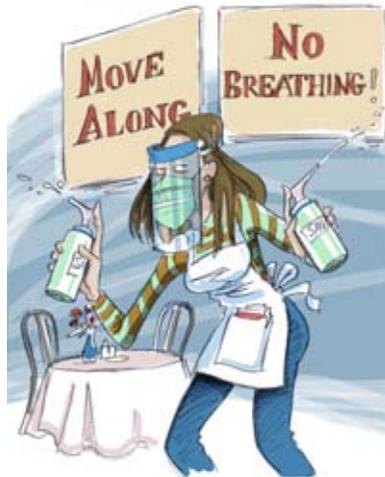
August 18, 2019

10 a.m. – Before the Covid-19 smackdown, coffee was a mid-morning ritual. Jools and I would drive to our local cafe, order coffee, chat to the server, read the papers, and indulge in mindless banter with acquaintances for half an hour before fleeing when the ravenous lunchtime horde of schoolkids stormed in. Now the cafe has re-opened, so we decide it's time to slide gently into the New Normal.

Uh, oh, it's like walking into a crime scene. Most of the tables are taped off with black and yellow hazard tape. The staff wear masks and plastic face shields, the cashier sheltering behind the additional security of a large plexiglass screen. Jools attempts small talk as she orders, but it's impossible without shouting, so communication is limited to raised eyebrows and shrugged shoulders. As we find a space to sit, the floor manager jots Jools's name and telephone number into her notebook. "Contact tracing! In case we need to track you down later ..."

Another associate shuffles past, his broom pushing unseen germs away from our path.

"Bugger this!", mutters Jools, scanning the newly-sterile en-



Art: David Anderson / dandersonillustration.com

vironment. "It's a scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Let's get outta here before Nurse Ratched comes in with her bloody needles". She nudges me towards the exit and freedom.

Outside, we sit at the only table not taped off. There's a large blob of concealed filling from a muffin congealing on the table. I cover it with serviettes that keep blowing away. Cars idle, their exhausts spewing noxious fumes, within touching distance in the adjacent drive-through lane. A driver stares, unfathomable eyes peering over tightly-fitted mask.

We drink quickly and leave.

11:30 a.m. – We're driving past an old people's retirement warehouse, where eight unfor-

tunates died at the height of the pandemic. "Hold your breath", I tell Jools, reminding her of how, as kids, we tried not to breathe the germs that might be escaping from the hospital close to our home in England. We laugh as we realise how those childhood fears refuse to die ...

1 p.m. – I'm walking to the shopping mall. Halfway along the route, detouring down a narrow path, I spot an elderly woman walking, head down, towards me. A few metres before we meet, she looks up, sees me, and dashes to one side, her back against the fence. Stunned by her reaction, I spin around. Zombie attack? Big dog with dripping fangs? Nope. Then I realise, it's me she's scared of. Well, perhaps not me – just my breath! ...

1:15 p.m. – The mall is almost deserted. I nose around a few shops, avoiding the large bottles of sanitiser at every entrance. Then I spot a sign in the bookstore welcoming back customers. That's nice, I think, before reading a big poster with seven instructions explaining how to be a considerate shopper. Rule Number Three advises that, once inside, "Please do not remain in the store longer than necessary". I give it a miss.

Instead, I head to the food court for another coffee. I'm not thirsty, but it's the only place I'm allowed to sit down, remove my mask, and breathe freely. There are a dozen or so mainly-unoccupied tables, each separated by

Insights

a self-isolation chasm, in a space where there used to be 50. A guy stands up to leave, whereupon a cleaning lady, masked and visored, swoops in, disinfectant spray in one hand, paper towel in the other. She smears gunge on everything, finishing with a vigorous scrub of the seat. Clearing away the Covid-spreading farts of death, I assume. We make eye contact. A small shrug of the shoulders, her mask twitches slightly. Was that a smile?

2:15 p.m. – Walking home, there's hardly any traffic, and not a soul in sight. I wonder what happened to the kids who are on holiday from school and their parents who aren't allowed to go to work. Where are they? Are they all sequestered in their home jails, hiding behind locked doors and tightly-drawn curtains awaiting that fateful Covid attack? Turning a corner, there's a family of four ambling in front of me. Slowing down, I dodge into the lane where I'd met the old lady earlier. Must be careful – perhaps *they* are the zombies she was so afraid of . . .

5:00 p.m. – Cameron, our teenage grandson arrives to stay for a couple of days. After a curry dinner, he digs into his backpack, retrieves his PS4, and hooks it into a big-screen computer monitor. The rest of the evening and half the night will reverberate with laughter as he plays *Fortnite* with his on-line pals. He'll crawl out of bed at 3 p.m. tomorrow, ready for breakfast. We don't judge: What else is a 13-year-old

expected to do after months of lockdown, daily scare stories and forced isolation?

6:00 p.m. – The TV news tells us Ontario has fewer than 100 new cases of Covid-19 and no deaths. Our town (population 40,000) has, according to the local paper's website, just three remaining cases, and a total of 11 deaths, including those eight oldies who died at the end of March. The figures couldn't really be any lower, but fear, not logic, is now the great emotional driver.

The kids are due to go back to school in three weeks, but terrified parents are adamant that

they will stay at home until the government slashes class sizes. Ontario premier Doug Ford blames the leaders of the teachers' unions, whom he accuses of "playing politics". The teachers, whose series of rolling strikes was interrupted by the pandemic, respond by charging Ford's government with "playing with children's lives".

Immovable object meets unstoppable force. Crashing impasse awaits inevitable compromise. Old Normal. New Normal. Some things just don't change. **CT**

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George Monbiot

Finding our feet, regaining our freedom

Boris Johnson's attack on planning laws is both very new and very old. It is new because it scraps the English system for deciding how land should be used, replacing it with something closer to the US model. It is old because it represents yet another transfer of power from the rest of us to the lords of the land, a process that has been happening, with occasional reversals, since 1066.

A power that in 1947 was secured for the public – the democratic right to influence the building that affects our lives – is now being retrieved by building

companies, developers and the people who profit most from development, the landowners. This is part of England's long tradition of enclosure: seizing a common good and giving it to the rich and powerful. Democracy is replaced with the power of money.

Almost all of us, in England and many other nations, are born on the wrong side of the law. The disproportionate weight the law gives to property rights makes nearly everyone a second-class citizen before they draw their first breath, fenced out of the good life we could lead.