

Anchovy

Josefina Huq on the comfort of strangers in computer games

I wake up stupid, still sleepy. After five seconds I remember why I'm here. Last night in bed Mark was crushed up against me, and my toenails kept scraping against the wall. All I could think was please, please don't scratch these walls – they are not mine to ruin. But this morning I forgot to check it, because I have been forgetting a lot of things, more things than usual. There's a lot of time now, to think and take stock and be 'productive', but mostly to recognise the sort of dampened fear within my body. But sometimes, in those few seconds before I feel that, I am able to switch on 'Animal Crossing'.

In the game you, human, arrive at a deserted island, and begin building a town and filling it with animal neighbours. Tom Nook, a racoon dog, guides you as you replace your tent with a house, plant flowers, build bridges, open up a shop. At the moment there's a lot to worry over but not a whole bunch to do about it. In 'Animal Crossing' it is the exact opposite. There's always something to do, but if you can't get it done no one will be hurt, no one will die. The town continues to grow, to not just survive, but thrive.

The not-doing is how we help each other, so we might as well get fossils appraised at the museum. Might as well be louder, more consistent on the internet. Take Mark's phone away so that we can truly disappear into a crap, early season of 'Survivor'. New symptoms, less resources. Gather wood to build a rustic coffee table. Cry at the window, just a little. Sometimes he asks me to play it as he falls asleep. The music is soothing, but I think he mostly enjoys the squeaky gibberish when my animal neighbours speak to me. He mimics them with his eyes closed, smiling. One day I hope he will visit my town, after I've expanded my home and made a room for him.

I brought my office chair from my place, to plunk in front of a desk he put here for me. I lost my job and one of my housemates believes it is all a conspiracy, and in this way I am lucky. I don't have to be out in the world, where it lives. And because my flatmates cannot be trusted, we decided I would stay here at Mark's, in a room we have called the 'nest', where I write, and video-chat my family, and when that quiet panic comes again, tend to my virtual village.

I see my cousins when they visit my town. My cousin Joseph's villager once arrived with 'PPE'. I laughed while feeling a bit sick, and then asked where he got it (he shook it from a tree). Later on when I found my own mask I felt too guilty to wear it. He stockpiles all the yellow items for when he visits me, and I keep the pink things for him; umbrellas, rugs, clocks, shoes. In this way we slowly furnish our homes, change our appearances so that our avatars may feel sane, safe, and able to operate in the world. Walk around and catch bugs, check up on the flowers, the other villagers.

I only have two friends on my island, but they are loyal and very quick to give me gifts. They tell me how cool and nice I am all the time. In the game no one can really hate you because you don't have enough agency to hurt feelings or embarrass yourself. Sometimes they will watch me fishing and clap when I catch something, even if it's just a tiny anchovy.

Before the severe lockdowns I had dinner with my cousins. We felt it then, that it was the last time. We were full of guilt and trying not to hug each other. Joseph and Dan cooked roast lamb and ten different sides. They used the nice dinnerware, including the ceramics Dan made. When we all sat down it felt like that scene from 'Signs', the father cooking everyone their favourite foods, before they run down to the basement to hide from the

aliens. Hugging and weeping over French toast and mash potato. I had a dream that Joseph died, working at the hospital. I told him and I shouldn't have, and I hope he has forgotten. My cousin Sarita steals all the roast potato, and we fight each other off from the dish while trying not to touch. When her villager first arrived in my town her face was busted-up and swollen. It's what happens when you shake trees and can't catch the wasps in time. I make her follow me to the shop I've recently helped build, where I purchase medicine from two small racoons. It heals her instantly.

Sometimes I don't get to the game in time, and the fear shows up again. It seems illegal to feel that, when I'm here and safe in the nest. I am allowed to be sad for the world, but not for myself, the house I can't return to, the way I could be strolling through the city, the friends I could be making. I shouldn't be thinking things like, am I coughing because I can't quit smoking or because when I hugged my cousin last she was lying about self-isolating? Will the smoking combined with getting it kill me? How bad could my lungs possibly be? No one has ever checked and I never thought to ask. Another scene from 'Signs' – a small boy with asthma struggling to breath, a flashlight on him, gripping the leg of his father's jeans. Which of my family members will be the first to get it? I finally turn on the game.

My cousins keep the 'writing' things for me too – books, desks, typewriters and scraps of paper. I buy a new record from the store every day, and they are all produced by a guitar-playing dog called 'K.K. Slider'. With the little money I have I order books by Australian authors, and read them too quickly. A tweet from this morning: early symptoms could be the inability to taste and smell. This is it, or, I've burnt my tongue on the lasagna we ordered last night, from a restaurant we don't particularly like, but one that is local and struggling.

In the mornings I check on my town and listen to podcasts. Isabelle, the town-planner and also, a Shih Tzu, announces that the clothing store has just been built and is due to open today. The podcaster announces a

rise in Australian cases. Isabelle thanks me for my continued support and donations. The podcaster asks me to wear a mask only if I am sick. I build an extension on my house and now owe Tom Nook a lot of money. In Spain, they have begun using ice-skating rinks as morgues.

The first time I watched 'Signs' I was too young. I was lying on the thick carpet of the lounge room, in my childhood home. My cousins behind me on the couches. When the alien popped out of the bushes and crossed the road I felt a terror I was not equipped for. I scrambled towards Joseph, scraping my knees against the carpet, crying and screaming. There was laughter and pats on my head. It is a time I have been thinking of often – a time when I never washed my hands and aliens were the only thing to fear.

When you are luring in a fish the console will vibrate at differing intensities, depending on the size of the fish. If you're trying for a large one, like a shark or a whale, it will rumble violently in your hands. I make sure to only go for the small fish when Mark sleeps.

Josefina Huq is a woman of colour, a creative writer and a PhD candidate based in Melbourne. She is interested in crafting short stories about place, home, memory, nostalgia, and anything else that might make you upset. Her research attempts to justify this as a good thing.