

The Quiet Woman Restaurant corona del mar. ca.

March 8 - May 23

What Happens Now?

I read Gabrielle Hamilton's piece in the New York Times April 23 and felt a kinship to the unspoken question that reverberated throughout – What Happens Now? The next day I revisited it again, listening to her haunting words on a podcast as she described the idea, evolution, success, struggle and covid dismantling of her flagship restaurant Prune. I was standing in my own restaurant, The Quiet Woman, 2800 miles and worlds away from Prune and New York City but feeling strangely the same.

I was sanding the always beaten up trim on the limestone cocktail tables preparing to repaint them. In the scratches and chips of the curved molding I could hear the clink of the things that made those scrapes: stacks of silver bangles, the back and forth of watch bracelets, the clunk of purses with little metal feet, the heavy fobs of exquisite cars and the scrape of belt buckles as people bent far across the tables in an almost comically pointless endeavor to continue conversation as the band began their second set. I heard all of those sounds like punctuation marks in the steady din of animated conversation, the daily background noise of a busy restaurant, echoes of a taken for granted past.

I wasn't prone on the floor in painter's coveralls plumbing the dark depths behind the line retrieving errant items as Gabrielle was, but the same sort of thing plays out in every restaurant that's headed by an entrepreneur still tied to the day to day running of their place. You do a lot of things you could pay someone else to do but in the end you do them yourself. Sometimes it's the money, but more often it's that it has to be exactly the way you have it in your head and you know (after a few trips down this road) that it will take more time to explain to someone else exactly what you want then it will take to do it yourself or that someone will assure you they know "exactly " what you want, only to finish and you find yourself looking at them like Sarah Cooper with the disinfectant bottle, because they clearly had no clue, or you're just too damn busy to pay attention and the job is done and you spend the next year or five or ten looking away whenever your glance falls on the "thing" whatever it is, because it's not right and it will always be a glaring error to you, unnoticeable to anyone else.

This morning though, sanding in the silence of empty tables simply gave me comfort - just to be doing something normal that I had done many times before - so I could pretend for a moment that things were normal, find reassurance in a familiar routine, and push the unanswered and unanswerable question to the back of the closet, hidden in the winter clothes for a while.

What happens now?

Wednesday, March 8, I was at LAX catching a flight to St Thomas, a ferry to Tortola and a short sail to St John for a brief family holiday followed by a month sequestered away hoping to make a dent on the book I keep promising myself to write. The snippet of news I allow myself every morning while onboard the boat got darker daily and the Covid buzz kept getting louder and louder until it was impossible to ignore. I finally plugged all the way back in on Saturday, March 14 and realized that a) Corona virus was real, b) the holiday was over, c) The Quiet Woman had to close, d) the boat had to get back to her slip in Tortola and e) we had to get back to the states. I closed the restaurant on Sunday March 15, instructed all the employees to file for unemployment as furloughed due to Covid-19 and made plans to get home. The boat pulled into her slip the day before the BVI borders were closed and we arrived home to an almost empty LAX on March 18.

I organized a deep restaurant cleaning, packed up the food in the walk-in and what wouldn't last in the freezer for donation and trash, collected some wine and went home to wait. Corona del Mar, Newport Beach, Orange County, California and much of the US was shutting down. We were watching Governor Cuomo's updates on the horrors in New York and Governor Newsom's updates on California's efforts to avoid New York's fate.

The QW was not opening anytime soon but it would open again at some point, wouldn't it? We needed to be ready so I embarked on a plan. I'm big on plans. I believe you can get through almost anything as long as there is a plan, however difficult, daunting or unpleasant the plan may be. Texting occasionally with the QW staff and friends, *How are you? Is everyone healthy? Are you collecting unemployment? Do you need food? wine? We have some - stop by. Keep in touch.* I never asked anyone if they were coming back. Coming back was too far away and I assumed that almost everyone would come back. Designing and building protective partitions, switching from linen to glass top tables, finding fabric to go under those glass tops, removing butcher block in favor of stainless, replacing the entire back kitchen, debating building a patio for outside dining, disinfecting fifty-five years of experiences, grit and grime and oh yes, figuring out how to pay for all of that along with the weight of the approximately \$90,000 of past due invoices sitting on my desk screaming at me. Applying for EIDL and PPP and being smacked upside the head with the realization that just because I have done over 3 million dollars a year of business with Wells Fargo for decades does not mean I am a valued customer and no they are definitely not going to help me get a loan. If I had known that it is better to be in debt with the bank you do business with because they will always protect their own interests first, then maybe I would have taken out a loan but it's too late now. Drawing plans for sidewalk seating and patio seating and doing a bit of take-out business, well yeah – all that.

Thing is, Covid-19 isn't really big on plans except the obvious one - to destroy and change the world we knew. Will the QW reopen? Surely it will. Will the QW survive? I don't know. Those who shake their head in disbelief at the idea that a successful, busy neighborhood restaurant that has been a fixture in the fabric of generations of lives for over a half century might not make it, might not survive, might not rise from the ashes of Covid-19 don't understand the knife edge that all independent restaurants, even institutions like mine, live on.

I don't have the luxury of avoidance. I have only one path and I have to keep moving forward though my always optimistic outlook is increasingly shaded with grey and in danger of being overwhelmed almost every day.

We averaged \$70,000 a week before Covid-19.

My fingers are crossed that we can reach \$10,000 a week with take-out so we can pay rent.

We never even came close.

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www.quietwoman.com