

Covid tales from Tom's bench

A photo-story by Jim Grover

October-December 2020

At the side of Mount Pond on Clapham Common there is a 24-hour/365 days a year 'snack wagon', 'Honest Tom's'. It has been there for 30 years and was owned and operated by Tom, who passed away last year. In his memory a bench has been erected by it, complete with an inscription plaque and a flower vase (which Nadine, who has worked in Honest Tom's for 27 years, fills with fresh flowers each week).

Every day during the month of August, I went to photograph someone or some group sitting on this particular bench and asked them a few questions, focusing on their personal experiences of Covid.

It was, deliberately, a random process; whoever sat down on 'Tom's bench' became my subject for the day.

On one day I had to wait for three hours for someone to sit on the bench (it's not the only bench!). On another day, despite going twice no-one sat on it, so the empty bench became my mute subject that day. The project was paused in the middle of the month for four days while I went on a brief 'staycation'.

August had some typically British variations in climate, including a heat wave and heavy rain. So the set of sequential images also conveys the passage of time: through the weekly new flowers, that wilt and die, and the green that peppers the scorched grass as rain swept in at the end of the month.

The diverse sitters' (who come from all walks of life) experiences of Covid cover the complete spectrum, from surprisingly rewarding...through indifference...to harrowing. Their stories are like many we read and hear about each day but are now made very real as we see the faces behind the words. Yvonne's incredibly moving story, on the very last day of the project, the 31st, puts all the others into context.

I would like to sincerely thank all those who appear in this story for their support; without their willingness and understanding this story could not have been told. I would also like to thank Marie McCarthy and Diana Whitehead for enabling this story to be exhibited here in Omnibus.

Thank you; I hope you enjoy the exhibition.

Jim Grover

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