LOCKDOWN STORIES

EDITED BY

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CITY LIFE

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"Narrative is a sign of civic life. Societies that turn their backs on this right are societies of deafening silence: authoritarian nations, police states, xenophobic cultures. When you fail to protect the right to narrate you risk filling the silence with sirens, megaphones, hectoring voices carried by loudspeakers or from towering podiums. To allow such walls of silence to be built in our midsts and our minds is to live in their shadows long after they have been torn down."

Homi Bhabha, *"The Right to Narrate"*

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Introduction

When the pandemic began, elders became the single population most at risk from Covid, and clearly not just in terms of their potential medical vulnerability. At the time of writing, and notwithstanding the ending of many social distancing restrictions, many elders in the UK have undertaken various levels of social distancing and isolating for over two years. Loneliness has been well documented as a risk factor for mortality. Ageism, too, is a psychosocial burden decreasing resilience: elder social exclusion impacts morbidity and contributes to early death. Age is, of course, not the only factor in social exclusion. Government studies confirm that people who are racialised or live in working-class areas are at higher risk from Covid-19 too. Medical studies confirm that chronic social adversity leads to a lower immune response.

In short, Covid has put our elders in an impossible position. They are at increased medical risk from Covid: lockdowns and social isolation were meant to address that, but they also decreased their mental and physical resilience. Moreover, the social, economic and cultural barriers they already experience in varying degrees makes all of these factors more complex and challenging. That marginalised people have been the ones soaking up the dangers of the pandemic comes as no surprise to us. We come from the same communities, live in the same boroughs.

CityLife: Stories for Change fosters intergenerational connection by connecting emerging writers with community elders through a combination of creative writing, public engagement and research. Since the project started, we have been writing about the changing experience of life in the city across generations; it was natural for us to turn to stories, not statistics, as a way of processing and interrogating the experience of living through a pandemic.

The Project

CityLife: Stories for Change was born as *EastLife* at the University of East London, in 2015. We wanted to use the tools we were working with in creative writing and cultural studies to experiment with ways of connecting with and servicing our communities. We already knew that we had a group of students who wrote compelling and original autobiographical pieces about their life in the city. Isolation and chosen families, trauma and discovery – these stories showcased the talent brewing in the university, and gave us a closer look at what it meant to be young in the city. We paired them up with community elders, our "storytellers", during workshops in libraries and community organisations. These conversations resulted in biographical pieces about the elders' lives which were vibrant and intimate. They breathed life and colour into the black and white pictures of East London we'd seen in museums, classrooms, our grandparents' living rooms. We started exchanging the gift of story, back and forth.

Moreover, the intergenerational conversations we had at that time changed more than one life, and started a process of doing and thinking which continued through the years. Ever since we printed *EastLife: An Anthology of Life Writing (*2015), CityLife has been a whirlwind of activity. We wanted to continue platforming stories that are silenced, marginalised or obscured by the mainstream and forging bonds in an increasingly conservative and alienating society, and so we collaborated with Richard House Children's Hospice in 2016 for *CityLife: Stories Against Loneliness*. We began to think about how our own life narratives and the elders' mapped out over the geography of London's boroughs and communities, and secured a PhD scholarship from the Stuart Hall Foundation in 2017 for *Invisible London: Place and Identity in Non-Fiction by Londoners*. We found ways to ask our stories questions through research, continued to work ethically with our collaborators, started new partnerships with community organisations in new boroughs, and participated in academic

conferences in the UK, EU and Canada. Finally, we got funded by The British Academy for *Lockdown Stories* in 2020, which awarded our creative practice and provided research support at a national level. It is our privilege to thank the British Academy for giving us this opportunity.

We met new collaborators. The University of East Anglia Creative Writing undergraduate students featured in this collection joined a contingent of experienced University of East London Creative Writing BA and MA graduates, many of whom had been working with us since our inception. This link with the oldest and most prestigious creative writing degree in the UK further cements some of our founding principles: that co-creation is valid and community writing is literature, and they deserve to be treated as such. The University of Brighton supported us throughout, confirming its reputation for investing in the arts as well as in social responsibility, and for backing cutting-edge methodologies in creative disciplines. We would like to thank our university partners for allowing us to publish this second anthology.

We reached out to our veteran storytellers, some of whom we had been working with on and off for five years – despite many protesting their life wasn't interesting when we first met them. It felt like a way of coming back together in a crisis, even if just on the phone. We also included new storytellers from Toynbee Hall, a historical East End charity combating poverty and social injustice since 1884. Our Project Manager, Sam Dodd, was a telephone befriender at the time Covid hit; the idea and labour of becoming partners with Toynbee Hall were hers. A heartfelt thanks to Miry Mayer and Sam Crosby for building this bridge together with us.

The Method

As we have done since 2015, we invited our writers to produce a short autobiographical non-fiction piece about an aspect of their life – in this case, experiences of lockdown. We would have normally paired them up with

storytellers during workshops in public libraries and community organisations throughout London. Through these budding relationships as co-creators, each pair would have generated several drafts of a biographical story about the elder's life. We then would have had a final storysharing session, when the writer would have brought the final draft of the story to the storyteller to read together, and the storyteller would have decided what to edit or approve. Since 2015, this process has been coordinated by Project Manager Sam Dodd; from 2019 onwards, this has taken place with Erica Masserano's assistance.

For obvious reasons, this project phase was different from the others. When it was conceived, we were going through the first lockdown; when it was written up, we were going through the second. On the day we met several of our new storytellers for the first time at Toynbee Hall, we'd just been past a temperature scanner, sanitised our hands. They were sitting at opposite sides of a table, playing dominoes with masks and gloves on. Meanwhile, many of our writers were in Norwich, sitting in deserted student halls and shared flats, or in London, watching the streets in busy neighbourhoods turn empty. All of us were trying to balance our degrees, jobs and private lives with the mounting mental and emotional pressure of the pandemic.

We had to rethink our methodology to function remotely, losing the collective aspect of our workshops but gaining incommensurably in safety. Not being able to count on non-verbal communication was hard, especially for writers who felt they may be missing cues to represent their storyteller correctly. On the other hand, the regularity of weekly phone calls provided a social connection that was missing while we were shut into our homes. The warmth, candour and laughter in those conversations permeates many of the stories in this anthology. We have been told by both writers and storytellers how much they appreciated these one-on-one exchanges in a time of media polarisation, and how much of a far cry getting to know each other sensitively, time after time, was from shouting at strangers in community Facebook threads. Story sharing remained an emotional moment; that this time the happy tears were through the phone didn't really seem to matter.

Due to the individual nature of the chats and to the intense, strained context around us, we also had to account for safeguarding and mental health more than we ever had, building check-ins on each other and on the writers and elders into the structure of the project. We heard from participants that they benefitted psychosocially from these connections during lockdown, and we felt it ourselves. Working with the storytellers, again in some cases, has been a pleasure, the relief of knowing that they were doing as well as they could under the circumstances was palpable, and some of the pairings have stayed in touch through formal and informal befriending. We also learned and accepted that it may not be possible to write about a distressing world-changing event while it is happening and before it is properly processed, and we encouraged participants to focus on stories from happier times if that was what they wanted. From a trauma-informed perspective, some topics are better broached when the time is right and professional support is available.

The Stories

The autobiographical pieces from our writers are as vivid as ever, while channelling the added urgency of communicating the experiences we were processing collectively in real time. Our writers are broadly, but not only, in their 20s and 30s. The first-person experience of lockdown in these stories is raw, humorous and gloomy at once. We chronicled ourselves while we clung to friends, family and videogame consoles, enjoyed the humdrum of capitalism coming to a halt, struggled to make rent, and developed obsessions with our neighbours. Using storytelling tools to make meaning out of the chaos of the pandemic was therapeutic to us; reading these stories about each other while isolating made us feel less alone.

Our biographical stories are born of the elders' experiences of lockdown, of their memories of long, complex lives, and of the captivating ways they performed these stories to us. Filtering the panic of these times through a wider

scope has been a sobering experience. Our storytellers juxtaposed the HIV/AIDS pandemic and Covid, detailed the changes in their neighbourhoods, and painted pictures of daily lives which are hidden from the mainstream, offering delicate, realistic depictions of old age which are nowhere to be found on bookshop shelves.

The insights coming from the stories are illuminating. They reveal to us the sometimes fraught nature of community: we have writers and storytellers from different backgrounds acknowledging that they could have kept living in the same borough all their lives and never met if it hadn't been for this project. They surprise us by reversing ageist stereotypes: we have elders being positive and curious about the younger generations, feeling fascinated by their creativity and enriched by their exchanges. They upend our expectations about attitudes towards the pandemic: we have younger participants isolating indoors and adopting stricter precautions than some of the older ones, and older participants using whatever outdoor spaces available to maintain social contacts, even in the middle of winter. They help us understand Covid denialism instead of entrenching ourselves: from the very human need to maintain a positive attitude in the midst of all-encompassing tragedy, to mixed signals from the government about the seriousness of the situation. Having these conversations has kept us open to dialogue with each other despite polarisation and deep differences in positionality and opinions. We are creating spaces where what Homi Bhabha calls "the right to narrate" is upheld, where experiences are communicated through dialogue so that we can understand something profound about ourselves we otherwise couldn't, and bonds of empathy are built against the silencing tactics of divide and conquer.

Our collaboration with Toynbee Hall also gave us an unprecedented degree of information about how our method and stories can be used to understand the needs of communities in order to ensure better provision of services. To harness and articulate this, we decided to include Volunteering Coordinator Miry Mayer, not an elder, as a storyteller. Her account of what it meant to coordinate Covid response in an East End community organisation

is invaluable; juxtaposing it with the stories of the elders who were in dire need of a response is eye-opening. To respond to their needs, our storytellers and writers seemed to chiefly lean on health services, community organisations, family networks, and other informal connections such as the one we have with them, spilling out of institutional support and into mutual aid. We will be interrogating these stories further for clues about how we can foster and strengthen these connections beyond the neoliberal project of shifting the duty of care from state to communities, as well as who should answer for it where they haven't been supported, more so during the future developments of a continuing pandemic.

A song, a dirge, an anthem

To conclude, we would like to thank our writers. To put themselves forward for a project which is fundamentally about getting out of one's comfort zone, to share their writing about the pandemic as it happened, and to believe in the process that they were being guided through was an act of great trust and vulnerability. We hope this has been a learning experience on both a professional and personal level (it certainly was for us), and that we have supported them correctly through a sometimes difficult process. We would also like to thank our storytellers. They are experts by experience about life in the city and trustees of a deep untapped reservoir of knowledge about it; to share it with others is very generous of them. Covid has wiped out a lot of generational knowledge in the space of two years. Whatever they were able to help us salvage is a treasure rescued from the depths of these harrowing times.

It is difficult to write about Covid. It is difficult to write about it as if it was in the past, to keep pushing against this latest act of collective gaslighting, to not feel it in the body and mind after a bout or three with the virus, which has left us tired, tired, tired. It is difficult to have hope, and yet this is what we feel when we read these stories now, two years after they were written. They

sing to us, softly at first, just the plain drone of a call about nothing through cheap smartphones, old Nokia cell phones, older Bakelite landlines, asking us how we're getting on today in our barricaded home, the only voice we will hear for the next many hours. They wail for our friends and families, for the emergency wards and the nursing homes, for the cenotaphs of hearts, for the grief we don't know we're carrying, and with the knowledge that much of this was avoidable, and those who are responsible have not been held accountable yet. They rise together, and the sound warms our bones like a hot cuppa in the winter freeze, a knitted woollen jumper, the embrace of our loved ones after not being able to touch them for so long. They say that we are still alive, and there is still time for one more moment of connection.

Memory

Irenee & George

for The Lowes, by Denise Monroe

Irenee and George met properly at the Black Lion public house in 1967. They were both Canning Town born and bred, post war babies who had grown up only a few streets apart from each other. Irenee was a couple of years older than George and worked as a comptometer operator for Charrington's brewery. She'd had a week's training on the mechanical calculator, inputting figures with a finger and thumb of each hand, and became a skilled operator. She'd always been good with figures and was a quick learner. George had worked at the docks since he was fifteen and was already doing well for himself. This was the early sixties and the Mod scene was big in London. George dressed sharp in his bespoke Mohair suits, sported a French crop and loved music. He liked British R&B acts like Joe Brown or Chris Farlowe and the Thunderbirds and always wanted something new, music that other people hadn't heard. He and his mates had clubbed together and bought themselves a 500 weight Thames van so they could drive up to Soho on Friday nights. They would park outside La Discotheque on Wardour Street, go into the club for a bit and then nip out to the van for bottle of the pale ale they had stashed in the back. Usually they had to leave the van overnight after too much beer but could come back the next day and search for new music in the specialist record shops of Soho.

By 1966 Mod music was on the wane and the Hippy movement was growing. George and his mates didn't like the new sounds and the long hair that went with it so started to hang out at the Black Lion in Plaistow. It

wasn't a music venue but a poser's pub, where people with a few bob went to look cool. The local gangs of plastic gangsters hung out there, squaring up to each other in the bar, strutting for supremacy. George and Irenee first met one night in January 1967 while in the pub with their mates. George had always hung with a slightly older crowd so fell into easy chat with Irenee and they got on well but then didn't see each other again for a few months. When they next met George hardly recognised her as she'd lost so much weight; she'd had peritonitis when her appendix burst and had been laid up in Poplar hospital.

Thursday was payday and George would drop his mother her housekeeping and then go out with his mates. It became a regular thing for them to meet up with Irenee and her girlfriends around Canning Town. They'd go for a drink, have a laugh, times were good. On Christmas Eve in 1967 Irenee left the pub and George called after her and offered to walk her home. On the way back she told him that her brother was getting married on Boxing Day and that she was going to be the bridesmaid. She invited George to the evening do but he wasn't sure he could make it – he usually went out with his mates, what would he tell them? She gave him an ultimatum: he either came to the wedding or stopped messing her around. He said yes.

The wedding was at the Old Boxing Club near Roman Road Market. George was a social creature but wasn't prepared for the riot that was Irenee's family. George was an only child, whereas Irenee came from an enormous family of Romany heritage – known disparagingly as diddicoys to the locals who thought themselves better. They were costermongers, market traders, coal merchants and, to George, it seemed there were thousands of them. They knew how to rave and they knew how to row and 19 year-old George felt terrified and out of his depth in this new world. He stayed in the background all night long. Even after he married Irenee, George could feel overwhelmed by her family and like the odd one out when they got together. Years later he discovered that his mother-in-law had him sussed and would warn them all not to wind him up when he came to visit.

George and Irenee were engaged in November 1968. He was 20 and wanted to wait until he was 22 before getting married. Irenee's sister's marriage

had fallen apart and she had moved back to her parents leaving her rented flat empty, so her mum suggested they take it. George would have been happy for a longer engagement because he liked living at home but a week after his 22nd birthday he married Irenee and they moved into their first flat together.

The flat was on the Scrutton's Estate and typical of the time. Landlords were under no obligation to do flats up so the decoration and making good was left to the tenants. There was no bathroom and the outside toilet was accessed by walking through the downstairs flat. Gary, their first child, was born about 10 months after they were married and the landlord offered them a self-contained flat that had become available around the corner on Tinto Road. By this time George had left the docks and was driving buses around London. Irenee had given up work to look after their son and would sit Gary in his armchair so that he could watch the workmen shovelling and digging as they laid the New Beckton Road. Maria was born three years later and George traded his bus license for a heavy goods license, taking to the road.

In 1976 the family saved for a holiday in Devon and when they came back Mr Scrutton, their landlord, was waiting for them with a key for a house that had just become available on the estate. Any excitement Irenee felt soon turned to tears when she was shown inside. The previous tenant had been born and died in the house and nothing had been done to it in eighty-eight years. Nobody had lived on the upper floors for thirty years and the entire house was in a terrible state. But Irenee could see that it had potential. She said she'd take it on the condition that she didn't have to pay rent for the first two months while she made the place habitable. The house had to be fumigated before they even began and when the London Electricity Board condemned the electrics, George had to push the landlord to rewire it and make it safe. They ended up paying only the rates for two years until the house was finally considered finished.

Fifty-one years later and Irenee and George still live in the Scrutton Estate and not much has changed. Some of their neighbours are the people that they went to school with and whom they have known all of their lives. There was a shift in the eighties when Thatcher introduced the right to buy

and a lot of their friends, tenants in the council houses, bought and sold their homes and moved out to Essex or further afield. That was never an option for Renee and George as they had a private landlord, but they didn't want to leave anyway. Canning Town is home. Besides, they are both socialists and firmly believe that houses are for people, not profit. According to Irenee and George, the only decent thing that Thatcher did was to cap and protect their rents, although they are both horrified by what the new young families have to pay to live in the same street as them.

George and Irenee are proud of both of their children. They went to university – which was rare in Canning Town at the time – travelled, worked away and finally returned to the area they had grown up in. This is a double joy to George and Irenee as its enabled them to be a part of their three grandchildren's lives. The eldest is Jesamine, named after a song from the sixties that George used to sing to Maria when she was a baby. She's now at the University of East London while her brother Kasper is studying for his GCSE's. According to his grandma he's a maths genius, just like his dad and just like Irenee. Gary and his daughter Georgie live just around the corner in a house that belonged to George's parents. They all share a love of music, a love of politics, and a love for Canning Town.

Irenee and George have been in lockdown since March 2020. It wasn't so bad at the beginning. Irenee enjoyed the sunshine and worked in the garden where the family would sit when they came to visit. The second lockdown has been much harder as it's too cold for outdoor visits. Maria is a teacher and she and her family have all had Covid so haven't been able to visit for a few months. Gary and Georgie visit at the front door but the laptop lessons that she was going to give to her granddad have been postponed until they can be in a room together. Irenee has left the house a couple of times in the last ten months but has become too fearful and doesn't want to risk becoming ill. For the first time in their life together, George does all the shopping and jokes about how he thinks he's in charge now. They are both prone to low mood and worry about the world that their grandchildren will inherit. George misses

going to the pub with friends that he has known all of his life. Irenee misses seeing her family and chatting with neighbours when she's out and about. To cheer themselves up Irenee reads thrillers and cop drama, anything with a good story. George thinks about the next gig he can go to. The house that has been their home for forty-six years is now their protector and their prison. In January Irenee had her first vaccine and is looking forward to being able to see her family again. She is still wary at the thought of going out, unsure of how safe she will be. George is waiting to hear when he will be vaccinated but will be back down the Black Lion just as soon as he can.

Roaring in Tunnels

by Sam Dodd – an autobiographical piece

"Guess why I'm walking round in circles?"
I look at him reluctantly.
"Cos I've got all my spare change just in one pocket! Geddit? So I'm weighed down on one side. So the coins pull me to one side, and I keep going rou…"
"Got it, yeah."

I REMEMBER THIS JOKE suddenly, thirty years later, in the middle of a Tesco aisle during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. It hits me in the chest and I *swear* I get a whiff of his cigar smoke. The aisles in this branch have never felt tight or close before, but the air weighs heavy now. (That could also be the mask I'm wearing, but I like the air/cigar metaphor more). I've done a circle round the same two neighbouring aisles three times looking for one bloody thing, anxious not to go the wrong way and upset someone head on, someone intent on a trolley standoff battle. I get dizzy and stop, the woman behind me tugging on her flyaway cart so it doesn't ram my achilles. "Fuck's sake," I mutter as I catch my breath, "such a shit joke."

Dad always made me dizzy.

When I pull myself together, I get moving again. Orange juice, cranberry juice, butter, milk, yoghurt, chicken, pork, frozen veg, frozen chips, frozen ice cream, frozen hash browns, barbeque wood chips, firelighters, batteries, orange juice, cranberry juice, butter… I finally spot the turkey bacon. I've given up pork but I do love my fry ups and I miss my local caff, E. Pellicci, where they serve excellent food and take the rotten piss out of every single customer all day long.

The next day, although it could be the same day as all days feel the same in lockdown, I am in the front room sitting on my couch, listening to

the nothing outside. No cars, no planes, no trains, I cannot even hear the birdsong that is usually there. It's eerie. At the same time, it is comforting. I have always felt bombarded in London, like all my receptors are on fire: complete sensory overload. I remember that this was how it felt to be a child, then to be a teenager, then a young woman, and then someone entering recovery from alcohol addiction. At every one of those stages, it was the same: total silence. Mute shock. And the feeling of having a roaring express train just behind my teeth, snaking down my throat; the engine room was my belly. I daydream, and wonder what it would be like now to have a drink. A quick trip to the shop, a quick sip and then shock, quick oblivion. I blink slowly and thoughtfully, using my eyelids to wipe the image of a bottle from my mind's eye, and decide that my couch is more comfortable than self-hatred and the throat burn of cheap bourbon and bile. I swallow, shifting the express train, though it doesn't dislodge entirely.

I LOVE WATCHING PEOPLE who exude joy. Love it. It makes my throat swell with familiarity, peace, and fear. People with huge laughs are my favourite. I watch them, let the sound of their joy hit me in the solar plexus, right in the gut – and I stop in my tracks because nothing in my life is so urgent that I cannot find the time to watch joy. I will not waste my time on rushing – and if ever there was an oxymoron, that is it. Anyway, we have nothing but time right now.

Someone laughs at the entrance to the Parkland Walk northern end in Highgate, near the bat sanctuary. It's a few days after Tesco now. I walked all the way here from Whitechapel. In that moment – when laughter floats through the trees and bounces off the bat cave, which makes me wonder how echolocation works – in that moment, everything is right in the world. I like watching eyes crinkle when mouths smile. Once, as a child when I was sick in bed, the doctor came to visit. He was wearing a face mask. It was the '80s,

I was small, and I'd never seen one before. I don't have many memories from childhood, but I vividly remember his laughter lines as he smiled down at me, mouthless. I remember reaching up to touch them and watching them deepen as I did. He just went about his temperature taking and various pokes and prods by weaving in and out of my outstretched arms, as I felt my way around his deep brown smiley eyes, giggling my arse off. He had no resistance to my touch at all. Dad did, sometimes.

I love laughing myself, too. When I laugh, I really do laugh – heads turn. I have a big gob and no shame. Not anymore. My friend once said to me, *"Shame dies in the sunlight, Sam."* He was telling me to surface it, if I wanted to move through it to the other side. *Shed sunlight on it, expose it. Use it to help others.* It was a day when that train was blocking up my throat again, and I was hunched over with the silence of the things I did to others when I was roaring mute, and the things that were done to me. I couldn't breathe when he said it; I swear to God I gasped for air. I was so frightened of being liberated from my shame that this made me feel like a caged animal being poked with a stick, because I did not know what freedom would look like, or if I deserved it, or even if I wanted it. Sometimes shame is so familiar that you're frightened of losing it; a fear of the unknown. It's like a fur jacket. Keeps you warm and safe, but someone died to make it, so it will always weigh heavy on your shoulders.

I try and pass on the joy I absorb from others, in a continuous loop of joy exchange, none of it static, none of it collecting or storing anywhere. It has to keep moving. I don't have a joy bank, because I never need to be empty again if I can be a joy conduit instead. What I get, I give away immediately. I get blocked up if I keep it for myself. I like to imagine, whether it's mad or not and who cares, that we are like electricity. We only function when there's a continuous current, we cannot function alone with no input or output. And currents need conduits. So I try to be a conduit, because what else are we here for, but to love?

I forget this sometimes, I forget to collect and give away joy, I even stop hearing and seeing it. I begin to rush again, to snap, I get embroiled in

the bullshit, and in those moments I run out of joy, ground to a halt, blink, swallow, and sit on couches wondering what a drink would be like now, even after five years without one.

Laughter is so beautiful, my God it is all we have.

I stare at the bat caves, desperate to see in, but it is pitch black and they don't come out in the daytime. I stand there empathising with them on this, my weight slowly sinking me further into the boggy mud. I felt like that for a long time: better suited to the shadows of night, not good enough to be seen in daylight. In sunlight. This bat sanctuary is in the disused Highgate tunnels that used to carry a railway from Alexandra Palace to Finsbury Park, one that was never quite finished and is now a long slim nature reserve that takes a few hours to walk. I visit a couple of times during lockdown because it calms me. It has beautiful views of London. The city that overwhelms yet comforts me, because it is my home. It is large, yet I am small. On other days, it is small and I am large. London takes me as I am. So I belong, for as long as I want to belong, to its filthy clean streets.

Bats are hated the world round in normal times, but more so now than usual due to the link with Chinese food markets and COVID. They predate on excess destructive insects – termites, wasps, beetles and flies, among others. They're an essential part of the food chain, sitting in the grey area of life – like the rest of us. Why do we find complexity so difficult to handle?

Light and dark, black and white, good and bad. Polarised, extreme thinking is very current in 2020 and has been for a while… No room for nuance, imperfections, bad judgements, mistakes, or even learning from them. There is a shame around being wrong, around inhabiting the grey area of life. That is madness and will never serve us. The news will have us thinking that we're forgetting how to love, and that makes me feel desperate, because I don't think we are – we're just being taught how to hate more, and there's a difference. More dark doesn't mean the absence of light, because we cannot call it dark without its opposite as a point of reference.

I look at the disused tunnel mouth and think about how a train will never come roaring out of it again. I trace the outside O of my lips with a finger. I am terrified of my roar, always have been.

The next morning, I wake up from a dream in which the world outside my flat feels dangerous. In it, men are bricking up my front door while I stand behind it listening, frozen in fear. I hear them leave and open the door, touching the unfinished bricks. They're red hot for some reason. There's still space to leave if I want to; it's currently just a jagged arch. The sky beyond the balcony walkway is grey and moody, clouds are moving much faster than they do in waking life. I swear I can feel a rumble go through my body, and I know it isn't thunder or an underground train. My stomach twists as I realise that right below the walkway, on the pavement and just out of sight, there are dead bodies. People collapsing from coronavirus, rasping out their last breath, desperate for some reassurance from someone, anyone, that there is someone waiting for them on the other side… *You do not need to be frightened,* I want to call out, but I am scared of the men with red hot bricks who must still be nearby. *You are loved, you always were, you always will be, you are from stardust and that's where you'll return.*

Voices float, hanging in the still, scentless air, but I cannot make out what they're saying. I decide in my dream mind that even if they come back later to finish the bricking up of my only exit, I would still rather stay indoors. I close the door, turn around, and my father walks out of my bathroom. He opens his mouth. "Jimmy Saville will be disappointed in you." I am more surprised by his sudden appearance than what he just said, as he died eight years ago, so I just stare at him. Patiently, wordlessly. He blinks at me from behind his thick-rimmed glasses, then disappears. I look into the front room; the lights are on low and the cat is nowhere to be seen. I open my mouth to scream and though I put everything into it, nothing comes out. Then I feel the vibrations in my chest again. I open my eyes, to wake up on my back

in bed. She's right there on top of me, patting my sweaty face with the pads of her paws in morbid fascination, eyes large and purring deeply, signalling she wants food more than she wants to listen to me relay my dreams to her. I curl my toes under the duvet and ask her out loud if dad really came to see me again – did she see him too or was it truly only in my dream? My mind doesn't cope in this moment, folds in on itself. But instead of getting up to move my body and expel the dream demons, I stay right where I am and wrap my arms around her, burying my face in her neck. She makes a noise between a purr and a harrumph, and I laugh. I stare at the ceiling till the need for a piss, a fag, and a cup of coffee takes over the need to hide.

My landline phone does this weird thing, at least a few times per week, where it'll briefly ring – just for half a second – then stop. It's a rotary phone, an old fashioned corded one with the pull dial. The ring tone is comforting, like something out of an '80s sitcom. You're almost waiting for Hyacinth Bucket to come shuffling out of my bedroom to answer it; 'Helloooo, Bouquet Residence, Lady of the House speaking!' It's never the cat brushing up against it, or a breeze. It's just a weird happening.

Another memory visits. My dad came to me in my sleep a few weeks after he died. In this dream I called him on the phone, half knowing I wouldn't get through, but wanting to dial the familiar number anyway. And the fucker only picked up. In an amazed, hushed voice, he said "You aren't meant to be able to get through to us here – it's only meant to work the other way round, and *that's* only when they let us!"

For a brief moment, I couldn't speak – the train in my throat was too big. Then, I just said:

"OK… but is that… actually you?"

"Yes", he replied, "it's me, love."

"What's it like there? Like – what does it look like?"

"It's nice. Very comfortable. They're so kind. There's a lot of paperwork though."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I snort, and his answer hurts my whole body.

"They make you review every moment of your life before the next stage. For how you affected others. So, darling, I have a lot of paperwork to get through."

I start to cry.

"You just wouldn't believe the stacks of it."

I can hear the smile in his voice. I start to laugh, which turns into huge, gulping sobs when I realise this time together is *so* limited; I've contacted the otherworld and I won't get long. It makes me fucking desperate. I can't lose this connection. I can't lose him again.

Just then, my mum walks into the room. In this dream, we are somehow living in an enormous house, in which each room has a tunnel for an entrance, not a door. I say to her, in a hushed tone because I'm terrified that the angel bosses will hear me and cut us off, "Dad's on the phone!"

She runs towards me and I give it to her.

"Is that… is that you?" I watch her face crumple in front of me as she falls apart at this one last chance to talk to him.

"Hello love", he says, then their voices are muffled to my ears for the rest of their conversation. She hands me the receiver back.

"Dad... am I doing OK?"

"You're doing just fine, darling." I can hear his voice breaking. "I am so proud of you."

When I wake up, I call my mum. It's 4am and she picks up immediately. "I just woke up from the strangest dream about you and your dad," she says.

I sob.

As I write this, the landline does the ring thing again. I turn to look into the hallway, and it happens again as I look at the phone – I don't usually get a double happening. 'OK', I say out loud, and keep staring, half hopeful and half frightened. I open my mouth again.

"Do you still have the same feelings and emotions as when we're in a human body? Or is it much more… dunno… wise and detached than that? Do you have angel feelings now? Or none at all? Um… so... do you still miss me too? Or is it just me that misses you?" A high-pitched noise comes out of me, an aching, desperate fury: "I don't want to be alone with it, dad. I don't want to be alone with my grief for you, without you."

I think, fuck, my neighbours are gonna wonder who just died.

When I went to view his body at the hospital and put my hand on his forehead, it was freezing cold. I heard screaming from another room in the 'death corridor', set at the furthest end of the main hospital building, plain and smelling of disinfectant, with a long row of identical doors down it like something out of *Black Mirror*. I thought, 'Why can't they keep their grief to themselves?', until I realised it was coming from me. Up to that moment in my life, I didn't realise the shock of grief could be so large as to overwhelm and leave your body entirely, desperate for a bigger vessel that can contain it, like a room where the roaring can echo.

Another memory: apples and carrots, huge rubbery lips travelling across my small hand gently. Feeding Ben the horse, who lived in a paddock past the pet graveyard and through the tunnel. Walking back, dad sings Time To Say Goodbye. Andrea Bocelli was famous for it at the time, it was the '90s. His trained operatic baritone reverberates heavily, literally physically, around the tunnel. My mum shakes with shame and neuroticism; I shake with aliveness, and feel dizzy with adoration.

It was my dad who taught me to sing. When I sing, it's so close to a roar it can feel overwhelming.

Dad had plenty of greyness, some black, and some white. He swung me, sang to me, hugged me, loved me, defended me, taught me how to punch, how to sing, how to ride a bike, and how to have a work ethic. He made me laugh a lot too. He abandoned me, ignored me, abused me, controlled me, sickened me, rejected me, slammed his enormous ham-sized fists into tables and doors,

fell down stairs raging drunk screaming at me, distanced himself from me, was totally unreachable emotionally, and gaslit me on all of that and more. My knee jerk reaction is to write him off completely. Put my walls up and pretend there is no gaping hole where his love and his abuse, his closeness and absence, his breath-down-my-neck and distant hollers, all used to be. But I miss him deeply. We are complicated, so painfully complex, and yet so beautiful in that complexity that it literally takes my breath away. The inescapable greyness of all of us means we don't ever need to strive for an unattainable perfection. We can destroy that myth, because lies about perfection kill. I am perfectly imperfect, and it's a fantastically joyful relief.

"You laugh like your father."

Hurt people hurt people; damaged people damage people. Break the cycle.

The radio alarm comes on. It is a week or so after Tesco now, about 7.45am – I am already awake. The news says we should all stay at home, and at the precise moment that declaration is made, it starts to piss it down outside. I think to myself, sure, I can do that, no problem. Hah! Jesus. I switch off the clipped, middle class, privileged voices relaying dystopian pandemic tragedy commentary in doomtones. What use is an alarm if I wake up before it goes off? Nightmares do that to my psyche: interrupt the natural order of things, show me the things I don't want to see, but perhaps need to see. So does a national lockdown. I need to change my alarm tone to one that doesn't make me want to burn my own flat down every morning.

I feel like a child again, but this time I am not frightened. Lockdown has surfaced my internal world, the one that usually goes unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of life, and that's OK. It simply explains why I'm dreaming of being trapped with no escape, screaming with no sound, staring with no words, blinking slowly, listening for echoes, and smiling at the sound of someone else's laughter while remembering my dad's, with the aching realisation that

I've forgotten the precise sound of it, and the feeling of how it used to rumble through my ribcage – the same as how his singing and laughter did. He was so large when I was small, everything about him enormous; his body, his fists, his laugh, his opera voice, his stature, his convictions, his oppression, his barely contained rage, confusion and shame, and his love for me. In the end though, at 79 years old, he was frail and lonely, wracked with all the pain he'd felt and caused. He died alone in the hospital bed from illnesses that took his soul long before they took his body, after I'd granted his request to a nurse for a Do Not Resuscitate as his power of attorney. A few years before this, he'd asked me to help him die with pills, and I just couldn't. The guilt wracked me; I wanted to relieve him of his pain. But in the end I was able to. I collapsed in the shower at the moment of his passing; they called me as I was still sitting on the bathroom floor.

A few weeks after his death, a robin redbreast landed on a branch by my face as I was holding his favourite necklace and asking for a sign. I hummed *Time To Say Goodbye*; a shooting star went over my head above. And a few weeks after that, I threw the necklace in a bin on Bethnal Green Road to rid myself of his energy. I still remember the exact bin, and sometimes play with the idea of rooting around in the bottom of it.

We are complex, grey animals, aren't we.

There is more laughter. It is everywhere, just waiting to be collected and passed on. Echoing, bouncing, reverberating, shaking; in search of vessels to be contained in and explode from.

Laughter is so beautiful, my God it is all we have.

Music as Dependency

for Annette Morreau, by Jordan Aramitz

During Covid-19, Annette kept sane through music. For millions across the world its power as a source of pure, unfiltered joy, might be regarded as a dependency. But so what? In this rapidly changing era of the 2020s, it is vital to have a dependable old friend.

Annette comes from a musical family; her mother was an alumna of the Royal College of Music, becoming the original viola player of the Macnaghten String Quartet, an all-women quartet specialising in contemporary music and playing by heart.

Annette herself studied cello at the progressive boarding school Dartington Hall and its College of Arts before going on to study Music at Durham University. She eschewed Oxbridge because at the time Durham was renowned for having the best music department, under the guidance of its eccentric Professor Arthur Hutchings. She recalled the magnificent sight of Durham Cathedral and the castle rising above the tree line as the train wound into the station, welcoming her to the northern city where she was to attend the applicants' interview. It was an aesthetic wonder and the memory continues to make an impression on her all these decades later. That moment solidified her determination to study there – or, at the very least, see the cathedral and castle up close.

Professor Hutchings met her at the station and she quickly made clear that if she was not successful in her application, at the very least she wanted to visit the castle and the cathedral. Charmed by her tenacity, Hutchings showed her round through the narrow streets. A couple of hours later, he offered her a place.

His faith in Annette soon proved well-placed when a year later, in 1966, she was the first woman to win the Durham/Indiana University Scholarship to

study music. She doesn't think her gender hindered or helped her application; the fact was that in 10 years, Indiana never knew that women were applying! Annette did so because she was disappointed that at Durham there was so little opportunity to continue her cello studies, but she knew full well that the music school at Bloomington, Indiana, was one of the greatest conservatories in the world, on par with the Julliard School in New York.

If experiencing life in a sorority was a bit of a challenge after the 'progressive nature' of Dartington Hall, paying $99 to travel 99 days on the Greyhound Bus throughout North America was an absolute life/changer, as were her lessons with the great cellist Janos Starker.

However, it didn't take long for her to realise that she was not going to be a great soloist. Her colleagues were learning a concerto by heart in a week… Knowing the ins and outs of the classical music world, changing direction but always keeping music central to her life, would be the focus.

On returning to the UK and finishing her degree, her first new focus was a traineeship at BBC Radio, mainly in the Music Department. However, months later, she took the opportunity to apply for both a place on the Arts Council's Arts Administration course and a job in the Music Department of the Arts Council of Great Britain, which led to her getting both. And it was as an employee of the Arts Council's Music Department that Annette founded one of the most valuable systems for contemporary music worldwide.

Over her years of practicing and studying, Annette had realised that there was little appetite in the so-called classical music world for contemporary music. With responsibility at the Arts Council for contemporary music, jazz and the smaller opera companies, Annette's thoughts soon came round to the fact that the performance of new music, nay, any written music, was very wasteful in terms of effort, finance, and results. The norm for most written music is for there to be a single concert; bad enough for any music. She concluded that generally, in terms of well-known classical music, the audience was not even listening at all, but comparing. Hence the lack of appetite for new music: audiences could not compare it to what they already knew. The

performers, after hours of work, were not that familiar with it either, being constrained to the 'normal' single performance. What to do? The obvious solution was to repeat the concerts, allowing the performers to 'saturate' in the works and confidently relay the product to the audience.

But how could a concert be repeated in the same venue when clearly there was not sufficient audience for a single concert? It couldn't. Repeating meant touring to different parts of the country, perfecting the performance and the understanding of the new work. Home in one! Top class performing groups from all over the world could be heard throughout the UK (as opposed largely to London), amortizing costs (in effort and finance) and spreading cultural knowledge.

Who was the audience? Probably not the 'normal' classical audience, but those more interested in the less predictable contemporary arts: the visual arts, fringe theatre, dance, held in less predictable venues than formal concert halls.

And what about marketing and promotion for a less predictable audience? Less predictable, younger audiences in less predictable venues spelt less predictable publicity material: idiosyncratic, brightly coloured, cartoon-like, amusing. Annette came across the work of the highly inventive Bob Linney, an illustrator already much in demand for his work publicising underground theatre and his lucid posters for health information in developing countries. Repetition was again the key: one image only, always repeated on posters, leaflets, and programme covers. They became collectors' items, helping to connect the music to the right people.

Annette spent 17 years at the Arts Council of Great Britain 'bedding in' the Contemporary Music Network. It was time to leave. She moved to Channel 4 TV, where she had responsibility for commissioning music programmes. But as the Mozart bicentenary rolled up in 1991, it was to the BBC that Annette turned pitching her idea: 'NOT MOZART'. In the shape of 6 hour-long dramas, she invited 6 composers to choose their own film directors and come up with their homage to Mozart, whatever that might mean. Michael

Nyman chose not to work with Peter Greenaway, but Dutch composer Louis Andriessen did, Andriessen and Greenaway winning a MIDEM prize for 'M is for Man, Music and Mozart'.

Now following a free-lance path, Annette became a music critic at The Guardian, The Independent and BBC Music magazine. She also made radio programmes for the BBC, including four two-hour programmes for Radio 3 about the great cellist Emanuel Feuerman ('FEUERMANN REMEMBERED') with interviews and performances broadcast in the prime 'Archive' slot on Saturday afternoons. That led to numerous comments, one listener even inviting her out to lunch. Turned out he was the Commissioning editor for Yale University Press based in London. He asked her if she'd like to write a biography of Feuermann. When Yale invites you to write a book, you don't say no – even if you've never done it before!

But how was she to finance it? As it happened, Harvard University, in the shape of The Bunting Institute, gave her a Fellowship. Published in 2002, The New Yorker described it as an 'exemplary' biography.

Annette is now a few years into retirement, but her routine during the COVID-19 pandemic has not become any less intriguing. She lives with her pet cat, Lupo, and he is the dearest companion she could have asked for. In a way, it was the six-year-old feline who adopted her: he was the pet of a neighbouring couple before they moved away. She offered to look after him while they found a new home; he refused to go back to them. Lupo has become her rock while shielding from the ongoing crisis. Instead of his original name, Annette prefers to jokingly call the cat 'Freud' or 'Sanity' in reference to the calming impact a pet has had on her mental health. During quiet lulls in the late afternoon, he likes to cuddle up to her on the sofa while the radio plays.

Before COVID-19 struck the world, Annette loved hosting parties and invited friends and colleagues from the classical music industry, so the sudden separation from her friends has taken a toll on her. She enjoys the daily walks through her local park, the Old Paddington Cemetery, but the hectic

joy of entertaining crowds used to be her passion in-between quiet days to herself. One of her fondest memories is her 60th birthday. A few weeks before the event, she asked a few friends who composed music if they could write pieces (for four violas in memory of her mother) for the occasion. Gladly, they obliged and the night was something truly quite magical. Their eccentricity fuelled her then and still does now.

In recent months, she has joined forces with her equally concerned neighbours to stop the deportation of an Eastern European handyman, named Peter, who is beloved in the community. As he was homeless, he lived in the shed of a property down the road from Annette's quarters. It was a simple structure that did nothing more than provide some shelter from the ever-changing British weather. Annette could cook meals for him and his pet dog, Dice. It gave her a sense of satisfaction to provide delicious, home-cooked food for the pair; it was something she enthusiastically did for all her social circle before Covid-19 required her age bracket to avoid in-person interaction. He became a dear friend to her and to the whole neighbourhood, and someone she could rely on to help her navigate the rapidly changing technologies of the modern world. Annette and her neighbours would support Peter at times, and all pitched in the money necessary to fund dentures for him after his old pair fell apart.

In an unfortunate turn of events, Peter was found and arrested for having no papers. To further add salt to the wound, the police went so far as to euthanize Dice. With her connection to Lupo being so essential to her, Annette could empathise all too well, and sadness quickly turned to fury over the unnecessary tragedy. Even after all the neighbourhood's efforts, Peter has been imprisoned for nearly a year now, awaiting near-certain deportation back to his country of origin. Still, Annette refuses to give up and is continuing to work with lawyers to attempt to appeal his case. It has been a long, arduous process, but she is determined to fight to the bitter end.

And yet, amongst the turmoil, Annette has found that music never fails to calm her down so that she can get a brief moment of respite. That, then, is

why she thinks of it as a dependency. Music soothes her, gives her reassurance. With soft tones filtering out of her speakers and her cat, Lupo, curled up on her lap, she can put every trouble to rest. For a little while, she can feel the same rush of wonder and comfort she did when she was a girl and saw Durham Cathedral rising above the treetops from her train window.

Things That Miles Cannot Touch

for Miles Davis, by Erica Masserano

THE PART OF himself that looked at the world like a child, because when you are a child, you do not see the world as you do now

When you're little you're just like a sponge

The fence that separates Harry Roberts nursery from Ben Jonson primary school, the years he grew up on one side or the other, a life all collecting itself in one place

Like a pearl in an oyster in Stepney

His father: he was a cobbler, initially he made shoes at home, then in the shoe factory in Redchurch Street; he was from Dominica, Miles does not know how he and his mom came over, they didn't tell him, probably for a reason, probably it was rough business

He laughs

His mother: from Saint Lucia, mums are the salt of the earth, you can have one father, two stepfathers, three or four, he says, but you can only have one mother and you have to cherish her, she does all that work for you from even before you are in the world and in his darkest days she'd been there for Miles and his brother

You have to put her on a pedestal on high

The sunlit sound of the Patois his parents spoke, a bit African, a bit French and a bit English, he would hear a word bounce from one side of the table to another a few times and then catch it and pick it up and retain it

When you're little you're just like a sponge

Saint Lucia, which he visited in 1980; he had a little tour of the island, which didn't take too long; maybe he saw the turquoise sea crashing on the volcanic beaches and the green peaks plunging into the turquoise sea, maybe

he heard the waterfalls shattering sheet after sheet of white water in the rainforest, he is not too sure

It's just so far now

His younger brother after their parents moved him to a boarding school, which Miles could not understand, he just wanted to be with him, the school was way out of Stepney and his brother was only 10, they said he was badly behaved

You don't see these things as children

The door to his old council flat on the Ocean Estate: his family lived in Bothnia House, his friend Frankie lived in Bengal House, they bulldozed it; the newspapers always talk about the poverty, the people crammed 12 to a flat, but on the inside it was a tight-knit community with neighbours who cared about one another

It's strange

The neighbour's bell he used to ring and run away, growing up in Tower Hamlets maybe wasn't the best but he had fun times, like most children, mischievous, playing knock-down-ginger and football on the inter-estate competitions

Like the world was his oyster in Stepney

The Ocean's women and children, the Krays saw to it that no one could touch them, because they had a code; one woman he talked to had lived in army camps all across Europe and told him she had never been safe until she came to East London

We know these things happen

The blackened window on the second floor from the Reed family fire, he does not know if the fire was accidental; the drugs – never touched them – if you get hooked to a substance you're going to be kept under control, the papers say that the Ocean was the cheapest place in Europe to get heroin

You don't see these things as children

The promises from the developers who said they were going to knock down the estate and build a new one and relocate people there, his mother did not want to leave, they moved her into temporary accommodation on Bethnal Green Road and never moved her back in

We know these things happen

The brightly coloured football gear in the sports shop in Hackney where he did his first placement on the Youth Training Scheme, didn't want to be on the dole when he left school, he does not think the shop exists anymore but he was blessed to do a lot of things in his early years – Jack of all trades, master of none

He laughs

His desk in the bookies office on Bethnal Green Road where he did his second placement on the Youth Training Scheme as an accountant, on an empty office floor, which was a strange experience; he was always bright with numbers, a real number-cruncher, that place is probably gone too and if it's not gone it's not like he can visit

It's just so far now

His son Elijah, who is a teaching assistant, who is academically minded, who should be in Bristol; and his son Miles, who is more practically minded, he is in Liverpool, Tier 3, but that does not seem to be bothering him; they are from two different mothers, he is proud of them both and loves them both equally, his mum helped him raise them

You have to put her on a pedestal on high

His first son when he was just born, his flesh and blood, it was a shock; it's a shock when you contemplate in your mind how your actions have produced another human, and you have to take care of them

When you're little you're just like a sponge

The part of his brain that was injured in the accident, he just remembers he was driving, then hearing the ticking of the machines and the doctors around him saying "neuro this, neuro that" and he knew they meant brain; the words he could not tell them, I'm here, you can talk to me, waking up in a hospital bed, unable to move, thinking

I'm here, I'm here, I'm OK

The ways his life changed, at first it left him confused, but then he accepted it, started joining community organisations, doing rehab, being

active; he likes to think that he can make a difference, if he can make a difference in one person's life every day that's his dream achieved

Don't do tomorrow what you can do today

His disability, which he does not call disability, he calls it inability, every day it's just different, but he thinks other people are good at seeing things from his point of view; he doesn't want to complain, he thinks that there are people worse off in this world and if he falls down, he'll get up and brush himself off and carry on

I'm here, I'm here, I'm OK

The machines in the gym he frequents for his physical rehab, which is closed, it has been very helpful for his ABI; he went to the gym and swam and walked every day before lockdown, it's helpful for his physical rehab, he has a long list of goals, he's always had it, and he is still working on it

It's just so far now

The woman in the gym who had an issue at the job she just started and he would like to tell her that it's going to be alright, he says he is a touchy-feely person, he likes high-fiving people, he has been asked not to do it, it has become evident that he should not do it

The touching is a big change

The homeless people that he talks to on the street or at Chrisp Street Market, the people in Mile End Park he sits on a bench and makes Covid chitchat with, he cannot bear to be inside all day, he is too active for that; he has signed a petition against the cuts to community centres, he got 1000 signatures on the one to save his gym

Don't do tomorrow what you can do today

Lockdown, which is like Christmas used to be in the old days when everything was closed except that was joyful, and which is an opportunity to reflect on what life is really about, to not rush all the time, to just live it; the realisation of another lockdown coming, he cannot wait to get back to normality

It's just so far now

The mixed messages from the government: don't go out but go back to work; don't go out of your house but you can go to restaurants, you can

go to pubs; communication was clearer last time, when they just had a clear directive, do not go out, boom, period, but it's only when people started getting financial penalties they actually started taking notice

It's strange

The news on TV, which is all negative, he thinks it is too negative, he doesn't do negative; just like with Covid, he says, the people who he knows who had Covid have come through the other side, they want to keep people in a dark place, once the light starts coming through people will see that it's not that bad

I'm here, I'm here, I'm OK

The pandemic, which he calls a plan-demic; in history illnesses keep coming and going, it's just evolution, people have to learn from the experiences of the past, it appears to him that we're not learning; we have to learn to be nice to each other, look after each other, just be nice, it's not too difficult

Don't do tomorrow what you can do today

God, who made the world and we are going to end it, whenever Miles needs to he can turn to his faith, what's going on in the world today has all been written, it has all been foreseen by past scholars

He laughs

The bonds you have with people, so many are passing away and if you didn't take the opportunity to talk to them then you will have lost it, he has seen too many people pass suddenly like his friend Frankie from the estate, it's life, people come, people go; especially in times like now, it doesn't matter how the relationship is, you have to grab on to it

Don't do tomorrow what you can do today

The sudden rain batting the ground outside the Toynbee Hall windows while we're having what he calls his therapy session

It's therapy because we're talking

But really, it hasn't been that much of a change at all, except for the staying inside and the touching

The touching is a big change

Talk History

for Peter Shrimpton, by Imogen Ince

Peter warns me, just minutes into our first conversation, that he's a little old fashioned, a self-proclaimed old fogey and proud. Initially, I laughed this off as an amusing, somewhat throwaway comment, yet seeing how the world can change so drastically and so quickly, I've begun to understand what a comfort the familiar is. Talking to Peter, hearing him speak, is a strange experience. How do you get to know someone so well without ever seeing them? With the restrictions enforced by the government, there's little we can do apart from talk to each other, so I listen. I listen to his words, which spit and crackle from my worn phone speaker and into my laptop, the recording software spiking and falling with each sound. It keeps score of our conversations and the generational divide on our tongues.

"I'm not any good with words," he tells me, during one of our calls, but that's not what's important. He's a storyteller, one whose sentences are littered with fragments of history and words that have yellowed with age. Like clockwork, I call, and like clockwork, he picks up every Monday morning, his voice comforting during such an isolating time. Peter's stories are a comfort too, a small glimpse into the life he's lived, where he grew up, ten or so miles from my own family home. When I tell him this, he's pleased to hear it, and weaves the streets into his stories, his voice a map; some places I know, some are entirely unfamiliar, and he helps me rediscover the city. When I ask how he knows the area so well, Peter replies,

"I became a street sweeper after working in the City, and it was the best thing I ever done." "You must know the place pretty well," I say, still testing out the limits of polite conversation. He agrees wholeheartedly and begins to list off street name after street name until I can't keep up anymore. Canary

Wharf onto Canning Town onto Stratford, Ilford, Romford; every place has a story. One of these stories catches my attention, the fondness in his voice seeping into his speech, and I want to ask more.

The Two Puddings Pub, once located in Stratford, maintained an infamous reputation and was known locally as the Butcher's Shop, purely for the sheer number of fights that broke out there. Despite this, it was a major draw for a number of figures; hosted footballers like Harry Redknapp, musicians like David Essex, and of course, Peter. The building itself was rather unassuming, the black and white images found on Google reveal the bright piping of its half-moon windows which contrast with the dark tile and cold facade, but the more Peter talks about it, the more it's brought to life.

"It was the only place that stayed open past eleven," he laughs. "Well, the Puddin's would shut and then we'd all move to the nightclub upstairs – a proper discotheque. That's why everyone loved it! It was the only one in the East End of London -- people would come from all over the place."

When I ask him about the pub's reputation, he pauses for a second to gather his thoughts; "It could get a bit…" he struggles to find a word, "...it could get a bit feisty. Cliquey. Some people would turn up for a punch up instead of a good time and a pint."

That night I searched online for any images from the Two Puddings, wanting to put a place to a name. I had expected to find something far less cheery in appearance, and it seemed hard to believe that this was the place that boasted such a notorious reputation, every photo revealing a packed dancefloor with every patron beaming up into the camera lens. The women sport perfectly quaffed beehives, their fringes falling into their smiling eyes, whilst the men look crisp with their gelled hair and blazers. From this little porthole into history, it all seems so glamorous. (On reflection I realise I may be viewing this all through my own rose-tinted glasses, constructed from my desire to live vicariously through Peter's recounted youth as I spend my own trapped indoors.)

It's Friday night, and Peter finds himself back at the Two Puddings. He passes the bouncers, a new addition to the establishment, he notes, and heads upstairs. Jostling

through the crowd, he and his friends stand at the bar. He orders the usual and looks out to the floor, where the figures dance to the club's pop records, which is good, but it's not rock, not yet. Peter's established a system for this now – have a good time, dance with whoever's caught his eye, drink a little too much, catch the last train home and hope you didn't cross the wrong person.

"It wasn't a big place, so you had to watch who you'd bump into, but I wasn't one for causing havoc. Some of my friends were though." I can hear him smiling down the phone at a memory he's keeping close to his chest. "Some strange things used to go on all them years ago."

Peter stopped drinking after his father passed away in '99, went completely cold turkey one morning, but he's not afraid to laugh about his drunken tales. He recounts the nights he'd spend at clubs like the Two Puddings, staying up to the early hours of the morning and once finally arriving home, having to get up for work just a few hours later.

He laughs as he recounts, "It was largely with my mates. They'd all struggle to get up before noon the next day, and I'd get up no problem. Bright and early." I admire that, knowing that I'd be unlikely to achieve that attitude.

"But I've always been like that; never been ill, never caught a cold, not even in flu season."

In lockdown, Peter walks to stay active and sane. He watches the news, but not too much, and calls friends and family to catch up. He misses the communities he's helped build, the Any Old Irons programme where he could enjoy the company of other avid West Ham fans, or the shows he'd go uptown to see. Despite this, he never complains; Every phone call starts with an update: How are you? What have you been up to? On occasion he'll spare a witty barb for whatever politician or public figure who's been acting out or discuss the development of a vaccine or update me on what lockdown is like in London. He'll tell me about his walks, about how he'd battle the winter weather for miles at a time, his focus on how fortunate he is to get out, stretch his legs and enjoy himself. In such a frightening time, Peter isn't fearful – he's grateful for what he has.

The line goes silent for a moment, and it's as if I can hear the distance stretching out between us, all one hundred miles of it.

"I'm very lucky with my health. Especially now. Very lucky."

Tiles, Towers, Toilets

by Christopher Worrall – an autobiographical piece

I had a dream last night.

I was in a tower so tall that the ground below was invisible. Inside the tower was an equivalent of everything and everyone I knew in the world outside.

There were crowds, and sometimes I walked through them, joyous at finding old flames and unrequited loves. Walls, floors and sweeping wide staircases pulsed with movement and excitement.

I hugged someone who might have been my favourite ever teacher, the one who really changed my life. I had no idea, but the hug was long and firmly returned and as crowds cheered around me I wept a tear for the joy of being held so fiercely.

But did I know them? I never had a teacher with that face. Who were they? Nobody could hear my questions.

Mum was in the tower, and she was herself, except that in her dementia she thought that I wasn't the real version of me, and she was tweeting everyone to tell them. I couldn't find her to tell her to stop tweeting, because finally I was on my side lying on a thin ledge at the top of the tower, clouds all around me, knees hanging off the edge, too scared to look down into the abyss.

It was so astonishingly blue…

Reflections bounced off the windows, and falling away below me were garlanded terraces thronged with crowds. If I craned my neck there were people who'd reached safety, off the ledge, but I was too scared to call for help.

Today

Last time I saw mum was over a year ago. In the old world. She was gaunt, teeth sticking out of her dry, pinched face. Clinging to me as I left the ward. Sobbing. I'm used to my mother's tears, used to the demands, the pressure to

save her. It got serious when dad left. I was sixteen. I'm older now than she was then.

Mum went into a care home just after the pandemic started, and I haven't seen her since. The social worker told me that mum said I'm always so busy with my job. She tried not to sound judgemental. I wanted to explain the sleepless nights, the crushing fearfulness, the overpowering need to punch the little git version of me who sits in the tile on the screen, looking like me, sounding like me, mocking me, all day, every day. The words wouldn't come. Instead, I mumbled something about feeling guilty. Actually, I'm relieved mum's locked up in the care home… and not just because she was becoming a danger to herself. How can I begin to tell this stranger anything meaningful about who mum and I are?

The case conference takes place on zoom. Me and my husband, my uncle, the head of the discharge team, mum's social worker, and the deputy manager of the care home. Little tiles of expertise on the screen. All the professionals are weary: grey and exhausted. The decision making 'tool', a document they emailed us in advance, is long and burdensome, covering twelve 'care domains' to assess whether mum has full control over her bowel movements, or can understand what people are saying to her. It's hard to take the process seriously when we all know that the most important issue is whether the NHS can or will pay for the cost of her social care, the 'timely and skilled intervention' she might need if she can't shit for herself anymore.

The head of the discharge team is stern. She's clearly the one with the power here. I enjoy her broad Lancashire accent, booming out over the speaker and from under an impressive thatch of hair and eyebrows. My uncle is clueless as usual, keeps offering little anecdotes about mum, like this is some kind of quaint family gathering. Should I have brought battenburg? Mum hated him, although she often pretended otherwise, and desperately wanted his approval. She was the oldest child, he the youngest. The favoured son, spoiled and whiney. Now grown up, late middle-aged white-van-man-racist-bigot, with the princess daughters and the tax-free backhanders.

I am, true to the aspirations of my uneducated parents, now middle class enough to know what awkward questions to ask. But it doesn't stop me seeing it from their point of view, worrying about how tired and stressed they all are, worrying about taking up unnecessary time. The woman from the care home is genuinely lovely. We bond immediately; she's charmed by my mum's vanity and I laugh along with her. Mum was beautiful. I remember us clothes shopping together, fun times as I egged her on from outside the changing room.

Uncle is talking again, oblivious to the logic of the decision making 'tool'. I stare at him in his little tile on the screen, grateful he's at the other end of the country, that I can mute him, turn my video off and scream at the tile to fuck off and die. What are those god-awful figurines on the shelf behind him? When will I ever see him again? At mum's funeral? That'll be it.

Mum is smearing shit round her room at the care home. Telling the staff to fuck off when they intrude on the new reality she's made for herself. Before, in the tiring world of adulthood, mum had been on her own for a long time. Our weekly calls used to consist of long lists of the chores she'd done, "on my *own*". Now though, she's found herself a pretend husband. Her second one, apparently. The first wasn't quite as amenable and hit her in the face a couple of times. Husband number two and mum both like to get naked in her room with the door closed. The staff clearly expect me to be horrified. I'm charmed by her childish rebelliousness. Thank fuck she's having some fun. In this alternate reality, mum has a son, like me, only he's a young boy and he's adorable. If this is losing your mind, maybe Alzheimer's isn't the cruellest cut, but the kindest, transporting us back to an idealised moment of happiness? And of course, the care home has been locked down, on and off, for over a year now. My very adult, very unavailable self hasn't troubled the demented fantasy of the adorable boy I'm supposed to be. I'm pleased for her. And relieved.

1987

Mrs Williams, my A-level Sociology teacher takes me aside after class today to ask me how I am. The teachers are worried about me. Mrs Williams let

me join her class six months into the year, something she'd never done before, and I feel vindicated in dropping A-level music when she gives me a B+, her highest mark, for my first essay. I walk home from school feeling happier than I have for ages. But that familiar burning settles in my tummy as I walk towards our front door.

Mum is sat in the lounge, crying again. I sit next to her and ask her how she's doing. Suddenly there's glass shattering against the wall, and mum's screaming about how she can't cope, how she hates him and will never be happy again. Then she sobs about how sorry she is; tells me again how special I am, that nobody else understands her like I do. My hands are shaking. There are shards of glass on the floor, next to the puddle of water from where she threw the glass. It's six months since dad left. And another year before I'll be leaving to go to university, to the far end of the country. I give her a hug. Everything will be okay. She won't feel like this for ever. She just has to feel like this till she doesn't feel like this anymore. I put the kettle on and get the dustpan and brush.

Today

One vaccination, two self-administered tests and five cancelled visits due to changing guidelines, and now I'm booked to see mum on Friday. I feel like I'm back on the ledge, knees hanging into the abyss. The tower throngs with crowds. Are they the reason I'm visiting her? Are they watching? The social workers, and care home staff, the solicitors and the doctors and the family friends, my uncle, and my colleagues, my neighbour who cries when he speaks about his mum, my dad, still guilty, and maybe the teenage boy who still feels it is his job to save his mum. Good boys visit their mums in care homes. Good boys weep for a locked-down year's worth of missed hugs.

Arriving at the home for my Covid test does nothing to settle my unease. The volunteer who administers the test, a brisk, chatty woman with huge glasses, regales me with tales of the hardships the home has suffered: the staff who've burned out, the deaths, the wider neglect of the elderly and

vulnerable. I flush with shame, and look for signs of judgement in her face. All I see is jolly helpfulness. She's here to help the home and its residents, why should she care about my story? I relax into the onslaught of her chatter. The room is a repurposed resident's bedroom, with a door out onto the car park and a grassy area bathed in sunshine. It's a beautiful day.

After the result confirms I don't currently have any antigens, she leads me back into the building and I tense for what's to come. Will mum remember me? Will my presence unsettle the scraps of self still grasped by her demented brain? We emerge from the lift and are met by one of the unit's nurses and slowly follow a couple of old women down the corridor. One is short, the other tall and leaning against the handrail. Both are grey, stooped, slow. The nurse calls to the taller woman, reminding her that she's been so excited about her visitor. The woman turns, and it's mum. She looks ten years older, but her features are softer, less troubled and more well fed than a year ago.

Her face crumples as she recognises me, and she staggers into my arms with a huge sob, 'oh it's you… I didn't know if I'd see you again'. I yield into the hug with a quiet sigh, waves of relief and compassion rising through my body as it relaxes.

Almost immediately she recovers and steps back, smiling. I take her hand and we walk towards her room. She's chattering constantly about how lovely it is to see me, until we get to the open doorway and a small old man in a nylon cardigan emerges from what is apparently her room. Mum scolds the man sharply, telling him he shouldn't have been in her house. With a smiling wink, the nurse closes the door on us and we're alone. The room is bathed in late afternoon sunshine, and outside her window the hillside is a deep lush green that you don't see down south in the dusty, chalky downs. I sit on the bed next to her chair. She holds my hand, beaming at me.

'Are you happy, mum? Do you feel safe here?'

'Oh yes. You know Marks and Spencers,' she extends her arms to encompass her room, and the home beyond, 'they look after you.'

1982

We find a field up the hill, just below the railway line. It snowed again last night, but today it's bright and clear and the world looks reborn. The gate is broad and too stiff; mum laughs, giving up, and I feel very grown up when she moves aside to let me tug it open.

I'm twelve, and the Christmas holiday is a welcome break from the terror of my new school. Since we moved here six months ago I've been going to the toilet six or more times a day. But today is good: it will be Christmas day soon, and the holiday stretches before me with the promise of videos to watch and fried egg butties to eat.

The dog bounds off into the unbroken snow, yelping as he disappears below the surface with each leap. Mum smiles at me and her eyes are shining in the sunlight. We turn together, giggling and huffing across the snow-covered field. A crisp, sparkly crust has frozen over the deep soft drifts below, and it cracks with a joyous snap with each wellie booted step.

We stagger towards each other, half laughing, half gasping, and she takes my hand, pulling me towards her. Her breath is warm against my cold cheek and smells of Polo mints. We turn and look down the hill over the fields. Below us the town is pristine and still, nestled in its downy blanket.

Joyriding down the Roman

for Denise Arbiso, by Sam Dodd

"I've been joyriding down the Roman on my mobility scooter. Gets me about alright, that thing does! Went to Toynbee Hall today – wasn't able to go there all through lockdown. They're so lovely there. You know, I've got a terrible memory. You may not get a lot outta me. But let's have a nice chat anyway."

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I grew up in Stoke Newington originally, and when I was very young, we moved more into the centre of Hackney. I was born 62 years ago in 1958. All my family were from there, going back generations. I had two brothers. Those two used to torment me – take my dolls, shake them teasingly... boys can be that way. Ah, but they were only messing. They loved me really. Both of them are still alive, they live near to me – we are all in Bow.

Growing up, my mum used to do the cooking. She was a good mum. Loved cooking dinner – she was very good at spaghetti bolognese and stews! I still love my stews now, make em all the time, but they're never as good as when your mum makes em are they! She liked getting her hair done, and she'd wear lipstick. Pink, I think. That's my favourite colour now too, I do like a bit of lippy sometimes. Her and my dad rowed a lot. He was argumentative, never grateful for her. Her catchphrase was "That fucking man." Hah! He was difficult, yeah. Difficult man. My mum worked in the same warehouse department store in Shoreditch High Street as me and my cousin, it was called Spencer Rotherham. She also had another job, swing park attendant over at Springfield Park in Stokey – looking after all the kids on the swings, making sure they were safe 'n that. She loved that job. So she did all that, plus being a full time mum. I dunno how she did it.

We had a tortoise, a real one, I used to play with him in the garden. It's funny, when you look back. What a strange animal to have! I liked mixing with other girls my age at school, didn't like school overall to be honest, and I couldn't bear P.E.! Did not like that at all. Climbing apparatus and all that nonsense – what is the point in that?! But I did like netball – that was great. It was called Clapton Park School on Chelmer Road, an all-girls school. It is still there, but the name has changed, it's now part of Clapton Girls' Academy. I was a very good child. I never got in trouble, not even as a teenager. The worst thing I ever did in my life was start smoking at the age of 11 – and I've been chuffing away ever since. It's ever so bad for you. I never told my parents; I hid it at the time. If they'd have found out they'd have told me off something rotten.

Hackney has changed a lot over the years. The people are different. It's more posh now than what it used to be. In some ways it's a lot better. The crime has gone down for sure. The community was tight knit back in those days, but my family kept ourselves to ourselves. We didn't go spend time down the community halls or anything like that, not like other families. Just wasn't my parents' thing. Some people loved all that though. We didn't go to church; my parents weren't really all that religious. I was christened in the Church of England but I haven't kept up with it. We stayed in a lot.

Much like right now, I suppose. My mood goes up and down a bit recently, with all this virus stuff going on. It can feel a bit frightening. I have my days when I feel down – and the grey weather doesn't help. I just keep going though, best way I can.

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The only job I ever had was in that Spencer Rotherham's, founded by a fella called Jeremiah Rotherham. Textiles warehouse – fabric, home decoration sections, all that. I worked there for a long while, in the curtain department. When I was a child, I wanted to be an air hostess! I never did get

round to that. It's funny, when you think back to your dreams as a child. I loved airplanes. But I retired before I had my kids, so it's not like I was at Rotherham's for decades – I was a stay at home mum – and I wanted to be.

I didn't really go out an awful lot, didn't have a bunch of girlfriends, but I did go about with my cousin Elaine. We liked the pubs. One in Camden Town, The Eastnor Castle, as she lived over that way, and one on the Roman near me, the Earl of Aberdeen. We had a lot in common with each other. We wanted the same things in life and were on the same trajectory. She worked in the warehouse with me. Then we both got married, started families, both had a girl and a boy. She was about my age too. We were so similar, and we really had a laugh together. One club we used to go to was on Neal Street in Covent Garden, called Chaguaramus – a gay club – we used to love it there. And funfairs, we went to them a lot too. Hackney, Lea Bridge Road – they'd be big ones, every year. My favourite ride was the Big Wheel. I couldn't go now! I'd get dizzy 'n that – I'm too old now. And Saturday morning pictures – we'd go there regularly. It was called the Vogue Cinema, on the corner of Stoke Newington High Street and Batley Road. We did a lot of things together, me and Elaine. Wish I was young again sometimes. If I was, the first thing I'd do would be to get dressed up and go out more, enjoy myself more, have more fun, I think. She's still about, my cousin, though we don't stay in touch as much. She still lives in Camden. And I'm still here in the East. Won't be going out on the town tonight, sadly! Think I'm past all that now, it's for the young ones to do.

I got married in my twenties. It didn't last long. I don't think he was my first love, but I can't remember who was! He's still alive, still very much a part of the family. Our first proper date, really, was our wedding. We didn't really do dating much, me and him!

My best memory is when I had my daughter Keely. She was born in Jubilee year, 1977. I always wanted a baby. Didn't mind whether it was a girl or a boy, but I wanted kids. And I loved that she was born in the Jubilee year. Then having my boy Terry, it just made me so happy, I was complete when I had those two. I love my kids very much. Very much. And all my

grandkids. If I was to give any advice to young people now, it'd be to keep off drugs. They're different these days. And when we're young we think we're invincible. Keep out of gangs as well; there is so much knife crime now, there weren't any knives when I was a kid, or at least it was very rare. So, stay out of gangs, stay out of trouble with the law, and stay off the drugs.

If I could, I'd move out of London. Loughton is nice, that's where my son lives with his young family. I'd like a change in the air quality. I'd go there, if I could. The pace in London is much faster now than it used to be – or maybe I'm just slower! I do think though, if you want to move and you're still young enough, do it. Take the leap. London ain't what it used to be. The air here is bad now.

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I'VE BEEN TRYING to cope as best as I can during this pandemic. The lockdown was tough, didn't leave the house as much as I used to, just stayed in really, though still made it down to the corner shop to buy my fags and crossword books. I had my hair done a couple of weeks ago, hadn't done that for months. I felt *ever* so fancy. Toynbee Hall sent me colouring books and fiction novels through lockdown, and the pharmacy delivered my medication. I went out for food when I had to, I could sort that myself and I didn't mind. My housing association even called to check I was alright – I thought that was very thoughtful. Did a lot of colouring in and crosswords over the lockdown. This week, I went down the Roman as I needed a new microwave. It's nice to be able to go out a bit more again now. Didn't find the one I wanted on the Roman, so I got the bus down the Bethnal Green Road. One of those market stalls with the fridges and cookers on it too. Must be a pain for the stallholders when it rains – what with all them electrics. Anyway, Toynbee Hall sorted me out with a laptop! I've never used one before. Just getting used to it – looking at the weather, the news, some pictures, all that. I'll never put my bank details in that thing.

I don't know of anyone in my immediate circle who got COVID, but I watch the news a lot – the numbers were frighteningly high. They still are. The NHS response to COVID is amazing. Unbelievable. The nurses and doctors are so good at what they do. Nobody in my neighbourhood did the clap for carers, not that I saw or heard myself anyway. I missed my mum during lockdown – she was in a supported living home in Bethnal Green.

My priority in life now is trying to stay healthy and listening to doctors. I have a lot of health issues now, all of which came later on in life – I was a fit young thing in the old days. I'm still eating chocolate though – even though I'm not meant to! And still chuffing away on the cigarettes! I went for another scan yesterday. Have a lot of scans these days, that happens when you get old. The results will go to my doctor. Not a particularly exciting week. Haven't really seen anyone. What I do on any day depends on the weather. I can't ride my scooter when it's raining cos I gotta hold a brolly at the same time. If I ride, I get soaked – if I hold the brolly, can't ride!

When I think about the future, I feel good. I like to be positive, not negative. It's important to think positively. It keeps us sane. If we keep thinking negatively, we are never gonna get nowhere. Negativity puts obstacles in your way. If you wanna go somewhere or do something, go there! Do that! You only live once. We must enjoy this life. We are lucky to have it.

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Been sorting out me winter jumpers. Coming up winter now, and I like me jumpers. Had a shower, washed me hair. Things like that. The decorator has gone now, it's all finished. It looks nice, it feels good to have a fresh home. And me tea is in the oven. I've got a bit of cod in. Don't like the ones with bones, too fiddly.

I like my own company, enjoy living alone. It's nice to be able to come and go when you want to, do your own thing, don't have to answer to no-one. Peaceful. Course, things changed a bit when we went into lockdown.

You realise how much you like to get out and about, the moment you can't do it no more. But I feel lucky to be here, to have a safe home. These days you can lose everything so quickly, there are so many homeless. And I'm grateful I'm not one of them.

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My mum died this week. I've never felt anything so acutely in my life as I am right now. It wasn't COVID, it was dementia. When she first started getting ill with the dementia, it was so hard to watch the gradual deterioration. She just didn't know what she was saying half the time, and then eventually, all of the time. This feels painful, to lose her hurts.

Her name was Joan, and she was a fantastic woman. When she died, this week, she was 91. White haired, lovely old lady. She was so kind, to everyone. Much more outgoing than me! I'm quite shy, but my mum never was. Got on with everyone. Loved going Bingo and socialising – well known in the community, cos she would always help a struggling person out – sometimes with money, sometimes with food, sometimes just with a kind word. Such a good heart, my mum had. She was never strict, just understanding. Loved all her grandkids too, mine and my brother's kids, and when they were little she came round a lot to help me out; I needed it. She was always out with her trolley, out and about, she liked being active. Loved the markets; Dalston, Mare Street, Stratford, Hoxton – all of them. She loved buses as well, was always on and off a bus somewhere or other. I've gone through her photos with my daughter, she was much closer to her than she was to me. One has got pride of place on top of my telly. I am going to miss her so much.

It'll be another Christmas soon. I hope people are OK this Christmas. Never had one like this before, have we? My mum won't be here for this one. It'll be the first one in my life I haven't spent with her. I suspect many people's mums won't be around this Christmas. I hope people cope OK.

Solitude

She Goes from Her Room to the Kitchen to the Garden to Her…

by Catriona West – an autobiographical piece

…room to the living room to the kitchen to her room to the garden to her room. Every day is the same. Every day is the same. Every day is the same.

Wash your hands. Social distance. Stay 2 metres apart. Use hand sanitiser. Wear a mask.

The weather outside is taunting everyone: clear blue skies, the smell of hot grass coming in through the windows, and it's warm – why is it so warm? Has it always been this warm in March? – yet everyone is stuck inside with nowhere to go. But the house backs on to fields and there are lots of open spaces where she lives, and the neighbour's dog to borrow to take on a walk, and it's peaceful and green and there's blossom showering the branches of the trees. She goes out on her bike, along the long windy country roads, to the nearby villages surrounded by fields, where everything is old and quaint and pretty: churches and cottages with thatched roofs. And everything is quiet, so quiet, just the birds and the rustle of the trees and the warmth of the sun on her face. She sits in the garden and reads, all of her old favourite stories, Tolkien and Tolstoy and Austen, revisiting the past; there's something comforting in reading a book you've read countless times before, like coming home to a warm house after a long day and taking off your shoes.

Wash your hands. Don't go to work. Stay inside. Essential travel only.

Everyone is sitting inside like they're tiny figures in a child's dolls house, one in each room, everyone doing their own little activity, attempting to stay busy. In her house everyone is in a separate room on their laptops, working from home or doing online school (except her brother, who's on his Playstation 24/7). And her mother is telling everyone to be quiet because she's on a work call, and can everyone come off the internet for an hour because her connection is slow and she's convinced it's because everyone in this house is online (except where else can they be; being anywhere but online isn't allowed right now).

Wash your hands. Stay inside. Except all children can now go back to school. But stay inside. And wash your hands.

She *thinks* she's still a student, but with no lectures or seminars at university she doesn't feel like she is. She hasn't got a job, and she's stuck, frozen in time, in a strange limbo where she doesn't have any purpose but also isn't supposed to have any purpose right now. And before when people did nothing and stayed at home all day they were called lazy and were encouraged to get out and do something with their lives, yet now everyone is required by law to stay in and do nothing with their lives. And people are furloughed or working from home yet the world is still turning, so perhaps we're not supposed to work until we die after all, because look at us, we all just exist, no one is spending all day at the office and everyone can work on their own time and take their own breaks and it's fine.

Wash your hands. Stay inside. Don't go outside but you can go back to work if you want and we haven't closed the borders either but remember to help our key workers and don't forget to wash your hands.

It's alienating and isolating, how people have to stay away from each other, recoiling at the sight of another person, crossing the street to get away. It's unnatural to see someone outside and your first thought be to create more space, more distance, between yourself and them, to widen the gap; even though they're right in front of you, you must stay apart, you must not come into contact. Humans are hardwired to be communicable, social,

dependent on other people, forming our lives out of connections, interactions, conversations. And even though she and her friends live so close to each other, they can only see each other's faces on the screen, on Zoom, not in person, as though they were a million miles away, on the other side of the world, or maybe another planet. They do quizzes, because everyone is doing quizzes, except theirs are the best because they are tailored to their group and have rounds on memes and High School Musical and "who wrote this caption to their private Instagram post five years ago".

Wash your hands. Stay inside. Help your local economy. Don't go outside but also Eat Out to Help Out because restaurants and cafes are open again otherwise all businesses will go bankrupt but also stay inside because cases are rising again and have you washed your hands?

She's spending too much time on TikTok, endlessly watching, and everyone is talking about Joe Exotic and Carole Baskin and everyone's doing Chloe Ting ab workouts and everyone is baking banana bread. Why is everyone baking banana bread? And everyone on Instagram is waking up at five in the morning and going for runs and doing ten-hour work days and meditating and journaling and using this time as a "spiritual reset", whatever that means (do *they* even know?), and she feels like there's a lot of competition right now to be productive and get things done and not waste your time. But she also knows that a lot of the things you see on social media are performative; it's only for show and only makes it seem as though they're leading a perfect life, but even their life isn't like that, not really. And it's okay not to be doing all of those things, it's okay if the only thing you did today was get up and go outside for a bit. You're not wasting your time, you're not competing against anyone else, it's okay to go at your own pace. You're doing just fine.

Wash your hands. Stay inside. Let's clap for our key workers. No, you can't have sufficient PPE, or a pay rise, don't be stupid now.

She makes a scrapbook of her travelling pictures and tickets and mementos from her gap year and misses it and reminisces about the freedom we all took for granted: look how we used to be able to travel across the world

with nothing stopping us, look how we got on and off planes without a second thought and visited new places and each day was a new picture, a new setting, and I-am-so-sick-of-staring-at-these-same-four-walls. Look at how lucky we were to experience all of that, none of us thought for even a second that we wouldn't be able to travel anywhere in a year's time. And just like we didn't know then, we don't know now. We don't know when this will be over, if our 'normal' is now a thing of the past, something to remember fondly but never return to, something to reminisce over with your friends about how you used to be able to do so much, so many things, with such carelessness and indifference, and she can't believe all those times she said no to a night out, what an idiot.

Wash your hands. Stay inside. Let's help the NHS but also let's just open up all the shops again even though we haven't made wearing a mask inside mandatory yet but here's some hand sanitiser and also good luck everyone.

And she should be grateful, because she has good health and so do her family and they have a roof over their heads and are financially stable and that is definitely something to be grateful for, but it's not enough. It's not enough to just sit inside and be grateful, she wants to be out, she wants to be moving on with her life. People aren't supposed to lie stagnant, people are supposed to be On the Move and Having Big Plans and Always Thinking About the Next Step and life is a continuous train track that's supposed to keep going forward, not round and round in circles. Except the whole world has come to a big fat standstill, like the universe has picked up the remote and pressed pause, like we are just little pieces on an Earth-sized playing board.

Wash your hands. Stay inside. You can now meet in groups of six but you can't go to your relative's funeral. Herd immunity will protect us all, but don't tell that to everyone who's already died.

And when everything started to open up again, after the first wave, after the initial swell and rise, there came the pause. The breath of fresh air, let your shoulders down, meet up in groups of six, sit inside restaurants, visit each other's houses. Soon followed by the peak, white tipped, foaming at the

mouth. The roar, the crash. Lockdown number three, stay inside, shut the schools, work from home, essential travel only. Three months; indefinitely; for the rest of your lives. Spray and grit and the harsh slap of water on rock.

Wash your hands. Stay inside. Social distance. Wear a mask. Use hand sanitiser.

And when we all said we needed some-time-off-work and some-Me-Time and when-did-my-life-get-so-busy, I'd-do-anything-for-a-break, This. Is. Not. What. We. Meant.

Turning

by Lydia Morris – an autobiographical piece

Light blusters in at such ferocity when she opens her eyes that she'll later wonder – once her brain too awakens – how she ever slept through it in the first place. Though perhaps – she'll reason – it's simply commonplace now that she's accustomed to sleeping with the curtains open. Something she wouldn't have dreamed of in London; staring out into the darkness there she would feel overwhelmed by the fear of who might be looking back at her. That it would lead to an overdramatised doping of melancholy whilst she stared into the pensive pitch black, just like the movies taught her to do when she felt anything other than ignorant bliss. More often than that she'd see something move in the corner of her eye, forgetting that there are billions of other living things out there, all with their own problems. Now having earned a few maturity badges, she is all too familiar with the reality that the monsters inside are something to fear far more than any imaginary evil in the darkness. Even standing, tits out, overlooking the allotments won't bring many repercussions to your doorstep in middle class Cheshire.

The covers are warm prevails as the best reason to stay in bed. In an old world one might have looked at our protagonist and felt pity – a feeling she is not unfamiliar with – being jobless, prospectless, broke, and with a decade's worth of regretful decisions in tow when she moved into her mum's spare room. However, the year is 2020 and everyone is sharing the same upcycled Titanic, so even if she overcomes her hardship, it won't be notable, it won't be admirable, it'll be simply life. Besides she's out of London now and so the phrase 'Get over yourself' is thrown around more than blabbering Boris Johnson memes. Getting out of bed is difficult but also, ultimately selfish. In the end, it's the realisation that each half hour is another lengthened claw on the ghoul below that gets her up.

Hours pass with nothing happening. Perhaps it would be days too if it were not for the bookmarking of notable therianthropic-like events that break up the monotony. By the way, in case you didn't know, that's the shapeshifting of a human into an animal, but don't be ashamed if you didn't – our protagonist wouldn't know, she'd probably have to google it. Inevitably it's always hunger that leads her into the firing line. The feeding area commonly shared by humans and cats tends to be the most treacherous of disaster zones. Much like the watering holes of the Serengeti, this kitchen in quiet Cheshire is a furnished lair for mothers and ghouls alike to await and pounce on their unknowing and unlearning prey.

Contemplating the stale sandwich debris on her plate beneath the midday sun she…

"Lydia, are you ok? You seem a bit quiet today?"

She begrudgingly looks up to make eye contact with the two seniors finishing their lunch on the wonky garden table. Quick glance at Les for spoilers on what's coming. He just keeps eating, mindful to avoid eye contact, with a quick peep up from his plate which looks as full as it was 20 minutes ago. It doesn't look good for her. Egg shells are on the ground.

"Nothing, I'm just tired," she says, her response vague with a quick exit umbrellaed within it.

Milliseconds become eternity as the lotto balls spin behind her mother's eyes.

"I don't know why you're so tired when you slept in until lunchtime today." *Dark patches start appearing around her face as her eyes deepen into her skull and her body starts to hunch.*

Lydia exhales, careful to hide the roll of her eyes.

Les fixes himself into an inanimate object as he takes another bite of his somehow still full sandwich.

"I was up at ten, mum."

"I don't think so because me and Les went out for our bike ride at 10am and you weren't up." *Her nails begin to protrude, thickening into callous darkened claws that lengthen twice the size of her gnarled hands to razor sharp points.*

Irritation starts to rise. "Well OK, maybe I got up at 10:02. I'm sorry I can't provide you with a time down to the exact minute."

"Well that's not 10 then is it Lydia?" *Her jaw protrudes out as her face lengthens.*

"Oh my God, seriously?"

"Don't say God's name in vain!" *She splurts over her lengthening fangs.*

"Oh please mum, you're about as good a Catholic as you are a vegetarian."

Les lets out a small laugh unnoticeable to most human ears. The look that befalls him within the smallest millisecond that passes is enough it seems to tell him all about how the worst has not yet begun for him, and that he will hear of that tiniest of laughs again, on numerous occasions before the day is up. Assuredly his gaze is back to his sandwich and now, somehow, entire portion of chips alongside.

"Lydia please do not persecute me because of my religious beliefs and the fact that I don't believe in cruelty to animals."

"You literally ate beef stroganoff yesterday."

"I picked the meat out!"

Lydia mimics pulling her own hair out a little too well. "You're not a vegetarian, you just like telling your friends you are."

"Lydia please do not take us off point. I'm trying to say that you sleeping in is a sign that you are depressed and myself and your stepfather – Les – who is sat next to me…" Lydia shakes her head in confused disbelief "…are both concerned that you should be getting out of the house more."

"There's a bloody lockdown on. What do you expect me to do?"

"Well, have you been looking for jobs? My friend's daughters are working from home in their own places where they live with their husbands."

Lydia laughs, somewhat disbelievingly, and yet also disbelieving that she didn't see it coming. Even though her mother has never once lost the upper hand when it comes to the element of unpredictability.

"Mum, you know I've been looking for jobs. I do it constantly. Les has even read over applications for me."

"Well why aren't you getting any interviews? What's wrong with you?" *Her arms turn inwards, the bones showing through her blackening skin.*

Lydia inhales sharply and quietly from the first blow, conscious of maintaining defences.

"Mum, we're in a pandemic. It's pretty hard to get a job when people are losing them left, right and centre. Do you have any idea how tough competition is? I'm really trying but jobs are being closed after a few days because they're so overwhelmed with applications or the company can no longer support that position. I literally can't churn out applications quick enough. I honestly don't know why it takes me so long but it's hard: it's not just CVs anymore, most of them want essays. And I'm at a disadvantage already because I've just taken a year out."

"Well that's your own fault isn't it. You should have thought about that before you went travelling around Europe with your boyfriend – who we never hear about anymore!"

"Mum you know we're not together anymore, and you know it's none of your business. Besides, what's wrong with that? People do it all the time. How was I supposed to know there was going to be a pandemic and the whole bloody country would be locked down?"

"Well, I've heard they're hiring at Waitrose."

"Oh my God" She exhales. "Mum I am not working at Waitrose just so you can get a bloody discount. I will do anything other than retail; working in retail is the only thing that would make this situation worse. Honestly, you think I'm depressed now."

"Well maybe you should get a nursing job. They're looking for nurses right now aren't they Les?"

They both glance at Les, who's sitting wide-eyed, caught in the headlights of yet another row about the outcomes of Lydia's independence. *He shifts uncomfortably beside the oozing goblin heaving next to him.*

"Well…" Les pipes up.

"…Mum I can't just walk into a job as a nurse." Les happily shoots

straight back down. "You have to do years of training – *you're* a retired nurse, how do you not know this?"

"I am a retired nurse Lydia, yes." She closes her argument.

Lydia shakes her head exhaustingly and looks to Les' plate. He's got a full sandwich, a portion of chips and a whole pizza now. She wonders what the science is behind people getting older and slower at eating.

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Lydia finally approaches her Grandad's driveway, thankful for the upcoming relief on her blistered feet. She had quickly remembered why these seemingly fine shoes had been thrown to the back of the cupboard all those years ago. Standing at the brightly painted gate of greens, yellows and black, she feels baffled by how to open it: an array of wooden beams of different lengths point out from the centre like a linear sunrise covering any inkling of where the catch is. She leans over it being mindful not to touch it. She contemplates climbing over it but beside the foothole issue from the intricate design, she questions her ability to do so without actually touching it with her hands.

"What are you doing?"

Lydia looks up to see her Grandad standing by his garage door, a garage he built himself as a much-improved version of the garage he built for her mum. He's holding a large piece of wood in his right hand and yet stares at her like she's the lunatic.

"I don't know how to get in without touching the gate."

"What do you mean? Just open it you idiot."

"Bloody hell Grandad I'm trying to not touch anything. I've not even got in your garden yet and you're already telling me to break the rules."

"Oh, bloody perishing nuisance you are."

Her heart warms at his insult.

He walks over to the gate to let her in. She turns to look behind for a spot to back away to.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got to distance from you."

"Oh, don't be stupid, how are you going to keep me safe by being over there to being here. We're outside anyway; you don't have to distance outside."

She questions herself momentarily, remembering his intelligence.

"I think you do." She thinks again. "It doesn't matter, I've promised the whole family that I won't come within two meters."

He opens the gate, and she moves to maintain the two meters.

"You're ridiculous." He laughs at her. She laughs too. "Oh, have you seen my new gate? I made it." They stop to look at it.

Lydia smiles as she admires it with him. "It's fantastic Grandad."

She watches as he strokes and pats it like a giant gate-shaped dog. She looks back to the gate, still smiling, having seen the gate countless times before.

"I wanted it to look like those Japanese drawings of a sunset, you know?"

"Yeah, I really like it. Why's that piece of wood longer than the others?" She points to one random piece of wood that juts out of the top of the gate.

"Oh, shut up."

She laughs, having not expected that response. The completely right kind of unpredictability she thinks.

"Hey…" He moves to punch her arm but he's too far away, "have you seen those paintings where each brick is painted a different colour on a building, and they make a whole picture? I want to do one of those on here." He points up to the side of his house against his driveway.

"What, like a random pattern?"

"No, a picture of that woman, you know what's her name – the actress…"

"No idea"

"Marilyn Monroe." He claps his hands together in achievement, his coarse skin rubbing as he does so.

"Marilyn Monroe, why?" She looks at him confused.

He turns her confused look right back at her. "Because she's nice to look at," he says to her as the blatantly obvious reason to paint a 25 foot

multicoloured portrait of someone on your house. "I want everyone who drives down the road to be able to see it, right from the top of the road."

"I think you might need to ask the council first."

"Pfftt."

She opens her bag, putting it on the garden table and tells him to take out the medicine himself as she's been careful not to touch it, given she asked the pharmacist to drop it in the bag. He looks at her like he's wondering whether her time with her mother has finally tipped her into full insanity. Eventually he'll come to tell her that he knows the pharmacy delivers and in fact he's even quite happy to collect the prescription himself, but it gives him an excuse to see her.

They take a stroll around the garden, not intentionally, rather her Grandad keeps stepping close to her without realising and she is overly conscious of protecting him, so steps in turn too. Soon they're all caught up on the development of every meter of his lengthy garden.

"Now I've got to go soon because I'm not supposed to see you for any longer than 15 minutes."

"What are you talking about?"

"I honestly don't know anymore, Grandad; it's just what I've been told," she says with extinguishing fire.

"Where's the logic in that?"

"Right, do you need anything ordered Grandad?" Avoiding a debate she knows she'll struggle to win. "I can get anything delivered to you."

"No, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I actually bought some new shoes the other day because these old things have seen better days."

She looks down at his shoes. If it weren't for all surrounding beaches being closed off to the public, she'd have said it looks like he'd found a pair of washed up trainers, somehow still paired. She pauses considering as she looks into her rebellious Grandad's eyes.

"Yeah, they look like you could do with another pair."

"Well I bought a new pair for a very reasonable price, but I just like these, I suppose, and so I'm still wearing them. Oh no I tell you what," he points up to her face suddenly, "I've noticed when I go to the supermarket that everyone is wearing gloves, but I don't have any, so I've just been wearing my exfoliating gloves from the shower."

She bursts out laughing. "What, you've been wearing your bright pink shower gloves to do your shopping? You must look like a right nutter."

"No, nobody takes any notice."

She shakes her head. "Right Mum's got a new box of vinyl ones, so I'll get them for you."

"No, no, I want proper ones like gardening gloves."

She exhales, preparing for his stubbornness.

--

Lydia pauses, sussing out the situation through the safety glass that others might presume is just the kitchen door. Her mother is sitting – gawping – at the TV, as her mum would call it, with an iPad in front of her and her phone absentmindedly resting in her hand. A regular sight that is used frequently as a checkmate tool when Lydia or Les is criticised for their screen time. Her mum looks so human in these moments, so different from the other versions, that it's in these moments that Lydia hangs her head: her mum is getting old right before her eyes and, despite everything, she has never doubted her mother's love. Being filled with both love and dislike for one person is a complicated thing. She sighs, remorseful, and vows to work harder to try to remember her real mother when all she can see is *the creature*. She breathes in a shame-ridden breath and turns the door handle.

Her mother jumps slightly – *the accidental poke of the bear Lydia fears* – then looks up sheepishly and starts loudly singing indistinct notes.

Lydia is confused. "Are you alright?" she says.

Between half notes, "Yes, sorry Lydia I'm just doing my choir." She points to the iPad in front of her.

"Oh, sorry," Lydia whispers.

Her mother continues to half-sing while her eyes dart around the room clearly debating the necessity of maintaining the illusion. She lets out a "huff" dropping any singing pretence and gets up to make a cup of tea.

"Sorry, don't stop on my account."

"No, I don't ever do the singing; it doesn't work on Zoom, but they'll all constantly Whatsapp me to check on me if I don't show up."

Lydia laughs.

"Grandad seems good, I got his medicine to him."

A few long hairs start to grow out of her mother's slightly hunching back. Les shuffles in his seat.

"I asked him if he wants me to order him anything and he mentioned he wants some gloves for when he's doing his shopping. It's good that he's being mindful."

Lydia glances up. *The beast, full formed stands before her, all resemblance of her mother is buried beneath the pitch-black skin that hangs off its heaving rib cage, random clusters of long wiry hair move as it's body heavily sways in its stance.*

"He shouldn't be going to the supermarket Lydia," *it screams at her, breaking its rasps.*

"I know mum, but he won't listen to any of us, will he? We've all offered to do it or get it sent to him, but he wants to do it. I figure if he's going to do it regardless then we may as well help him to do it safely."

"You're encouraging him," *it cries pulling force from the ground beneath it.*

"I'm not encouraging him; I'm making it safer. You know what he's like, he'll do it anyway." Lydia stands her ground; Grandad has always been off-limits before.

The creature's hollow eyes bore into her and tipping onto the furthermost back point of her heel, she balances as she watches in that second her mother succumb to the demon once again.

As if mustering all its strength it pulls back, its right elbow protruding and claws point to form one sharp dagger. "If you give him those gloves and he catches Coronavirus then it's your fault if he dies." Release, all resemblance of her relation lost. "Remember that."

Lydia topples, heart lost to its pit, speechless.

"Diane," Les says as he stands up.

"That's not fair mum. What am I supposed to do?"

"It's true." *It snarls, seeming suddenly drained.* "It's your decision. I'm not having any part of it. But it'll be on your hands." *The creature breaks a long piercing stare as it slumps back to its seat. It picks up its iPad struggling with its long clawed fingers and loathes into the screen.* Lydia stands numb, before slowly turning and walking away, *hand clasping stomach, hunched* as the little bit of black inside her grows a little more.

The Way of the Lockdown

by Jack Pascoe – an autobiographical piece

Getting better all the time
but never really reaching my prime.
Something I needed was back where I left it
never changed or even affected.

April 24th 2020

Three in the morning!

I hack out a chesty cough and try to bring my head to a decent distance above the pillow. I settle with resting on my stomach propped up by my elbows with my forehead resting in my hands.

Outside my window the thick clouds are orange from the street lights of Cardiff. It feels like rain is brewing. A rising breeze blows in through the window and pushes the curtains away from the wall.

There's a pile on the table next to my bed. Small bottles of shampoo and aftershave, off-white serviettes from various take-aways, empty soft drink cans and a few second hand books all intertwined with cables from various devices. It's safe to say I've woken up to prettier sights.

I don't even know why my body decides to wake me up at this time. Since the pandemic hit I've been working as a self-employed cycle courier and have taken it upon myself never to leave the house before 11am on any given day.

Had I been working at PGL Swindon (an outdoor activity centre for school groups and tourists) I would be up at 7.30am on my way to eat some awful breakfast in the canteen before rounding up herds of children and fixing them to the giant swing as their classmates laugh at their screams. Now, that is quite an alarm clock for six days out of the week.

However, it had been a turning point. At one point during the season I was asked to teach English to foreign teenagers for a month or so. I dug out my old pastel shirt and buttoned it up once again ready for war. As I stood at the front of that dimly lit classroom I began to feel my chest sink and my shoulders get heavy like an anchor dragging along the bottom of some polluted bay. I would look through the dusty window at the endless tree lined paths running through the grounds of the centre. I wondered what was running though the undergrowth and dancing on the branches under the clear skies. Once my last class had finished, I vowed never to go back.

After the season, my hands were hardened and my lungs were fresh with country air. I returned to Cardiff to live with my mother during the winter period with a plan to return next year.

I took a job as a crew member with Five Guys which I hated. The boss was an ill-mannered baby gorilla with a fuse shorter than his hairy pinkie finger. It was also my first British winter in three years. The cold crawled into my bones each day and forced me to wear at least two more layers than everyone else. All this combined with a want to pursue my chosen path, free cheeseburgers and smoking weed to self-medicate didn't make for a healthy body or mind. However, I always had a secret smirk as I cleaned grease off the walls and listened to his middle management bullshit. I knew I would be out of there soon.

My last day was the 10th of March. I was due to start back at PGL on the 20th. On the 19th I made my way to the train station with my head up and my suitcase wheels click-clacking on the pavement. I bought my ticket. I sat down in my seat. My phone rang.

"Hi, is that Jack?"

"Yes it is, who's calling?"

"Hi there Jack. This is Tom from PGL recruitment. I'm afraid I have some bad news. Due to the recent Coronavirus outbreak we can't allow any new staff to arrive at the centre at this time. We have had to suspend your start date until further notice."

I stood up, grabbed my bags and rushed to the door of the train before it closed. I stood outside the station for a while pacing and occasionally kicking the beige stone wall.

After a few minutes I called my friend Carl who lives a short distance from the station. I took my bags over to his flat and told him what had happened. My eyes flitted around his living room unable to focus. I stopped and started sentences like a car that was having trouble shifting gears. I kept repeating my own self pitying mantra; I was so close to freedom and just when I thought it was a done deal they pulled the rug away.

Ten days later I received an e-mail from PGL. I opened it with low expectations. My body slumped on Carl's sofa barely collecting the energy to click.

The e-mail stated that I didn't qualify for furlough as my start date was after the government cut-off point, the 10th of March. The government later reviewed this and changed the date to the 19th (still no use to me). I thought about that tiny room at my mother's house with cobwebs in the corners, the bright green and yellow furniture at the job centre and the big fat zero soon to be showing on my bank account. Tears began to build and fall.

I checked the government guidelines on their website and discovered that I could be put on furlough by Five Guys if I called and asked to be re-hired. I immediately called the baby gorilla who told me it couldn't be done that way. My eyes felt like they were on fire and my blood felt like rocket fuel. After several heated debates via phone and Whatsapp I managed to convince him that it was completely above board and that I was in fact entitled to it. I closed the conversation filled with quotes from the government website and awaited the furlough confirmation from their head office.

Carl works with ambulance despatch now, but before that he had worked as a delivery partner for Uber eats and still had an account with them that which could be used by a substitute cyclist of his choice.

"If you want I can lend you my account and my delivery bag. You could get out on the streets and earn some money while things are being sorted out."

The tension began to release from my chest. Naturally, I leapt at the chance. I had no choice.

All that was about a month ago now. My diet now consists of sporadic doses of fast food, sugar injected drinks and the occasional pot brownie to numb the pain amongst a steady ritual of dope smoking. My thoughts are consumed with memories of the continent hopping EFL teacher I used to be and the delivery boy I am now. As I sit in the room where I spent most of my teenage life, I find myself noticing my increasing heart rate and my shortness of breath punctuated by an unfamiliar wheezing noise.

As another breeze rolls into the room, I put some Dylan on to see if he can comfortingly mirror the appropriate level of melancholy with my own.....absolutely fuck all.

I begin to rummage through the documents on my laptop. I see something I wrote on the way back to Cardiff from Heathrow after returning from Thailand. It stood on the screen in rhyming verse. My eyes fell on one particular section:

So, I carry my suitcase one more time
past that familiar borderline
after the pace of the trains and planes
and the various spiritual aches and pains
hoping this place I call home can redeem me

This must be the last thing I wrote before moving away from writing all together. I haven't felt the need to write anything since. It seems as though I've been lead away from that side of my life. Creativity never paid the bills in my case and so I just left it somewhere in the back of my memories where it wouldn't bother me or distract me from moving along this new path.

I pick holes in it for about twenty minutes before giving up and closing the document. I better start thinking about getting back to bed. I stick my hand into the pile of crap next to the bed and produce a strip of Lorazepam tablets that were prescribed to me by a private doctor in Lisbon. I drop one down my throat with no water and wait for the effects to take control and send me into a much needed deep sleep.

September 10th 2020

Twenty past ten in the morning.

I gently raise up and and open my eyes to glance out of the window.

The sun is shining brightly on the back garden covered in white gravel with a pristine picnic table dead in the centre. Across the alley, on the roof of his shed, an older gentleman is tending to his sunflower collection. Beyond the tops of the terrace houses I see the flags from the Hindu temple gently sway. I smile gently.

My newly purchased e-bike is parked next to the picnic bench tucked up in its rain cover. I begin to feel a sense of accomplishment knowing that a few months ago I was doing my deliveries on Carl's little blue one-speed push bike exhausting myself in the process. The e-bike allowed me to double my takings overnight and helped me to get a place of my own.

I take a shower and brush my teeth before unlocking my bike, put my ears buds in, throw the big red box bag on to my shoulders, raise the back garden entrance with the silver fob key and head out on to the street.

As I approach the banks of the river opposite the old Brains Brewery, I stop peddling and let the wheels roll as I watch the newly orange leaves drift to the ground. I exhale.

Within five minutes I reach the centre of Cardiff. The streets are beginning to come to life now that the people have had a chance to wake up. However, everyone seems distracted. As of yesterday Caerphilly county was thrown back into strict lockdown measures following a rise in Covid-19 cases. A couple of schools in Cardiff had also been closed after reports of students feeling unwell.

I catch a glimpse of a woman in a black lightweight jacket and skinny jeans taking long strides down St Mary Street with her arms crossed and brow crumpled. Her eyes were fixed on the pavement in front of her. As a rather ragged looking man turns out of Church street and gets in her path she halts and assesses the distance between them. She jolts, changes direction and gives a good two metres.

If only everyone was that considerate. Not everybody in Cardiff seems to get the urgency of the problem. The weekend just gone saw new stories of many young people turning up to clubs and gathering in large groups while drunkenly dancing and singing in the smoking shelters. Matt Hancock the current health secretary would have turned whiter than he already is. My opinion is that he has nobody to blame but himself. The messages from government have been mixed at best. On the one hand they want the economy to start up so are more than willing to open up shops and cafes, on the other hand they want everybody to stay apart and control the virus. They seemed to be overlooking one tiny flaw in the plan; there's no real way of policing these restrictions especially with a haphazard-do-everything-by-the-seat-of-your-pants attitude of South Wales police.

About a month back I watched groups of people at the Roath Park recreation ground being broken up and sent home from sunbathing. I haven't seen anything like that since, but still this crowding continues. It certainly doesn't look like local plod want the deal with anyone breaking the restrictions. I would suspect that on their days off they are probably doing the same. I mean, if Dominic Cummings can swing it then it's OK, right?

When you mix a general distrust of government with isolation and frustration, you're going to get an angry population. You can certainly feel it in the streets of Cardiff. Everybody is walking around wary of each other while totally ignoring the bright yellow arrows painted on the streets. I don't know who may be carrying the virus without knowing it and neither does anyone else. Consequently everybody is checking out everybody else to see if they are breaking the rules like they are. A very paranoid environment where everybody seems to be guilty on some level.

Last week I was picking up an order in Taco Bell. The staff had laid out the floor so that the counter was separated by a line of tables with a small opening for people to enter. The only way you could access the counter was to go through this opening.

Standing next to the opening was a portly man wearing a light blue collared shirt tucked into his Marks and Spencer's jeans. His face was red

from too much sun, bad diet and frustration. At this point in the pandemic I was tired of asking people to keep their distance. I said 'excuse me' as I passed him with my mask on to approach the counter and enquire about my order. The staff member handed me a cup of water and asked me to wait a short while. As I walked back to through the opening, the portly man piped up.

"Keep two metres apart, you fucking twat!"

I stopped and turned towards him. "Excuse me?"

"Don't you know there's a pandemic on?" Saliva sprayed from his red face. "Keep your fucking distance!"

I was used to being spoken down to by staff members with short tempers and a deep loathing for their work, but this just took the biscuit. Little did he know he had triggered something in me that I never thought would rise up was making itself heard.

I took my mask off and maintained eye contact while stepping towards him. I stopped about three feet away from the self-righteous prick.

"Listen bro," I held up my cup of water. "D'you want me to tip this over your fucking head and smack you in the mouth?" Everybody's ears in the restaurant stood to attention.

His eyes began to widen in the realisation that he had picked on the wrong guy. I continued.

"Because the way you're talking to me right now, it sounds like that's what you want. Is that it?" He looked down at the floor trying to ignore me. I didn't let up.

"Don't you ever swear at me again, got it? If you don't want to be within two metres of anyone, don't stand in the spot where everybody has to pass you." The staff members behind the counter looked at each other as if to say 'he's got you there'. The prick was looking at the ground ashamed of himself. I punctuated my outburst with a finishing comment:

"Now, I'm going back to my space to wait for my order. While I'm there I don't wanna hear a peep out of you. Now shut the fuck up."

I walked over to my area and sat down with my heart beating between my ears. Nothing more was said on the issue. The prick collected his order and scuttled out.

At the start of the pandemic there was no way I would have gone down that route. Isolation and frustration had driven me to the point where I was able to speak up for myself. I was never able to do that before.

It was this moment that had started a trail of thought in me. I needed to do things for myself and never trust anybody else to do anything for me. I hatched a plan not to return to PGL after the pandemic. If my outdoor career was the progress I would have to pursue it through independent qualification assessors on my own terms. I was not going to wait for someone to give me the experience or qualifications that he or she thought was right for me.

I now knew what I needed and how I was going to get it. Had it not been for the pandemic I would never have had the time to reflect and come to this conclusion.

I pump my legs in a high gear as I ride down the street towards the castle. The ear buds play Dylan's 'Dignity' as I dodge the people of Cardiff all trying their best to adapt to the changes.

With heavy heart and empty hand
pining for an open page
to write new history, free from rage.

As I reach the castle gates, my phone goes off. It's a message from my friend Sam Dodd asking if I'd like to write a piece for CityLife. I accept thankfully. I feel I'm ready to write again.

Getting On With It, for Joan

for Joan Barham, by Rowena Price

'There's nothing you can do 'bout this, it's just gotta take its course.'
'That's a good way to look at it.'
'Well, there's no other way to look at it.'

--

Resilience, for those of the generation who can remember the Second World War, is born out of survival – a choice between suffering and endurance. That drive and zeal for life is the river through which ninety-year-old Joan Barham, who has lived almost all of those ninety years in East London, channels everything she does. It is probably fair to say that the relative comforts and privileges of contemporary UK life has not bred the rest of us into stoics, and that, until this year, most of us had never experienced the call to unite in collective action to keep everyone safe – much like in a war. But has the pandemic really got us all keeping calm and carrying on?

Joan is divided on this. She tells me many stories of the kindnesses of people; neighbours from down the road knocking on her door to see how she is, her daughter-in law who checks the labels of the food in her fridge and restocks it when it's out of date, regular phone calls from a whole host of friends and relatives. She has a large family, with four children, fourteen grandchildren, and fifteen great-grandchildren; she is the ninth of thirteen children herself. Joan is particularly close to her sister, who lives a short bus ride away. Before the pandemic they would regularly visit each other and go

out to town for a walk and a cup of tea.

'My sister I go out with, she's the baby. So every time she got anything wrong I'd say, ''that's because you're the thirteenth child'', and we'd have a laugh over that. I get on very well with my sisters. I've got two sisters and two brothers left out of thirteen.'

Although she is unable to go out much of the time at the moment, Joan is never short of friends and family to help her out with errands and tasks around the house. On one occasion when one of her sons visited, he insisted on cleaning the tops of the wardrobes, which she tells me with a characteristic chuckle that she is too short to see, and that what she can't see she doesn't worry about. Over the course of our conversations, I come to see that this last sentiment sums up Joan very well.

But as well as people's altruism, Joan has also witnessed their selfishness during the pandemic, and has noticed a definite drop in common courtesy among the public. She regularly travels on the bus, and says that despite her obvious age, no one will offer her a seat. She thinks that peoples' manners have dwindled over the lockdown towards people vulnerable to the serious effects of COVID-19, including the elderly, because they believe she probably shouldn't be leaving the house at all. Yet, what she says next surprises me – not in the context of her experiences of the often self-serving public during the pandemic (think toilet-paper hoarders) – but because it seems to me a belief that has evolved over the course of a whole lifetime of experiences:

'There's more unkind than kind people in this world.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes. Yep.'

––

In mid December, Joan has her first round of the new COVID vaccination. She asks the doctor how busy they are at the moment and he tells her that they are, although a lot of people eligible for the vaccine are refusing it. 'I mean,

why refuse it when it's free?' Joan asks me. 'The scientists have worked so hard to get this up, and now people are throwing it back in their face. It either kills or cures; if you get the virus you're better off for having the vaccine either way! But people are really stupid.' She tells me about a friend who was offered the vaccine and asked for a few days to think about whether she wanted it or not; Joan is pretty incredulous at this. Her view is that there's no time to waste. She has faith that the vaccine is well tested – 'they wouldn't give it to people if it wasn't' – and that we all need to put our trust in the work the experts have done to make it available to the most vulnerable members of the public so quickly. I agree with her.

'I don't know what's wrong with people, I really don't. I think they're frightened. But I'd do anything to stop this virus. I think of my grandchildren growing up, and I'd do anything to make it a clearer world for them.'

Joan's no-nonsense approach is well tempered by a very large streak of compassion, and a warm, wisecracking sense of humour. She is sociable and outgoing; she likes to be where there's a lot of noise and a lot of things going on, and is most comfortable surrounded by people. With such a big family and living in a city, this doesn't surprise me. Her son used to say that he had to make an appointment to see her because she was always out, to which she pointedly countered that it was his idea for her to start attending her social club, so he shouldn't complain when she was making the most of it. Talking to the ever-affable and level-headed Joan now, you wouldn't think she had ever been the shy type. But she assures me that she hasn't always been like this.

'I used to be so quiet when I was young. Really really quiet I was; I wouldn't say boo to a goose! But when I started work, that's when I changed.'

I ask Joan how much she's noticed her city changing over the pandemic, and what it's like watching this happen. In London, where usually everything is open all the time, nothing shuts down at five or six in the evening like it does in the countryside. She tells me everything being closed feels more frustrating than eerie, though; she can't visit her social club, or go out with her sister like they used to so often. And in the city centre, where one of her

sons works, it's like a ghost town: 'You wouldn't think you was in the heart of London.'

She worries about all the businesses that inevitably won't survive the lockdown period, how hard people work to get their livelihoods up and running, only to be knocked down by something so totally out of their control.

'Well, I reckon it'll get worse before it gets better. I reckon there's been a lot of suicides.' For her home, her family and friends during this time, Joan counts herself lucky. 'Lots of old people can't go out at all, and they ain't got any family to help 'em out. People are struggling, really struggling.'

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When I speak to Joan in early January, her tone has changed; even in the short time I have got to know her I can tell she isn't feeling herself. I can hear it in her voice: the restlessness, the fatigue, and the loneliness, too. She tells me she is really struggling now with having to stay inside all the time, not being able to see her friends and family and being alone over Christmas and New Year. But she always qualifies these frustrations with something to the effect of 'well, a lot of people are doing a whole lot worse.' And while this may be true, suffering isn't quantifiable, and clearly she is suffering. Yet I can tell it helps Joan to feel in control by feeling thankful for the things she does have, and this is the constant that runs through her: she is endlessly appreciative and selfless. I know not many of us are able to be the same.

Midwinter is probably the worst time to be in lockdown, especially for those who live alone like Joan. To some extent it was bearable for her last spring and summer, keeping the windows open or sitting in her garden in the sunshine. She's excited to do some planting for the spring, when the weather allows it. But at the moment it's raining a lot, and when it's not raining it's cold and windy.

'I put the TV on and I think, I don't wanna watch this, I don't wanna watch that either. And I don't like watching the news cos it's all about this

coronavirus. I put my music on; I'll listen to anything really, I'm not fussy, me. I like the opera, the male opera singers, though, they're good.' Joan listens to her music inside and watches the few people who walk past on the street.

Joan's optimism has rubbed off on me. The tide is turning, slowly but measurably. We may feel we are at the lowest ebb, but each day we get two more minutes of daylight, and each week we are one week closer to normalcy. Joan may have lived most of her life already, but she deserves to see the rest of it from the other side of her window, in the air and the light, with the people she loves. For her and all the people displaced, afraid and isolated because of this virus, I can't wait for that day to come.

The Campus

by Nic Peard – an autobiographical piece

The Department looks out over an artificial lake and acres of marshland.

The marshland remains untouched for the most part. On some foggy, cold mornings, it seems like the marshland is only permitting the campus to come so far – or slowly stealing back. The lines blur. Nature bleeds into the site that once edged it out; even before lockdown, rabbits roamed free on the wide roads leading down to the lakefront, ready to flash at a moment's notice into burrows on the green. I even saw a stoat one evening, looking out at me from a rabbit hole it certainly had no business being in, before it fled down a pipe.

When the seasons change, the urban wildlife stirs and then settles, dissolving back into the rhythm of the campus. The campus is famous for hosting aggressive waterfowl, but strangely it's the pigeons that are my favourite. There are predators operating in the sky and on the ground, and the pigeons stick together on this campus in a way that I never saw them do in London. They flock, gathering in the recesses in the buildings just under rooftops, picking their way expertly through the spikes left there by an optimistic estate team. And when they're startled, they take flight – brilliantly, together.

My office was on the first floor of the Department, which was perfect for viewing those flights. A cloud of shadows would dart across the wide windows out of the corner of my vision, and without fail I'd turn my head from my monitors to gape as they went by. Thirty pigeons together would go rushing by the window, casting the most wonderful shapes together before wheeling around to settle back in the building opposite. They weren't swifts casting fantastic, flexing mirages in the sky, but their flight never ceased to thrill me, distracted for one moment from the tedium of button clicking, spreadsheet staring and emailing answering.

I'd feel like the last eight months would have been worth it if it meant I got to see those pigeons fly past that window again.

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The view from the spare bedroom is... well. It isn't terrible. It's neatly proportioned, you have to give it that. Our garden and the hedge (both slightly overgrown) are portioned neatly with next door's garden (not overgrown, very nice patio) and that's all framed with a neat line of houses stretching diagonally back, right to left, over the suburbs. And it's not as if I don't have any sky – it's just blotted in at the top, there. You can see it when you stand up and turn away from the screens, which I don't do so much anymore. Too much to do.

It was such a mix of feelings at first. Being driven home by my line manager with my monitors in the boot of her car, threading wires down the back of the desk in the spare bedroom. I felt *like* a kid on holiday at first, being woken up in the middle of the night to catch a plane. I don't know what I was thinking, but I was certainly thinking like a kid – playing a bit of make-believe to fend off the cold and burning fear rising faster in the pit of my stomach day by day.

The walls started to close in very fast after that. When news of national lockdown finally broke, my dad texted me. There's little that fazes my father; pragmatic to the core, there's no problem that doesn't have a fix one way or another. Even if it's a wrong one, or couldn't possibly work, he never fails to offer a solution on the spot.

That evening, he texted me four words that drained the kiddy-holiday feel right out of me and opened the floodgates to that lurking, bubbling fear.

This is a nightmare.

Put bluntly, I was scared. I was so frightened that I would lose my job, that my partner would have nothing after their PhD, that they would die, that I would die, that my family, 400 miles away from me, would lose their jobs

and then they would die, that we would all run out of food, that everything would fall apart, that nothing I had worked for would manifest and that it would all come undone in my hands, falling out between the gaps of my fingers like sand and there would be nothing. Nothing.

Put poetically, the pigeons I'd watched out of the window in my office froze in my mind's eye. Suspended. Headed absolutely nowhere.

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When we could be outside for more than an hour, I started walking to work. The moment that my nine-to-five had finished in the spare room, I would walk to the Department, and then come back home again afterward. It wasn't as if there was anywhere else I could go. At that point, it was either claw back a sense of continuity or climb the walls.

I took the same way that I always did – up the cycle path, through the new development, down the long road and onto the campus. I'd do a loop around the Department, (where I could see we'd left a window open) meander by the water's edge and then head home back the way I came.

You might expect to hear that nature had reclaimed the campus in the absence of students and staff (wherein it turned out *we* were the virus this whole time, or whatever trite nonsense Twitter was comforting itself with) but that wouldn't be quite right. It was true that it had been getting on just fine without us. While there was no ivy choking abandoned bike racks or wild boar roaming the car park, human life on the campus was certainly diminished. A fine layer of dust was settling on things. It was jarring to walk by windows to see office chairs with jackets still on their backs and mugs at the edge of desks which had been unoccupied for months. Walking around the Department, I could see through the glass doors that the big screens set up just before it all happened were still flashing fancy graphics. For no one.

But the swans had been busy.

The lake right by the campus had always been home to a trio of swans – a white pair who were in an on-again-off again thing with a black, single swan, who was known for chasing their cygnets off of the lake so he could have his partners to himself again. *Well, other people's children are really fucking annoying,* one colleague had mused wryly to me when I'd started at the office and observed that year's cygnets speed out of the reach of their menacing uncle, who was making attempts to chase them up the bank when their parents' backs were turned.

Undeterred by their third's objections to the matter, the white pair had nested again – but this time, they'd done so right by the lake's edge. If you were careful and hung on to the railing, you probably could have touched it with your foot. Mr White Swan was very aware of this as I approached, and hissed at me as I came near. The flock of pigeons took off behind me, casting speeding shadows on the concrete path.

Black swan was nowhere to be seen.

Not mollified by my chummy murmur of *you're alright, mate*, Mr White Swan folded his wings in a swan-huff as I turned to observe Mrs White Swan on the nest, who was also, understandably, not pleased to see me. She turned her head to narrow her beady eyes at me. I couldn't see how many eggs she had then, but on future trips out to the Department I would count two huge eggs nestled up against each other in that picturesque spot among the reeds lining the edge of the lake. Starved for a little bit of logical connection between events, I immediately jumped to conclusions: would they have chosen to build their nest so close to an otherwise busy thoroughfare any other year? No, I didn't think so. Finally – tangible, positive, proof of the circle of life sat in front of me. Things were out there persisting even though the human world had stopped. The swans at the Department were expecting, and there were reasons to keep going.

Mr and Mrs Swan tolerated the few snaps I took with my phone.

"This is great," I said to them breathlessly. "This is really, *really* great." I sent out the pictures at random to anyone I thought might like to see them.

This genuinely made me weepy, one friend wrote back immediately. *Thank you for this update.*

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I visited the swans several times over the ensuing weeks. I would pass by whoever was on the nest and ask them out loud for updates as if they could answer me, asking them to promise me that they were looking after the eggs and each other. I said to them that this was just going to be great and that it was going to help. We would all feel better when the babies were here. They would be the rising sun after a long dark night, and the light at the end of the tunnel made up of infection and death statistics.

As far as I know, both cygnets died.

More accurately, I think that one hatched and died, and its sibling died in its egg. That was all I could surmise on the day that I found out. One of the swans hissed from the reeds as I came near – not a preliminary warning like the first time I stumbled across them, but a real and truly unhappy demand that I back off. I couldn't see either swan through the reeds, and then I rounded the corner to find the nest one egg down and the other unattended.

I looked back toward the reeds where I could only conclude the dead cygnet was, and back at the egg that its parents should be prepared to kill to protect – totally alone in its nest, and bared to the elements.

I sat down heavily on a bench nearby. "Oh, shit," I said out loud. My voice got all thick. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

I came back once to the Department after that. Both of the swans had gone. The unhatched egg was still there. I watched a pair of moorhens clamber onto the abandoned nest, walk over the egg and hop off on the other side to go swimming through the reeds.

I did not come back to the campus for a long time.

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I know why I latched onto the swans and the eggs as readily and intensely as I did, and took it so personally when the cygnets died. Every day was a bewildering spiral of anxiety and fear, and some days felt like I was waking up to another twenty-four-hour extension of an endless push forward. Every shove onward felt more and more futile. Like a lot of the population in early lockdown, I had vivid dreams, and would wake up in a deep panic I couldn't fathom. On those days, I drifted between my office and my bed, haunting my own house rather than living in it.

It didn't help, either, when the University started sending emails from HR that talked about voluntary options. The sector was headed down an infamous creek in a leaking boat and we might like to jump before we were pushed. I didn't know what to do. Without a permanent contract and a partner about to finish their PhD and seek academic employment in the worst possible climate, I didn't know what other choice I had other than to put in for voluntary severance in the hope that I could pay the rent for next year with the severance pay. My application did not mean that I was immune to redundancy, either – and so that endless push forward became a struggle toward a cliff-face I didn't know was there until I stepped blindly over the edge. My application would ultimately be rejected and I would keep my job, but every morning I woke up anticipating a blow that was another day, a week, a month off.

Those swans and their babies were meant to have a beginning, middle and end that I was also being denied.

But I had forgotten about the pigeons.

Before the pandemic turned everything upside down, the pigeons outside of the Department window had been my own sign that things were not just persisting, but co-existing too. You could be inside, pressing buttons, and other things were taking flight and spreading their wings outside the office.

That isn't to say that I hate my job and feel trapped in it. It was just the path I was walking down until a glowing exit sign came up where I would naturally step away, divert, and move on. And when I wasn't walking, I was able to nurture and grow things that I'd pick up and carry with me until I was

done walking for the day. Together, it felt like all the gears were grinding correctly, and things would take their logical course. One day in the not-too-distant future, I would not be in this office doing this. I would be doing something else that would come out of the things that I was doing outside of work and it would be what I really wanted to do, and it would be natural and good.

But all of that seemed to have vanished too, gone in a vacuum of months that blended into each other and days that seemed to each last ten thousand years. Everything that I had been working toward outside of the nine-to-five had gone up in smoke, with my immediate plans for the future as the kindling. But I needed something – *anything* – to punctuate these endless days. I started looking among the ruins of the structure of my life for meaning and purpose.

And I found it.

Over lockdown, with the amateur dramatics group that had been the keystone to my existence before the pandemic, I directed and edited an audio drama. Two nights a week, we gathered together on Zoom calls to rehearse and record, figuring it out together and laughing the whole way through. Was it the same? Of course not – not even an approximate. But it was something, and we were grateful. We were grateful for the structure and purpose it gave all of us, and we basked in our persistence. Editing long into the night to get up the next morning, work, and then edit all over again felt like taking shuffling, baby steps down that path again in anticipation of a flickering exit sign.

Put simply, I found meaning through adapting to enormous circumstances, and worked a structure back into my life.

Put poetically, I had found a way to see the pigeons taking flight outside my window – by painting them on the glass.

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My first walk back to campus after my time away was the week before the new student cohort was due to arrive and move into halls. Peering in through the glass doors of the Department itself, I could see new stickers on

the floor and signs for one-way passages around the building. A great sheet of thick plastic had gone up between the lobby and the reception desk. I wouldn't be back at the Department and at the office until January at the earliest, and I was okay with that. I hoped to come back when I could walk freely around the building again.

I didn't go to see the nest. The way was blocked by new building works, and I was grateful for it. I didn't want to see what had become of the egg that had been left behind. Instead, I leant on the wooden railing nearby, braced against the incoming chill in a new coat. A trio of ducks saw me from the other side of the lake and came speeding over in the hope I had something to eat – not an unreasonable hope, since the corner shop at the top of campus sold bags of bird feed. They milled about by my spot at the edge, but dispersed when something much larger came over. My breath caught.

The black swan had come back.

"And where the bloody hell have you been?" I asked him as he eyed me side-ways. Of course, he didn't answer, and it was none of my business anyway. I looked up across the lake, following the rippling trails of the departing ducks, and there they were too – Mr and Mrs White Swan, right over the way.

Just as I processed what I was seeing, the pigeons took flight from the building opposite. They curved spectacularly through the air, going right past my window in the Department. Standing outside, I could see them just as clearly as I had from the inside. The burst of brilliant activity was still such a thrill and I watched, beaming, as they looped around and settled back under the awnings where they'd flown from.

And I was inordinately glad.

Bathroom Window

by Suzanne Wilson – an autobiographical piece

"Do you hear that?"

"Yeah, what…?" I squinted with both my ears and eyes, "Hold on. What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock." My partner then understood, "God, they're doing that clapping thing, aren't they?"

It was Thursday evening, and we had been watching something I can't remember on Netflix, draped over our sofa like a pair of drunk bumblebees, when we heard a faint rumbling from outside. My partner had paused the video.

I looked at him for a minute. "Do you want to take a gander? Just to see?"

My partner sighed that we may as well, and we both headed to the bathroom which would give us the best view of our neighbours' homes. Sure enough, there they all were, clapping and banging pans. Someone had even brought out their didgeridoo: an overtly phallic tool to bring to the weekly 'I love the NHS more than you and here's the racket to prove it'-fest. My partner tensed. He plays the same instrument and was probably itching for a 'doo-off'.

My gaze dropped to our own front garden, where I could see that most of the residents had taken to their front doors to join in. That was when I noticed one person in particular. They were standing in their doorway, clapping far too enthusiastically, head flopping from side to side to acknowledge their immediate neighbours and with a gait that was horribly familiar.

"Did you notice that blonde girl?" I asked my partner when we had returned to our positions on the sofa, "From the last house, next to the garden gate?"

"I didn't. Why?"

I took a second to gather my words, in the knowledge that I might sound a bit mad. "I know that I couldn't really see her face, but I could have sworn that it was a girl I used to go to Ballyclare High School with."

He looked doubtful. "What? Back in Northern Ireland?"

"Lisa Kelly. It just seemed so much like her. The way she stood there. And her hair was exactly the same, even down to the parting and," I gestured to my forehead, "one of those widow's peak things."

My partner smiled, probably thinking that the cabin fever was finally taking hold. "Think of how unlikely it is. A girl you went to secondary school with, all the way back there, just happening to live in the exact same building as you do in Leeds."

I told him that I knew how silly it sounded, but also that Lisa Kelly wasn't just any girl I had spent a few miserable years at school with. From the age of twelve to about seventeen, she had been my best friend.

We had done all sorts of daft things together, bonding over our strange sense of humour and ability to judge people quite harshly from a quiet distance. We thought that when we were older, in our mid-twenties, all cool, we would still be thick as thieves and living together, somewhere wonderful that wasn't Northern Ireland. Of course, this plan never came to fruition, as these things never do. Another girl decided that she wanted Lisa for her best friend, and spent the best part of a year excluding me and worming her way into my best friend's good favour, until Lisa 'The Spineless Wonder' Kelly finally dropped me. I am aware of how typical this sounds for catty teenage girls, but at the time I was distraught, and I am very good at holding grudges, even if it is to my own detriment.

It was around the third week of being trapped inside our one bedroom flat in Leeds, my partner and I. We'd only left to scuttle around Aldi in the search for a bag of dried pasta or an unscathed avocado. Sometimes we would wait until the sun was setting to go for a stroll around the park, hissing like Jacques Tourneur's Cat People, disappearing into the shadows and leaving

only a puff of cigarette smoke should any stranger breach the two-meter rule. We had established a vague routine that we were neither happy nor unhappy with. This would soon include my obsessively staring out of our bathroom window, which looked upon the front garden courtyard that we shared with the other residents of the converted tannery building.

The weather had become surprisingly warm for mid-Spring and although there were many of us off from work and school, not many could go out and enjoy it the way we would have liked to. The residents of our building are very lucky, as we have access to both the shared garden, simple as it is, and the sprawling Meanwood Park which is a ten second walk from our front door. However, most residents chose the former for their good weather pastimes, probably due to caution and the fact that a police van crawled in and out of the park four times a day. It was also at this point that we became more familiar with the faces of our neighbours.

My partner's favourite was Mr Cool-Music. He would have had the ageing hippy look if he wasn't in his mid-thirties. He sat on his doorstep with a cushion under his bottom all day, fiddling on his tablet and blasting unusual electro from his living room. He had rather red and shiny skin and I often worried that he didn't wear enough sun cream. There was also Miss Understood, who sunbathed quite a bit with her book. She and her boyfriend lived in the flat below ours. Miss Understood would normally walk around with a face like thunder or, when she was reading, look as though she wanted to murder her book. However, the second someone spoke to her she would break into a genuine smile and chat away quite happily. There was a family of four, including a well-behaved Shih Tzu named Pepper, who would bring their young and often very boisterous human son out to play in the garden. We could only remember the name of the dog, so we just called them Pepper's Family.

Then, of course, there was who I referred to as Possible Lisa Kelly, who also chose to sunbathe incessantly. When I went to use the loo, I would stand for a few minutes at the window each time, suspiciously gazing down into the

garden to try to get a good look at her face. This marked the beginning of the phase my partner would call ' Rear-Windowing'. Although I was glad not to be afflicted with Jimmy Stewart's broken leg, his camera with the telescopic lens would have come in very useful.

The 4th May was what I remembered to be Actual Lisa Kelly's birthday, so on that day I spent more time than usual at the bathroom window, on the lookout for any activity that could be considered birthday-related. Sure enough, at dinner time, the suspected ex-bestie lolloped out onto the pavement in that twee manner that was all too familiar, and collected from someone what could have only been a large bag of takeaway food.

"She's just picked up Chinese or something." I called out, "That can't be a coincidence. It's her birthday tea."

My partner popped his head into the bathroom, "It's all a coincidence. And you're getting a bit obsessed."

I knew all too well that I was becoming a bit erratic. Sometimes I would even jump from what I was doing if I heard any activity outside so I could take a look. I couldn't help it. Maybe, if the world was running as usual, I wouldn't have been as bothered. But then again, if the world had been running as usual, I probably wouldn't have even noticed that she was there in the first place.

I wasn't alone in my investigation. My current and very decent best friend, Catherine, who lives up in Scotland, had also agreed to help me after I explained the situation to her. Having been to the same school and still in contact with people who I was not, she was able to investigate through social media. Catherine was not able to see Lisa's location, but told me that she would let me know immediately if she learned anything. I don't know if Catherine believed that Lisa Kelly just happened to live a few doors away from me, but she was kind enough to go along with it, possibly in the same manner that one might humour a child or someone who is clearly feeling the effects of being on lockdown for almost two months.

However, I cannot state that these observations came only from the direct gaze of my tiny bathroom window. There were many occasions where

I would be returning home, in all of my sweaty glory, from a grocery shop, or lumbering to the recycling bins to dispose of our shame in the form of pizza boxes and empty wine bottles. *She* would be there, sunbathing or reading or even the strenuous activity of doing both at the same time. At these times, I would be thankful for the bright sunshine and my light sensitivity leading me to always be wearing large sunglasses, which I was convinced obscured my identity while still allowing me to have a good look at Possible Lisa Kelly.

No matter how many times I stood watching from the bathroom window or how many fleeting glimpses I captured while hurrying through our front garden with my head bowed, I still could not be certain. I think that my Catherine found it humorous and, to an extent, so did my partner, but he also had to live with it and my excessive yammering on the subject.

Then, Catherine served me well. She sent me photographic evidence that Lisa Kelly was lurking uncomfortably close to the outskirts of my life. There she was, grinning away at me, enjoying the good weather with a friend she presumably had not seen since lockdown began, with our building sitting in the background and our bathroom window in clear view. I was surprised that I wasn't in the photograph too.

I showed my partner.

"Look! I was right. I was bloody right. See, there's our flat in the background."

"Okay. You were right. It's whats-her-name." He wasn't as excited as I was. "So what now?"

My triumph switched to irritation, "Why? Why is she here? Leeds is *my* town. I live here. This is my special place. I don't want it infected by *her.* Why does some girl, from a middle-of-nowhere town in Northern Ireland have to live here?"

Of course, my long-suffering partner couldn't answer me.

Now that I knew I was right, my only options were to avoid her, just as I had been doing, or actually approach her with a, "Lisa? Oh my god. I didn't know you lived here."

There was absolutely no chance of the latter. I couldn't hack the fakery of it or the knowledge that she would tell the awful people that she was undoubtedly still in touch with about me and my life now. However, I knew that I shouldn't feel unable to come and go to my home as I please just because Lisa Kelly might be outside. It was a decision I never did have to make.

As it all started with a noise, it too ended with one. I was home alone, breezing about the flat on one of my weekly dust-busting missions, when I heard a lot of clatter and commotion from outside. I rushed to my usual spot at the bathroom window to be greeted with a wonderful sight: Lisa Kelly taking boxes to a removal van. A week later, there was no sign of her at all, and a week after that, a smiley young family of three moved in.

I was once again at peace with my home. I took great pleasure in telling the news to my partner and best friend. Catherine shared my glee; my partner was just glad that I wasn't obsessing over an insignificant person from our bathroom window anymore.

"Well, you don't have to worry about her again. Lisa's gone."

"And I didn't even have to do anything. She never knew I was here all this time."

My partner laughed at me. "It's not as though you could have made her move."

"I'm sure the flaming bag of shite I sent her played a part in it."

We laughed again, then my partner looked at me, "You didn't, did you?"

"Of course not. That's disgusting," I wrinkled my nose, "threatening letters would be far more hygienic."

Unprecedented

by Sandra Wilson – an autobiographical piece

I ARRIVED AT THE tall glass building and entered via the side doors. It was a dark chilly wintery morning. I switched on the lights as I walked the corridor towards the office that led to the reception desk. I hung my thick navy puffer coat on the old wooden coat rack and settled at my desk. The air smelt old, dank, close and musty. I sat on the comfy leather chair and grabbed switched on the computer and signed the register.

The reception area was quite dull, the silence almost deafening. The old worn dark brown plastic covered chairs, regularly urinated on and spilled on with the free tea and coffee provided by the centre. The chairs were opaque despite being wiped daily by the chirpy cleaner. The chairs were beginning to show miniscule cracks, though you could not see it in the dim lighting. They had been covered by hundreds of bottoms of all shapes and sizes now curved in a mix of all those. The sometimes incontinent, often frail elderly people that visited with their concerned, irritated, frustrated relatives, sons, daughters, grand-daughters and grandsons had left a mark.

The thin once light blue carpet was now lumpy and torn where there was the most footfall. The facilities manager visited once every two months and inspected the building with senior staff, in the hope of getting funds to give the place a revamp – The first visit yielded a budget of ten pounds to buy thick black sticky tape – the workmen were called in for ten minutes to tape down the areas where the carpet was torn – the visitors to the centre didn't seem to notice – grateful for a warm building, friendly faces and free drinks.

"Where's the tea and coffee?" said one of the group's regulars.

"It's coming," replied the occupational therapist who organised it.

There was always a mix of visitors, some happy, lonely, smiling, chatty, others sad, anxious, and teary.

There would be those who walked in at a slow pace, confidently dressed in their best outfits, flouncy flowery dresses, and plastic sandals in the summer. In the winter, they would wear thick black Marks and Spencer's slacks, quality thick hand-knitted jumpers, ribbed woolly hats, leather boots and cashmere gloves.

Others would come in the same outfit week in week out, bringing with them an odour which seemed to cling to the garments even when they had been cleaned, almost as if afraid to leave the comfort of the cloth it inhabited.

Then there were those that shuffled in, carefully assisted by a relative. Waiting in complete silence as though lost in another world and jolted back like an electrical current, back to this dimension when touched gently on the elbow and aided on a slow concerted walk to the Doctor's office down the narrow uninteresting corridor.

I sat at the old brown desk and fidgeted, trying to imagine how many other people had sat here to work. I opened and closed the drawers, flicking through paperwork, reorganising the white appointment cards, and looking at my silver watch – 8.15am and I was already bored. Swivelling in the huge tattered black leather chair, I looked out towards the entrance. The huge glass doors beckoned me to escape. Suddenly the doors opened slowly, almost in slow motion, creaking; the bottom swept the black rubber mats underneath and then closed. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The doors were usually triggered by movement, footsteps. Why did they open?

I stood up to peek over the high dark brown reception desk, but there was no one.

I liked the early shift because it meant I left early, but the eeriness of the early morning was unnerving. I heard every clink and clank and the heartbeat of the building. I walked to the front and locked the main doors, then walked down the long carpeted narrow hallway. Every creak could be heard. I looked from left right, hearing only my own footsteps as I made my way to the small kitchen. I poured hot water into my faded Santa mug and rushed back to the

safety of my desk, trying to ignore the fleeting black shadows that seemed to pop out in my peripheral vision.

I sipped the creamy sweet caramel latte, revelling in the flavours, so comforting and warm, savouring every moment, as it travelled slowly down my oesophagus. I made a mental reminder to cut down on my sugar and to place an order for a bacon sandwich at the café round the corner. I looked at the old grey phone and quickly checked for any voicemail. I wondered why it hadn't rung yet.

"Don't pick up the phone if it rings before 9am, that's when our service starts," my colleague had told me when I'd started the job. This had stuck in my head from my first day.

"What if it's an emergency?" I had asked.

"The out of hours team will pick up, derr," she said sarcastically raising her eyebrow then return to gossiping with the other staff.

"So, Alice!" said the senior nurse" whispering loudly.

"Who's that? I asked.

"She's been having it off with one of the married doctors," she replied ignoring my question.

Everyone ummed and aahed.

I had completed a Masters to do this, I thought. I daydreamed of leaving full time employment forever, spending my days travelling the world, reading novels and writing.

I proceeded to wipe the dusty desk, phone and keyboard with the thin cheap disinfectant wipes pulled from a red and white plastic tub. I threw the used sheets in the small bin under the desk.

I picked up a little blue sachet and tore the top off. Inside was a thick disposable wet sanitiser so I wiped my hands. We had been instructed to start using these especially when we returned from the toilets. We had also recently been given training on how to wash our hands more efficiently. I didn't think anything of it as we were always being given new directives. Staff started to trickle in, and the day hastened.

A sudden air of urgency had taken hold. Senior staff rushed around, those with health issues were sent away with laptops to work from home. My colleagues remained tight lipped, not giving away any information after each meeting. Usually after each meeting there were whispers and leaks but not this time. I was not privy. Their elaborate version of local and world news usually unfolded through a story involving them, a member of their family or a distant friend or relative. If you wanted to know anything, they were the ones to go to.

I rarely read the newspapers, I was too busy reading books and studying. I kept myself up to date with the discussions of the centre's visitors.

"Did you 'ear that there's a pandemic in China. Well, my cousin's friend's sister, she works down the local chippy and she said that some virus is coming over 'ere."

"Really?" I said to the audience of a secretary and two nurses who had gathered.

"It's only in China," said one secretary. "It actually started there because they eat anything. I've seen videos of people collapsing in the streets."

"Those are fake," said one lady.

"I'm serious! Hang on, I'll get my phone out," she rummaged in her bag.

"You better stock up, 'cos we may go into a lockdown," said another lady.

"A what?" The phone rang.

"Morning, ladies," said the Manager popping her head in.

The women quickly dispersed.

"I'm sorry, the meeting rooms are booked out for the, week," I said to the third person that day.

It was unusual to have so many in-house meetings. The secretaries and admin staff were called to attend the next lot of emergency meets. I was left to man the reception on my own. I had become accustomed to being excluded.

"Cancel all the groups," the manager instructed.

Things were taking a strange turn, I thought. Every time I popped to the local supermarket to buy lunch, the shelves were void of toilet paper, wipes, sanitisers.

The freezers were totally empty. I just assumed they were waiting for deliveries. But every evening the news and the panic buying said differently. The news spoke only of the pandemic in the UK.

The empty supermarket shelves made it felt like there was an apocalypse heading our way. The fear emanated in the air like a cloud following the eerie smell of pandemonium and panic. This kind of thing did not happen in England and if it did, it was usually in a movie.

From having a building full of medical, support staff and patients visiting daily, we were down to zero patients and a skeleton staff of seven.

"From next Monday," said our Manager, haughtily looking down at us temporary staff, as we sat at our desks. I swivelled slowly from side to side in my chair.

"…you will be expected to sit apart. You sit here," she pointed to one end of the open plan office, "and you sit over here. The government have advised us to practise social distancing."

I popped into her office after the meeting.

"How do we know this social distancing works?"

She looked at me blankly.

"I don't know."

"Can I have a laptop to work from home?"

"We don't have any, but as soon as IT have some stock I will let you know." Suddenly, the directive was given for a total lockdown. Only key workers could go to their jobs. I was classed as a key worker, but I was now at a reception with no visitors and minimal phone calls.

I dealt with a monotonous backlog of paperwork all day. I put a sheet of paper into the little scanner, pressed a button and watched it slide through slowly.

One evening, I discovered that two friends had been in contact with someone who had the virus. I was advised to go into isolation. My whole family were now indoors together.

"What shall we do today?" We would say.

We spent our days working on projects, reading, writing, chatting, laughing. For us, it was a time of discovery and learning.

One day the phone rang.

"Morning, it's me, Sarah," my manager said.

It was unusual for her to call. I listened intently.

"Unfortunately, due to the decreasing workload"

Here we go, I thought.

"We will no longer need your services."

"I see," I replied.

"Thank you so much for your dedication and hard work."

A sense of relief came over me, I had dreamt of leaving, well not exactly in that way.

But then I thought, can she do that, during lockdown? I had worked for the temporary team for seven years, the audacity.

I didn't return to work. Our centre had been closed for the foreseeable future. There had been an outbreak of the virus.

I enjoyed quality time with my family. We decorated, played games, read, developed a new business, and studied, learning new skills.

I was grateful for what we had. So many friends and family had been hit hard with job losses, redundancies, and bereavements. Those who had not been directly affected questioned whether there was a virus. Those who had been affected were led by their grief and fear.

Finally, lockdown restrictions were lifted and most returned to work. Life was different now, with everyone except children instructed to wear masks. Buses limited the number of passengers at any one time.

"How were the trains this morning?" I asked my husband daily.

"They were packed and still not everyone wears a mask."

The daily news reported that numbers were creeping back up again. Rumours of a second lockdown spread.

"Did you hear? We can only meet in groups of six. Also, the pubs have to close by 10pm," I chatted with my friends via Zoom.

"Does that mean they have figured out what time Corona comes out and who she visits?" We giggled at the unbelievability of the situation.

There was daily news coverage. I changed from channel to channel only to be met with an update of deaths caused by Covid or the number of test centres that had been built or the number of cases or which countries you could visit and which, if you did visit, you had to stay in isolation for fourteen days. I stopped switching the TV on altogether.

Lockdown number two came swiftly, it had been expected, like a visit from an Aunt which you dreaded but you knew was going to come sweeping in, stay long enough to create a whirlwind in your home and then go suddenly, leaving you with chaos. The number of cases continued to increase rapidly.

"We will have a tier system," announced Boris Johnson.

There was a new set of rules; Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 rule of six. Limitations, closure of pubs, no mixing households. Confusion.

"Schools and Universities will remain open and only essential shops. Gyms, pubs and restaurants will shut down," announced the government. "Work from home and go to work only if imperative. We will do our best to save Christmas, we will be coming out of lockdown on 2nd December," said Boris proudly.

Stuff Christmas, I thought, it's more important to save lives. So we will come out of lockdown on the 2nd, we will have an influx of last minute Christmas shopping, and then what?

I had become a recluse. I didn't care to leave my house. It was a concerted effort just to make plans to go for a walk around the block, visit the local park, or go shopping.

Seeing discarded disposable blue masks on the ground or people not wearing masks in shops gave me anxiety.

Standing in line, being herded like sheep, marching in one at a time. Spraying the handle of the trolley. Squeezing liquidy sticky alcoholic bacterial gel onto your hands and rubbing it in quickly. Picking up groceries and putting them in your trolley. Trying to avoid contact with other shoppers or glaring at those that came too close. No entry if you were not wearing a mask. Trying to avoid the shop staff who did not wear masks. Feeling stifled and suffocated,

wanting to remove your mask but you daren't. Stares of disapproval if you so much as coughed, sniffed or sneezed in a shop.

Queueing at checkout, standing on little coloured circles stamped out on the floor. Putting your groceries on the belt as the masked, blue gloved cashier scans your goods and you put them in your trolley.

I was concerned about the approaching wintry, flu season. How could you tell whether it was flu or Covid?

News feeds popped up regularly on my phone. Mental health issues and loneliness was rising together with suicide cases as people were forced to remain indoors.

The new norm was to stay at home, watch Netflix, read, have Zoom calls, hold lockdown birthday celebrations. Follow the rules, follow the rules but not everyone followed the rules.

A week before Christmas, according to the media numbers continued to rise and the expected lockdown three came. Boris reluctantly cancelled Christmas. It was a quiet time for us, no relatives talking over each other, cooking big dinners, eating too much, laughing, or kids noisily running up and down the stairs.

A few days after Christmas, the headache came first, then the cough. I stayed in bed for a couple of days. I knew I had Covid and sent off for the test kit. I was restless, felt horrid and wanted to work, I couldn't remain in bed. I didn't feel hungry, couldn't taste my food and the cough was getting worse. I coughed like it was coming from the very depths of my soul. I would walk slowly up the stairs, like I imagined a ninety-year-old would and it would take about ten minutes to recover. I would sit on the edge of the bed, breathing hard and heavy, like I had been for a jog around the block. I hacked and coughed afraid it would not stop. I was relegated back to bed. My family nursed me daily. I spent days in and out of sleep, too unwell to watch TV. The kit came, the uncomfortable test was taken and posted. Two of us were unwell now and the rest of my family were in isolation. Shopping was dropped off on our doorstep. I was afraid to tell friends and family how ill I really was,

answering text messages in a light-hearted way, praying that I would not be admitted to hospital.

Superstition and panic set in when I saw my grandfather in a dream, we had a conversation. He had been gone for over thirty years, but it was as though I had seen him yesterday, so clear and vivid.

I did my breathing exercises in earnest, inhaled steam with Olbas oil, drank herbal teas which normally I would not touch. The test results came back positive. I was able to eat but still coughing violently and unable to breath properly. Three weeks in and I thought I was recovered. I stood up from my bed, and my head felt like it was a fishbowl with the fishes swimming backwards. I was engulfed with a cold sweat as my stomach lurched and I fought the nausea. "I feel sick," I said to my husband as he encouraged me to lay back down on the bed.

More days in bed. I forced myself to work, make a few calls each day. Week four and I was making trips downstairs. Going up and down the stairs was still a challenge. Recovery was slow but I was grateful that I came through it as I was one of the lucky ones. Each day friends and relatives informed me of the deaths of loved ones.

Like the whole population I was now waiting.

Lachesism

by Jordan Aramitz – an autobiographical piece

LACHESISM IS THE desire to be struck by disaster: to plunge into a burning house, to rise from the wreckage of an earthquake, to drive towards a tornado in the storm-chasing frenzy of a bored life, salivating at the idea of adventure – even an adventure that might kill you. Disaster films initiate a sense of heroism within me; that rush, that spike of adrenaline that gets the heart racing and the blood pumping until my mind is a hazy soup of fight and flight. When I am in that space, I am ready to lead a group of resilient survivors to seek help after an earthquake levels my city, to blow up a meteor hurtling towards our planet. In fact, I have had vivid nightmares of an approaching tsunami ever since I watched *Interstellar* but in my waking hours, I would combat that fear by imagining myself jumping, Spiderman-like, from skyscraper to skyscraper while the wave attempts to level everything lower down. Of course, I would save countless strangers on my journey to the highest peak of the city as any good superhero would – and my family would magically be waiting up there for me, out of harm's way entirely. I was ready, even the might of the ocean was stoppable.

I was not ready for a pandemic.

I began writing this while recovering from COVID-19. At least, I thought and hoped that I was recovering – when you have it, it is difficult to tell what is a cause for concern and what isn't. A study on patients who were in Wuhan, at the epicentre of the pandemic,]details the day-by-day progression of the disease. Unsurprisingly, I had been pouring over it ever since my parents tested positive three weeks prior to my own unwanted results. By the study's timeline, I was on day eight of running this gauntlet.

As an asthmatic, I'm no stranger to shortness of breath, but that used to be induced by the various sports I used to take part in before the pandemic begun. Two inhalations of Clenil and I was always ready to test my balance and reflexes in a fencing duel or rework the steps of a demanding choreography at dance practice. By now, a month after 'recovery', just sitting up and typing on a keyboard while the harsh, white light of my laptop screen sheds onto my bagged eyes makes breathing difficult. For every paragraph break you read, I most likely will have had to take a moment to lie down and regain my breath. At least, *attempt* to regain my breath. Two years ago, I was almost hospitalised with severe bronchitis that had been left untreated for weeks, but COVID makes that seem like a mild cold. Both left me gasping for air and unable to take deep breaths because of the excruciating constriction around my lungs, but the novel coronavirus is far more insidious. Bronchitis had me bedridden and made every inhale painful but subsided in a few weeks due to antibiotics – just as my doctor had promised. With coronavirus, all the doctors could offer my parents and I were condolences.

Unlike an impending zombie apocalypse, there is no cure that a rugged team of uninfected can traverse dangerous terrain and take down nefarious forces to gain access to. *Lachesism,* and the god complex of perceived immortality that comes with it, disappears quickly in the face of real danger.

Not real danger to myself, mind you. At the start of the pandemic, I was baffled at the idea of giving up the pleasures of university student life for something that seemed less deadly than the yearly flu. Parties on campus were still in full swing as Valentine's Day came and went in February and on the evenings they weren't, nightclubs would more than fill a building to bursting. Lecture halls where we sat shoulder to shoulder in the hundreds, sports tournaments where we would share water bottles in wild celebration after a victory. These were just facts of life to me and as a healthy, nineteen-year-old athlete, it was unfathomable that a minor illness wreaking havoc on the other side of the world could take away my routes to happiness. Looking back now, that mentality was even more comically stupid considering I was

in a high enough risk group for the common flu to be vaccinated against it every year.

A month after the last party I attended, I was fidgeting my way across London while praying that a shelter-in-place order wouldn't take effect while I travelled home. Home: two hours away, after a picturesque journey to the southernmost tip of Hampshire. My parents could catch the virus, I had found out, and with their slew of underlying conditions, it would not be an easy recovery. *Lachesism* had crumbled that day. Would I catch the new virus? Packed between maskless passengers like undead sardines on the train, it was a miracle that I didn't on that day. And a miracle more that I didn't infect my family on my mad dash back from university. I had packed the essentials that very morning before buying a ticket for that afternoon. Riddled with the panic, the worry, I left almost all of my belongings back in my dorm room. My best clothes, all of the computing equipment that made up my unnecessarily elaborate desk, a fridge stocked to the brim with fresh food. I would be back in a few weeks when this problem had blown over. By April, I could see my friends again. By April, my life would return to normal.

Normal never returned. Normal became 'shelter-in-place'; stay inside at all costs, account for all family members and keep away from windows and doors – now *that* felt like a zombie film! It became donning all protection available before stepping outside; it became dodging out of the way of the careless who ignored the two metre rule while stocking up on what was left on empty shelves; it was watching a death toll rise on surreal Salvador Dalí graphs and charts in a way that never truly *seemed* real but filled me with pure dread anyway. What do you perceive as real when the threat is so microscopic that it might as well be invisible?

Normal became days blending until six months had passed in a week and my body had aged a decade.

There are no songs for an empty world. Somehow, the entire Earth had ground to a halt for a month or two and the eerie silence of no traffic and vacant streets filled a deafening void. Everyone was in co-operation, everyone

agreed that we had to lockdown to flatten a curve of the dying that never really reduced to 'acceptable levels'. The irony of certain levels of preventable deaths being 'acceptable' seems to have been lost on everyone, because the economy was in shambles and saving human lives apparently just couldn't justify a downturn in stock shares.

In September, I returned to university on the promise that I would have in-person classes. That never happened, but at the very least, I was back with my dear friends at our new student house. Still without a green light for one of our infamous parties or a dolled up night out at a club, we entertained ourselves at home. Everyone decorated their room in their chosen theme, sorted out a playlist to suit it, and we travelled to each in turn while pretending it was a bar crawl through the city. Quarantine brought out sparks of creativity in the midst of the usual endless boredom and anxiety, depression and restlessness that had become the default, interchanging mindsets of the pandemic. The saying goes that 'nobody travels through Norwich': you only travel there specifically if you want to visit the city. This isolation protected us for the three months I spent at university studying through my second year. In a way, I almost forgot COVID-19 existed in the weeks when I didn't leave the house and enjoyed the hectic company of my friends indoors. It was a unique bliss that lasted until Christmas break ushered me home.

From talking to my siblings, I had known that my parents had come down with some sort of illness a week before I was set to return home, but we were convinced it couldn't be coronavirus. They had a wicked fever and were vomiting constantly, but they still had their sense of taste and smell and didn't have the characteristic dry cough – it was just the normal flu, surely. Denial is a powerful tool and stayed with us until our test results came back positive. My mother's condition had gotten to the point where she felt as though she was surely dying, so we were on the steps of a local clinic when the text came to break the news. The nurse at the reception was clearly panicking despite the fact that we were standing outside as per instructions; my mother simply seemed too exhausted to process the shift, and the shock

enveloped me in a tranquil state of… lack of emotion. Robotic, I profusely thanked the hazmat-clad nurse before, during, and after her hastily arranged examination of mother's vitals. It was an out-of-body experience that enabled me to escort her back to our home with a completely blank face, solid black discs for eyes. It was only then, in the privacy of my room that I broke down entirely. Hitting a brick wall would have been easier than dealing with than the sudden realisations. The insidious disease takes its time showing all of its symptoms and drags the torture out as much as it can.

With all the high-risk conditions that my parents shared, it was a sheer Platonic ideal of a miracle that caused them both to survive the illness. For two weeks, through Christmas day and the New Year celebrations, my siblings and I cared for them at every hour of the day. During the first week, it was a frenzy of constant 111 calls and hushed conversations with our GP who could do little more than pray alongside us. It was a month of never-ending blood oxygen level checks, thermometers in mouths, questions about how the symptoms were progressing. Can you taste this meal we've made specially for you? Can you stand up and walk to the bathroom? Can you breathe properly? *Can you breathe?*

It was only after a particularly horrific evening, when an ambulance had to be called to provide my parents with oxygen, that the horrific disease reached its crest and slowly, began to slink back into the shadows. Thankfully, COVID-19 was merciful in that I caught and started to experience the ailments well into my parents' recovery phase. Who knows what could have happened if I hadn't been so readily available to treat them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. With this disease, there is nothing you can do other than lie there, bedridden, and wait with baited breath.

Lachesism dies when the disaster isn't one you can see. It has been a month since I last exhibited symptoms of the coronavirus, two months for my parents. Yet, my mother's sense of smell still evades her and my father can only work half of the hours he used to be able to without fear of collapsing. As for me, the once-all-star athlete, my lungs protest and attempt to jump

out through my skin at the thought of a proper run. Even in my superhero fantasies, I can't help but shake off the feeling that I would simply not have the strength to outrun a tsunami – I can barely jump over a fence without becoming winded anymore. Recovery is slow, is going to stay slow, but I am grateful that I even have the chance to recover.

We are approaching three million deaths worldwide and there is a morbid curiosity in watching the counter tick, tick, tick upwards. *Lachesism* comes attached to the unspoken, unacknowledged requirement for death and destruction. After all, it wouldn't be a 'thrilling disaster epic' without either of those, now, would it? The assumption that we could never be the victims flies against the face of our saviour fantasies. There's no quick, fighting end to this pandemic and all that we can do is protect ourselves and those around us through a quiet, self-isolated existence. Don't try to be a rebel, an useless action-flick hero. The greatest feat possible for us is to listen to the science and protect our fellow humans.

A Study in Solitude

by Ersi Zevgoli – an autobiographical piece

"See you in two weeks!" I remember my flatmate telling me as she gave me a big hug and a bright smile, certain that this was only a passing thing. My smile was a little more tense.

"You won't," I wanted to reply, but nobody likes a pessimist. Or a realist, you might say as the two weeks stretched to two months, and I only saw her briefly and from a distance when she came back to our empty flat to pack up and move out.

Up until mid-March, just before lockdown, I remember all ten of us in our flat joking about coronavirus.

"Been to Wuhan recently?" We'd tease whenever somebody got the sniffles. Hubris? Perhaps. It all seemed so far removed from us, first year students in the East of England. Then we started reading about Italy. Then friends and family started calling me, asking me how things where over there. Greece entered lockdown twenty days before the UK did. I remember a joint call from my parents, a terrifying thing as their divorce was coming through at that time, imploring me to come home.

Come home where? My mum moved into the little one bedroom flat I used to live in while I was still working in Greece, and rents out her own place to help me with tuition fees. My dad is a carer for his 92-year-old aunt. And my grandfather had only just celebrated his 80th birthday, so my grandparents' place was also out of the question. Norwich is home now. So I stayed.

I remember the silence of the empty flat, of the empty building, pulsate around me that first weekend I spent on my own in student halls. I remember playing music a little too loudly and drinking a little too much red wine to brace myself for what I knew was an indeterminate amount of time. I

remember those first few days always leaving a light on in the kitchen; a childish, pointless safety blanket that kept me sane. The corridor lights unnerved me; they activated when someone moved. It had a horror film quality, walking down the corridor and watching the lights turn on one by one as you passed beneath it. Sometimes you moved a little too fast for it, and it would come on a few seconds too late, and you would already be beneath the next one. That would be a little late too, and by the time the one outside your room would come on, the door would already be shut behind you.

I had three months to learn how the corridor lights worked. Three months alone in an empty flat. You get jumpy at first. There's no one there to justify the noises you hear, and even the smallest creaking of settling pipes or wood is enough to wake you up with a start. Vast expanses of empty space, walls, bedrooms, bathrooms meant for ten left to reverberate the muffled footsteps of one. At least cleaning the industrial-scale kitchen and three bathrooms kept me busy (another word for sane, I came to realise) on Sundays.

I struggled to sleep. I made sure I exercised a lot; yoga, dance lessons, ridiculously long walks even in the spring showers that left me blissfully tired and sunk me into deep, uninterrupted sleep. I struggled not to stress eat. I struggled to fill my days. I struggled to keep in mind that this isolation was NOT me, it wasn't my brain slowly but surely sinking back into depression. I struggled remembering that this was something outside of me. I struggled.

But the days were getting longer, the temperature was rising, and in those spring evenings, with my window open to let the cool dusk breeze in, I found pieces of myself that were long lost.

I listened to music I hadn't in a long while, a little shy of my taste and apprehensive of the opinions of my younger flatmates. I descended deep into indie country music about the human condition that somehow made my own more bearable. The philosophical, endoscopic lyrics of Brown Bird tracks seemed oddly apt and fit with my isolation and desolation. Verdi's Otello provided the more personal drama that I needed; nothing was happening to me while everything was happening to the world at large, and listening to a

man unable to discern fact from fiction in hauntingly beautiful music made me feel when I feared I was going completely, irrevocably numb.

I read books I had long wanted to, but never had the time. "Hell is other people," Sartre wrote in his play No Exit, and while I might have agreed just a month before reading it, I was coming to the conclusion that they might just be paradise after all. I turned to more light-hearted reads after that.

I finally managed to get my grandparents to Skype me and see their smiling, if pale, faces after six months. I reconnected with people who'd faded from my life, the expanse of Europe between us diminishing, as we all had nowhere to go further than our laptops. I remember an unexpected message from a friend with whom I'd exchange birthday wishes via text only. He asked if we could have a chat, it'd been awhile. We Skyped for two hours, trying to figure out how this whole thing, so big it was nameless in our conversation, was affecting us. A gentle sigh over a cup of coffee as we took turns admitting that no, we were not doing great. Our brains were going places they didn't usually; dark places, places where self-doubt and existential crises lurk, ready to jump on you with no apparent reason. We were struggling. We Skype once or twice a week now. Each one makes sure the other isn't spiralling into this madness again.

This strange outpour of honesty from all of us soothed the darkest corners of my mind. Slowly, the faint electrical sounds emanating from the corridor lights became comforting and reassuring rather than terrifying and ominous. I was finally at peace with the corridor lights. Morpheus came to embrace me more willingly, the stress and anxiety subsiding. Cases were dropping in the UK and in Greece, and who can be grumpy in the summer anyway?

We struggled, I struggled, but we pushed through. June came, and with it three cancelled flights and the end of my student halls contract. Thankfully, having firmly made Norwich my home meant I have people who were willing to help me out, family and friends. I had a place to stay till I could get a flight back to Greece. Those summer days were long, warm, and gin and laughs flowed freely as – at last – I was back to living with people.

Just as things were starting to look up, an urgent phone call came. We'd all been so caught up in the coronavirus, we forgot that other things existed to torment us too. There are a lot of euphemisms for this particular disease that my friend was diagnosed with. We were so scared of it, we daren't call it by its name, and yet that's what awaited me as I answered the phone with a smile, only to have it frozen in place and then melted away slowly, painfully, like an ice cube left in the intense summer heat. Cancer.

Going back to Greece became more of a necessity and less of a choice now. July came, and with it finally a flight to Athens. I remember booking the ticket less than a day before the flight, urgently packing up a small suitcase. I remember hugging my uncle and aunt at the train station goodbye, too grateful for their support to even attempt to put it to words, still disbelieving of the news. The train ride to London was surreal; empty seats, empty carriages, and this disconcerting feeling of familiarity, but not quite. The flight itself, even more so.

But what did it matter? What did it matter that it took me a full day of travelling with a mask on, too scared to take it off except to hurriedly gulp down some water? I was almost there, my friend's diagnosis was the best it could possibly be, the operation was scheduled and she was expected to make a full recovery. I found my patience to be boundless in that nine hour stopover in Frankfurt.

And I was rewarded, as I exited the airport, tiredly dragging my suitcase behind me, to see my parents, bemasked and there. The heat of the Athenian July night hit me almost as much as the surreal feeling of my dad's urgent hug, social distancing be damned. I knew it wasn't over, I knew we had a long way to go, but for a brief moment, I could be carefree and happy and there. Home, after all, is not only your house or your city; it's just as much the people you love.

The Wii & I

by Zoe Mitchell – an autobiographical piece

On the first day of lockdown, I played four games of Mario Kart back to back. And then I cried for an hour.

It's weird, trying to understand yourself. When you decouple your actions from the context, step back into an objective side seat, you can rationalise all kinds of crap. You can reverse-engineer a whole narrative to explain so many things. I find myself doing it whenever I try to explain my lockdown Mario Kart addiction. It was a response to stress, a reversion to childhood patterns, a comfort blanket. But back then, on day 1, I had no idea what a chunk of our collective history lockdown would eat up. I had no idea what Mario Kart would become to me.

And really: what else was I *supposed* to do at my parents' house but revert to childhood patterns?

I remember the first time I went home from university, in 2019, back in that pre-lockdown era. It was an eight-hour train journey – Norwich-Peterborough-Edinburgh-Leuchars – and I made the whole thing alone, with an enormous unwieldy rucksack that held all my laundry. The straps were tighter on the left side, so all the weight gnawed at one shoulder, worrying the muscle till it throbbed. But it didn't matter, because it was Christmas and I was going to see my family. I'd made it.

The next morning, I woke at least three hours too early, while the dark was still going strong. But this was December in Scotland, so that's not saying much. I'd been woken, I realised, by the cold. But, again, this was December in Scotland. I probably ought to have expected it.

So I got up. I stared through the window, at the dark and the cold, at the palpable sheets of whitish wind. No one in their right mind would go outside in weather like this, not at 5am. Not without a reason. But, you see, I hadn't been to this village for months – for the first time in years, I'd spent a whole

season away from Balmullo. I'd missed its autumn shades, its oranging and cooling, the way its hedges aged into russet. I sure as hell wasn't going to miss its winter too. So – grabbing my house key for the first time in months – I unlocked the front door and headed outside.

I felt the cold as I walked, I really did. But somehow it didn't really touch me. It was as though there was a layer between me and the wind, something thicker than clothes. Somehow, I was removed from the physicality of it. The frost bit around my fingers, but it didn't land. When goosebumps rose against my arms, they didn't feel like mine. I walked through the quiet – the dead quiet – and watched as the sun didn't rise. And then I kept walking, down those paths I'd once trod daily. I was, I suppose, recapturing these old streets, relearning them. Was my affection for them fresh? Or was it a new, melancholy kind of affection – the sort of nostalgia you get from visiting somewhere you no longer belong? I couldn't tell for the life of me. And, frankly, I was too tired to work it out.

The sun rose, the day went on, and I recaptured it with all my might. I stopped by my favourite sandwich shop. I took a trip on my old daily bus route. But all the while I was floored by the unfamiliarity of this unfamiliarity, the newness of the novelty. Here I was, trying to get my bearings in this new old world, using nothing but a sandwich shop and a bus ride. These things were the staples that had once held my days together. They stacked into my life, so innately a part of me that I never questioned their transience. They were innocuous, yes. That deli sandwich that I'd always loved never defined me. But I tried to ground myself in the trivialities. That way, I didn't need to wonder whether the substance of me – the real me – still had root there. That was a whole other question.

It was that spirit – that grounding in trivialities – that led me to switch on the Wii, that first day of the Christmas break. I didn't know who to be, here, in my parents' house. I wasn't a child anymore. Could I, the grown person who did her own shopping, fit in here? Could I slot myself back into the gap I'd left, even after I'd grown so much? I didn't know, so I called my

brother over for a game of Mario Kart. In that, at least, I could be myself. In the way that has always happened, my competitive spirit was roused along with the game music. Out of nowhere, some fire – some hard, all-consuming drive – captured me. For as long as we were racing, nothing else mattered. No longer did I worry about who I was, where I belonged. Right then, in that moment, I was nothing more, nothing less, than a girl with a Wii wheel. And all I had to do was win the race.

So when, three months later in March 2020, I found myself locked down in my parents' home, it was easy to fall back into those old ways. Then, more than ever, Mario Kart was my lifeline. Shut away in the house for days on end, I was set apart from the things that defined me. My routine of lectures, coffee dates and church, hangouts in the kitchen, walks along the Avenues from campus to friends' homes – all of it was gone. And I had no clue when, or if, I would get it back. So I stopped being Zoe-the-lit-student. I stopped being Zoe-the-babysitter. I stopped being Zoe-from-Flat-8, Zoe-from-Christian-Union, Zoe-the-overachiever. For then, I was just Zoe: a less secure and grounded version of myself than I'd been in a long while. When I sit here, writing at the beginning of 2021, and look back, there's so little that still relates to me. Back then, I naively believed that lockdown would be over in a few months. I would, I remember thinking, be back at uni by May 2020 – "back home", as I found myself saying. When lockdown began, my biggest concern was the boy I'd kissed a few days before, right at the moment before we all retreated to our hometowns. He was 300 miles away – and my lofty dreams for a happy-ever-after relationship were, quite against my will, paused. For the time being I'd have to make do with Snapchat flirtation. I've got a good imagination, see, I'm good at lending weight to things that don't really deserve it. I was quite capable of positioning us as star-crossed lovers in my head. I could kid myself that we were at the beginning of a great romance, that our texting amounted to love poetry. As I sat and wrote my own (utterly abysmal) love poetry about him, it never crossed my mind how ridiculous I was being. I

barely knew this boy. What we'd had was the potential for something – not a real relationship. But, back then, everything was relegated to potential. With my life on hold, all I had were dreams and plans, things to look forward to. This quasi-romance was just as real to me as anything else.

Like that – stuck, unsure of who I was in this new old settling – I began a daily routine of Mario Kart. I played with every member of my family hundreds of times, I reckon. And I got pretty good, too. I was stashing wins under my belt, racing better than I ever had in my life. If I positioned this as the keystone of my life, I could make myself seem pretty damn successful. In this one area, I knew exactly how to win. Zoe-the-overachiever was dead no more.

It reminded me of starting at university, how out of place I'd felt. For weeks, I'd haunted my flat, hiding out there until the campus outside became a little more friendly. I went from lectures to my bedroom, meetings to my bedroom, the kitchen to my bedroom. If you mapped out my journeys, every one of them would converge on that one spot. I didn't feel free anywhere else. But it was Mario Kart that saved me then. When my flatmates suggested a tournament, I was all over it. At last, I could be me in front of them. They could see this side of my character – the successful, energetic, competitive side – and it felt as though they were getting to know me for the first time. This was how I found my place in university life. And this was how I found my way back into the home I'd grown up in.

I played Mario Kart while prepping Sunday lunch – our new family tradition, now we had the time for it. I'd set timers for potatoes and cauliflower cheese, and rejig each in and out of the oven between races. I played it on quiet, nothingy afternoons. I played it with my brother at 4am, delighting in this new tradition. In that early morning darkness, the world really did seem on hold – and, those times, it was our decision. We could race and talk, holding onto these hours that were ours alone. Nothing mattered, then. No one was replying to my messages, no one was ignoring them. They were all sound asleep, leaving me alone and worry-free. I played into the night, safe

in the knowledge that I was happy – for those moments at least, all was well. The longer we stayed awake, the longer we could sleep in the next day. I could postpone the achy terror of waking up, faced with another day of nothing. The longer I stayed in the world of Mario Kart, the longer I could stay away from my own.

And so lockdown went on. The days melted into one another and – slowly – I began to carve out a new routine for myself. My days were punctuated with Zoom calls and Facetimes and the weekly drive to walk round St Andrews. I listened to hours of podcasts every day, as I trekked every possible route across the fields surrounding my village. I blogged and wrote stories, ate too much and walked too far. I hiked up and down the same farm track over and over, baked cakes, made my daily pilgrimage to the local shop. And every day I played Mario Kart.

After a while, these things became my touchstones. They became my rituals, the markers that split one hour from another. No longer was I defined by trips to lectures or coffee shops, by the number 26 bus ride to Norwich city centre. These new activities made up who I was. I didn't need the walk up three flights of stairs to my flat, the smell of the library at 2am, restaurants in town or my waffle iron. My new routines replaced the old, till I forgot what life looked like before March 2020. Mario Kart was the one factor that tied it all together. It was my connection to my old self – not only to the Zoe of 2019, but to who I was before. Mario Kart has been a part of who I am for so long now. When I play, I'm a thousand Zoes in one: I'm squished with six others on a single bed at uni; I'm 14 years old at a sleepover party; I'm 10, on a rainy Saturday afternoon.

I remember that afternoon well. It was one of those rare occasions that my brother and I could persuade my mum into a game. We'd played three races straight when the phone rang – and I was top on the leader board. Mum went to pick up the landline and we paused the game, listening to the music loop against the menu screen. My brother and I sat there, silent but not deliberately so. I remember now the way my eyes glazed over at the screen, the

way my toes tensed in my socks, the feel of my Wii remote clamming slowly in my hands. When my mum stepped back into the room, I knew before she spoke that it was bad news.

"It's Grandpa," she said. *"I'm so sorry. Your Dad's on the phone, he says Grandpa died this morning. It was peaceful – he was fast asleep."*

I didn't say a word, but I nodded. And when I unpaused the Wii, Mum didn't even question it. She just sat right down, picked up her wheel and rejoined the game. For a few rounds, we played without speaking. I focused on the track and the leader board, turning and overtaking and nipping through shortcuts till I could think of nothing else. I wasn't imagining Grandpa dead, the shrunken, half-empty look of him the last time I'd seen him. I wasn't thinking of his loose skin and wrinkles, his blank eyes that didn't know me, the droop of his face post-stroke. I wasn't wondering what they'd do with his body. All I could think about was the race.

A few rounds in, I found myself laughing. I can't remember what it was I laughed about now – something innocuous, I'm sure. But I remember the moment right after it happened. I remember sitting there, remote loose in my hands, wondering how on earth my lips knew how to make that sound. Surely, I thought, such a noise should be impossible. No one can laugh when they're grieving. But then my little brother laughed too, and so did my mum, and soon all three of us were there, cackling on the sofa and steering all wrong.

Mario Kart got me through that day. It got me through another hundred awful days in lockdown – the day I finished binging on *Torchwood* and ran out of things to do with my time; the day that boy I'd kissed ended things. After a few months, I really should have known it was over. We'd stopped talking about the future, about life and God and all the important things. Our Snapchat streak had broken five times over, his silences had grown longer, and it had been weeks since he'd wanted to video call. But it had taken me an ill-advised eight-hour train journey to realise that we were finished. I cried the whole way back, sobbing into my face mask and longing for home. The vending machines and water fountains were all broken, so this crying was a

pretty inefficient bodily function. I really couldn't afford to lose so much water right then. There was no way to replenish it, and nothing to eat save two enormous slabs of Morrison's own chocolate. So I ate and I cried, and I drank water lukewarm, straight from the bathroom tap.

And when I got home, I turned on the Wii.

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I'd signed a lease on my second-year uni house – starting August 2020 – months before the first lockdown was announced. When the start-date for our tenancy arrived, there was nothing technically stopping me from moving. Students were allowed to return to uni; travel from Scotland to England was unrestricted. And I knew I wanted the change. Of course, I would still be locked down, still stuck indoors and shut out of my uni campus. But at least I could be stuck in a *new* house. This place would be a blank slate, a building empty of memories or associations. So I made that journey down south again, bringing all my things with me this time. When I moved into my new house, with my new housemates, I was as hopeful as I'd been in months.

So now here I am. During this latest academic year, the lockdown, of course, hasn't ended. Here in Norwich, I'm not exactly *free*. None of us are – as I write this, in February 2021, we're just starting to see hope for a way out, but it's still a long way off. Yet, somehow, I don't feel as trapped anymore. My days are still spent inside and online, that much is true. But the world doesn't feel quite so far away. Sometimes, I get to go outside, to help run tech on my church livestreams – it means I get to see people (from a distance) in real life. It's an opportunity that's been so rare this past year, and it's an incredible blessing. I get to see my old friends – at least, the top, unmasked, half of their faces – and even make new ones. In fact, the first week I volunteered at church, I met a guy who would become integral to my life. Getting to know him was hands-down the best part of my 2020. And it meant that, when the November lockdown was announced, I had a brand-new place – and person – to stay indoors with.

After a solid month of "forming a household" with him (read: sleeping on his sofa), I was more smitten than ever. But that's another story…

Nowadays, the life I led in that first block of lockdown seems so distant to me. Those day to day mundanities, those fears, those desires: all of them seem like relics of a far-off time. They might as well exist behind glass, in some underwhelming museum– the crappy webcam I used for my video conferencing; the chair where I watched all of *Gossip Girl* on Netflix; the bath where I lay for hours on end, replenishing the water when it got too cold, praying for a Snapchat alert. I can't imagine ever being there – being that girl – again.

During this period of lockdown, my life has moved incredibly fast and also incredibly slowly. I've spent so much of it vegetating – stuck in a handful of rooms, bathing in hand sanitiser. But for something that's looked so like stagnation, this phase has brought crazy growth. Of course, I've got a new house and a new boyfriend, but I don't mean that – not just that. The lockdown forced me to confront my shaky sense of self. It brought me face-to-face with my coping mechanisms, my rather dodgy foundations. For months, I tried to find my value in a boy who didn't love me and a video game. Neither of those things could sustain me. That boy didn't owe or promise me anything, but I poured all my dreams into him anyway. Poor guy didn't know what he was in for. Of course, Mario Kart didn't let me down, exactly – but that couldn't sustain me either. Moving away from my parents' house was the step I needed to re-evaluate and restructure myself. I learned to find my comfort in my faith, my sense of worth in who I believe God has made me to be. No longer do I rely on external distractions to keep me centred. I don't so often feel that tug towards Mario Kart anymore. I don't, perhaps, need it in that way I used to – I don't need a safety net, I don't need something tangible to define me. Now and again, though, I'll switch on the Wii in my new house. I don't need Mario Kart anymore, not in that same visceral way. But it's still a pretty damn fun game. When I race with my housemates or my boyfriend, the game feels new – and just the way it always has, all at once. In many ways, that's how I look at my development during lockdown. It's been a removal from my old,

insecure self, becoming a "new me" – but it's also been a reconnection, with the love and faith that have always defined who I am. I have a stronger handle now than ever on what makes me *me*. And if Mario Kart is a part of that, then so be it.

Movement

Holidays

for Johnny Besagni, by Erica Masserano
(Dedicated to the memory of Clerkenwell historian Olive Besagni)

Johnny walks round the back of Holborn. He's been doing this two or three times a week the whole winter. He comes to Central to see some hustle and bustle; he likes that. Though he was born in Wiltshire, where his whole family was evacuated during the war, he couldn't live in the country; he's a city boy through and through. But despite the Christmas lights strewn over the streets it's quiet out there. The buses roll by empty except for the occasional tired-looking worker. Oxford Street isn't that busy; Christmas shopping does not seem to be on top of people's to do lists this year, and when Johnny crosses someone on the pavement they mostly give him a wide berth. Even in Piccadilly shops were closed. If they don't open soon, he thinks, they will collapse.

He walks and remembers and thinks; it's what he does these days when he's not home. Most often, he thinks of when he was little. There's a story about a schoolkid like Johnny once was. His teacher asks him where Italy is. "I know, Miss" he says, "my *nonno* is from there. It's in Clerkenwell!"

At that time, you could say it really was. In the *quartiere*, the butcher, the baker, everyone was Italian. You could get through the day without speaking a word of English, and you wouldn't want to go elsewhere anyway, not to the rest of London where they still considered Italians enemy aliens and they would call your mother *puttana*. Clerkenwell was different, a safe port in a

storm of changes, and the Irish and Cockneys there, whose kids went to the same school as the Italians, were kind.

Still, St. Peter's Italian School used to send them on holiday so they didn't lose their connection to the motherland. The night classes were where the Clerkenwell kids learned to read and write the language; by then, the majority of them were already really English kids with Italian names, and those who weren't spoke their dialects at home, and never the official tongue. The Italian embassy would send the school some money so the Italian teachers could take them down by the coast of Livorno. In theory, a postcard view: an earthy, hilly seaside pin-pricked by maritime pines, bluish-green waves and billowing clouds to match the white surf. In practice, the experience barely resembled a vacation at all.

The trip took two days: train to Calais, ferry across the Channel, and then more trains and buses and trains to and from Paris and through the Alps to Italy and finally down to Tuscany, with the kids all crammed into smelly, old carriages, no water or food available, trying to sleep but no one succeeding. Every five minutes someone would be fighting or hungry or need to go to the toilet, except there weren't any toilets and no way to go until the train stopped and a crowd of kids would jump off all at once to run and have a pee and a poo.

Finally, they would get to their destination: a former school or monastery or army barracks, where their dormitory was thirty beds to a room, a sheet and a blanket and no pillowcase. They'd have to wake up early, go down to the hall and have coffee and a bit of bread for breakfast every day, which was fine for the kids with more Italian habits but mostly turned the stomach of the more English kids. Then, they'd sing *Com'è bella la nostra bandiera* saluting as they raised the Italian flag, which apparently was a way to educate them about the Italian way of life. For lunch, they'd have a sandwich with *salame* or *prosciutto* or some other cured meats, which was commonplace in Italy but luxurious for their standards; the problem was, everything came in very small portions, including the vegetables they had in the evening. These were the

fifties, right after the war years. England had recovered quite quickly, whereas in Italy there just wasn't much to go around, no matter how much their hosts tried to make the kids comfortable.

There was nothing to do there either. They were not far from the beach, but it was hot, forty degrees every day, too hot for the English Italians, the really pale ones, much paler than Johnny. A lot of them got sunburned, their skin turning from white to purple if they went out from under the canopies the school had set up. Lotion wasn't readily available back then, so they got their backs rubbed with a bit of olive oil, to help them fry better. They'd cry all the way back and then keep crying, traumatised by being away from their parents for the first time in a place where they could not communicate.

The kids were supposed to be practicing the language, but really, they were isolated, far from the centre of town, and they just asked the staff for food in Italian and for the rest they chatted amongst themselves in English. Still, Johnny and his friends who did speak Italian, would often jump the walls around the grounds and run away to the nearest village. Though the locals mostly understood they were immigrants' kids and were kind to them, the kids were still frightened to approach them. It hadn't been that long since the war. In London, Italians were only a decade off being branded enemy aliens; in Italy, mistrust towards the English was still in the air, and they didn't feel particularly welcome. It turned out that while in London the Clerkenwell kids were very Italian, in Italy they were very, very English.

Still, Johnny and his friends would muster up their courage and their language and walk into a little *bottega* or *salumeria*, or go down the fields and buy a watermelon from the local farmers for whatever change in *lire* they had. The watermelon was good, juicy and sugary from ripening under the scorching sun, at least; even better because they were hungry. The market, to which Johnny and his friends were forbidden to go, but they snuck out to anyway, only sold vegetables, and there were barely any other shops in town. It was easy to steal a few carrots from the grocer, but if anyone had wanted a new shirt, they wouldn't have known where to go.

The day trips to Pisa and Lucca were almost worth the whole dreadful experience. Everyone would get on the local train and head off for the cities to see churches and monuments, and that was phenomenal, better than St. Paul's or Westminster. Around the Italian cathedrals there were huge paved *piazze*, not just cramped city streets; the blinding white marble buildings towering over the children like perfectly preserved dinosaur skeletons. They'd scamper in and out of the palaces, all over the grassy and gravelly grounds, feeling like they had crossed over to a different dimension in which soot, back alleys and poverty did not exist.

And yet, in a way, they were the closest to home they'd ever been. Johnny and his Clerkenwell mates, he thinks, were the descendants of asphalt workmen, ceramic and mosaic makers, even marble cutters. The hands that raised the cathedrals are those of their forefathers, the skills they used handed down through centuries of gruelling work, the satisfaction at the end of the day the same for the tiled roof of a church or a well-decorated vase. Not that Johnny knew or cared at the time. Maybe later, when he'd renovate restaurants all over London or mould his own papier-maché sculptures for the Our Lady of Mount Carmel procession. But right then, he just wanted to run around the sunlit squares with his friends, slapping each other on the back of the neck and then running away, passing the time while they waited, they couldn't wait, to get their London back.

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JOHNNY GOES DOWN on Clerkenwell road to Terroni to order his homemade ravioli for Christmas, and thinks back to the ones he used to have when he was little. His mum used to make them herself, and the kids helped her. Johnny still has her little roller she used to flatten the pasta to then fill with *il ripieno*; where Johnny comes from, the traditional filling is mainly cheese with a bit of chicken stock and nutmeg. Then she'd flip them over and the kids would cut them and leave them on the tablecloth sprinkled with *farina* because they were a bit *umidi*. They'd have to stay there overnight and then in the morning they

were nice and almost dry, though even when you put them on the plate you'd still put some tissue in between the layers so they didn't stick together. It was always a wonderful thing to do because you only got to do it at Christmas; the rest of the year it was *pastina in brodo* and bread.

There were no *antipasti*, of course, the meal went straight to the pasta. To fill the pasta, to make the broth it was served in and the casserole to eat as *secondo*, they had one chicken to clean out that stayed on the stove for six or seven hours and boiled and boiled, very very slowly. Johnny liked the chicken broth so much that once grown up he'd make it himself and then freeze it, the pure chicken broth, so it didn't go to waste. After that, all the goodness would be boiled out of the chicken, leaving this chicken that doesn't have much taste to it, so that went in the *casseruola*. When Johnny was little, you'd only get chicken at Christmas. It's not like they could afford it every day; it was kind of expensive. They did appear to be much bigger than chickens are now, though; they used to be huge back then and they're tiny little things now, or maybe Johnny used to be smaller. Then, his mother prepared the English stuff, the *patate* and Brussels sprouts, the *verdura*, but not broccoli; broccoli wasn't even invented when he was little. Things were so hard to come by after the war anyway, though there was always the black market if you could afford it. Besides, Italian Christmas dinners are much simpler than English ones: there is no duck or turkey, or gravy from granules.

They'd borrow a table from the neighbours so they could all sit together; he was one of ten children. His dad had died when he was very young, so with his mum they'd be eleven at the table, when they were still living all together in Clerkenwell. Everyone was still suffering from the war years, but they always managed to have *la festa*, with more than they could eat. Mum made the plate up for the kids, not like now when everybody helps themselves; she'd give them the ravioli with the warm *brodo* full of savoury fat eyelets she'd drained off from the chicken and Johnny'd have to wipe the plate clean with a piece of the nice fresh bread she got from the bakery, *un po' di pane*. Mum would say "You can only have six ravioli", and she'd portion them out, counting them

so everyone got the same amount, but they were so much bigger than they are nowadays, or maybe Johnny used to be smaller. Johnny'd say to her "*Dammi un altro piatto*", and she would say "*Eh no*, you ate too much already", because there had to be enough for everyone to go around.

They didn't do fruit at the time, but mum would always get one *panettone* because it was an Italian tradition, quite a big one that would come out as a dessert, soft and airy and full of raisins and candied orange peel, a real Christmas treat. Johnny might get one from Terroni this Christmas; he has to get his Motta to take down to the kids, they look forward to it, they might be suspicious about *polenta* and such and say they don't like the look of it when they're served it, but they do like their *panettone*. He thinks about what he will be getting his grandchildren. He's never been one to buy his kids £300 train sets or anything like that; when he got them toys that took an hour to set up, everyone got bored with them anyway by the time they got to play with them. But he doesn't want his grandchildren to go without toys like he did, without presents unless one of the older brothers who was working got them something, or Christmas parcels from his married sisters in America arrived. He remembers the cowboy guns everyone in school wanted to see, the pair of baseball boots he would wear until they were utterly destroyed. Christmas Eve is for the kids, and especially coming from an Italian family it's important to do something, to keep the traditions alive.

Up until this year, some of the pubs used to be open on Christmas Eve, although not on Christmas day or Boxing Day, so he'd go have a couple of beers or a nice mulled wine with friends. He'd start at 12 and finish at 5 – when your friends start falling over you know it's time to come home to a nice dinner, though as you grow old you learn to stop earlier. When he was little, he'd go to Christmas Eve Mass at midnight, then back again for the 7am Christmas Day Mass. It's going to be different this year; it's going to be sad. His daughter will organise something for Christmas, and there's about seven of them, so they won't be affected by lockdown too much. It's not a fabulous time for anybody, but what can you do?

Johnny walks past St Peter's Church and the now-closed Italian School to Terroni, and looks towards Farringdon road to his home in Victoria Dwellings, his mask on, in the neighbourhood he's lived all his life. They say the streets around here were like a piazza once, everyone coming out to pass the time, especially in the summer, even the priests chatting to their parishioners from the step of the church. The ice cream vendors would go to Fraulo and Perelli for their ice, then add it to the milk they boiled in their own kitchen and carry the ice cream around on a wheelbarrow and sell it. The men coming home from the asphalt or the statuette trade would walk home with paint or plaster dust on their faces and clothes; shoeshines would do their shoes for a few pennies. The women, poor and impeccably clean, would be trickling back in small groups from the shopping, pushing prams loaded with children and pasta, or just lifting sacks and packs from Leather Lane market in their strong arms and carrying a baby on their back. Kids would run after rag footballs, cats and dogs, risking being run over by carriages first and cars next. But right now, there's barely anyone around, and the 'Ill has never been so quiet. It's cold and bleary and grim, and Johnny wants his London back.

Fascination and Horror

for Sarah Bancroft, by Suzanne Wilson

"I shouted at Dominic Cummings. He was in a cafe and I noticed him, so I shouted, 'Ohh you horrible man, you!' And he sort of…" Sarah mimics some grumbling-man noises, "…and off he went."

Imagining Sarah's expressive voice shouting over the hissing of barista machines and general cafe chatter at a beady-eyed, bespectacled git automatically makes the corners of my mouth tug upwards.

"I want Angela Merkel, but we're not going to get Angela Merkel, are we?"

Even only knowing her speaking voice, and with no clue as to what she looks like, Sarah oozes charm, good humour, and a clear disdain of our current government. She is able to make me smile and laugh more than I thought I could over a conversation about Covid-19 and the experience of lockdown.

"I've had a really decent time of it," Sarah tells me. She explains that, back in February, Covid seemed very far away, but when it started to hit Italy and they said that it was on its way over here, it became a sort of inevitability at that point.

"Especially when people were drawing parallels with the Spanish Flu of 1918, we all started to think 'Gosh! People are just going to drop like flies.'"

There seemed to be a nonchalance about it at first, a sort of gung-ho attitude, and this was coming from nurses that she was seeing everyday while visiting her dear friend in hospital. It was a cancer ward, and Sarah was seeing people in dreadful situations while there, so she was already dealing with something quite profound. Sarah was already in an environment where everyone had to be very careful, for if anyone was to bring any infection into the ward, even a cold, those people already had very weak immune systems.

"... so I became very conscious that I had to keep my germs to myself. This, in turn, made me a bit more in touch with my mortality."

Sarah describes herself as "being on pause", as she is retired and has moved into temporary accommodation while she waits to move back into her own house. Being on pause is something that Sarah didn't find easy, and her solution was to walk around London, covering between twelve and fifteen kilometers a day. Something completely free to fill her time with. A part of this was Sarah's friend who, after leaving hospital, was then immediately told to shield in her studio flat. Once or twice a week, Sarah would walk from her home in Hackney to see this friend in Lisson Grove and take her groceries and supplies.

"She would open her door and I would sit outside in the car park of her tenement flat, we would have a cup of tea, and then I would walk back."

Sarah compares the atmosphere she found walking alone in London to that in one of the opening scenes in *28 Days Later.* "I highly recommend walking down Oxford Street during a lockdown, as there were only two people to be seen. Or Covent Garden and Neil's Yard, which were completely deserted.

Also, Tottenham Court Road. I was able to walk all the way up and down without seeing a single car. I could wander to and fro across the Marylebone Road without even having to look. It was quite surreal and quite intoxicating, actually. Almost magical. And if you needed a wee, most train stations kept their toilets open even though there was no one there. I've got a picture of myself in Liverpool Street Station where I am the only one there. At the minute, when I go for a walk around the city, well, London isn't quite as dead, but let's just say that it's not very well. The beauty of what I was experiencing mixed with the feeling of 'Are we all going to die?'... I think encapsulated the bizarreness of the situation."

To Sarah, London is so much better than the countryside. Villages and similar areas only have one road into them and one road out; aside from that, all of the fields and land is private property, so there aren't that many places one can actually explore. In London, Sarah can walk out her front door and

pick any direction; there will always be something new to see, no matter how familiar the area is.

"It has been a beautiful and artistic experience, which sounds really elitist and poncey, but that's how it is. I've been very fortunate." However, the idea of a second lockdown is a bit more daunting to her. "What if they tell everyone over fifty to stay inside and shield? I'm worried I'll be told to go and live in a cupboard until next year or something. I couldn't do that at all. Even if the only thing I do is walk around London in a circle."

A major change that Sarah has noticed as she walks, is the sudden increase in traffic after lockdown restrictions began to be lifted in the summer. The City of London has closed off many roads to make way for new cycle-lanes. Sarah is a woman who does her research. She tells me that private car usage has gone up by one hundred and twenty percent since the year before. A lot of this increase has to do with reduced bus services, which are only running at thirty percent capacity. "So, if you shut all the roads that connect all the little bits, everybody is going to head to the main roads, which are completely rammed up."

The situation in London is comparable to living in a castle. Certain drawbridges go up at certain times, making it a very difficult place to navigate and leave. She points out that the government hasn't started fining people *yet*, but it will only be a matter of time before fines will be dished out, opening another revenue source for making money. Sarah's turn of phrase is striking: "All the major arteries in and out of London have been clogged up." It really drives home the image of London as the supposed 'beating heart' of the UK. Sarah is aware that our current government intends to keep the financial and political focus on the capital city, starving other areas of funding and aid. It appears, however, from her description, that the capital has had too many servings of bumbling, blond, saturated fats and is now developing a serious case of coronary heart disease.

"I'm walking back from the river, and it's just one long line of traffic, all trying to get onto the highway and then out of the city," she begins to tell me

as she walks during our phone call, showing an environmental consciousness that we both share. "At least there's more than one person sharing a car in this huge line of traffic," she comments, but then she stops herself. "Oh no, here we go." she begins to list the occupants under her breath: "single white man, single white man, single white man…"

With the more recent restrictions that have been put in place, Sarah's local swimming pool will soon be closed again. She goes swimming three times a week, covering over a kilometre each time. It really comes to light just how active Sarah is, a powerhouse of energy zooming around London and her local leisure centre. "They reopened in July again, but just the pool itself. All of the changing rooms and showers are closed off, so you literally walk in, have a swim, and walk back out again." Recently, she has been working on perfecting a flawless front crawl. Her inspiration is a video of a Japanese professional athlete called Shinji Takeuchi. He glides through the water in a manner that is more fish than human, barely making a splash with his head totally submerged. "His arms come up like the fin of a shark cutting through the water," Sarah describes, "It's the beauty of those movements that I aim to teach myself."

Teaching herself seems to be something that she does a lot; maybe in a situation such as this one, it helps. I related to her on this; knitting was a hobby I decided to try and master over lockdown, as it was something I always had difficulty with, much to my grandmother's despair. It resulted in a very lumpy, mismatched scarf that my partner will be forced to wear in the winter.

"It's been slightly easier for us introverts, hasn't it?" Sarah elaborates on how she can see people who are more extroverted struggling with the anti-social aspect of lockdown. "I could see young people out on Halloween evening, dressed up and trying to have fun, but there was only so much they could do. I feel for them because if I was in my twenties or thirties right now, I would be doing as much partying as I could." At the moment, in contrast, Sarah becomes personally offended if someone decides to knock on her front door. This is very relatable. I'm asked as 'a member of the under forties' if I

have been out partying. I tell Sarah that we are happy enough getting merry in our flat, considering how uncertain everything is.

"It's alright if you can have a few drinks at home, but there is something about being out and around people. If you get a bit drunk and fancy a chat, there's no one to really talk to. It's the company of strangers one can miss more than the company of your familiars in certain situations." Apparently, people working construction on the roads are really good to have a chat with. Firstly, they are classed as essential workers, so they are always there, and secondly, "They're doing a job, digging that big hole or whatever, so if you start chatting to them they have to stay, they can't really escape, can they?" Sarah gives one of her warm chuckles as I decide to myself that next time I want to speak to someone new, I can go and have a chinwag at the roadworks.

Not all her quests yield results, though. "One of the biggest things I did this week actually turned out to be a huge disappointment. My Tai Chi instructor told me that a big stone circle had been discovered underneath Victoria Park. And I thought, 'This is fantastic', so I looked the article up in the East London Advertiser and got really excited. I went out to Vicky Park and I'm imagining this circle. But then I thought that this circle, it's a bit close to the river, I'm sure this would have been a floodplain about five thousand years ago, but never mind. I couldn't find anything, so I checked back on the article and it was from 1st April. I was so disappointed. I felt as though I was off on a mythical quest and I imagined all of these great festivities going on around the stone circle." I see Sarah as some sort of Frodo Baggins-esque figure, with a bag of supplies on her back, trying to decode a magic map that leads her to the stone circle where the druids and pixie folk gather. "But alas, 'twas just a folly. I've lost faith completely in that instructor."

As our weekly conversation moves towards its end, it inevitably turns to the US Presidential elections, which are happening very soon. "I think over thirty percent have already voted anyway." Sarah tells me, "I do hope that Trumpy doesn't win. It would be very nice. Maybe we could turn a corner

with populism, and maybe go back to things that actually make sense. But that might be too optimistic."

I wonder if she watched the results with the equal parts of horror and fascination as I did; these two feelings seem to go together so often this year. As I say goodbye to her and hang up the phone, I hope for Sarah and the rest of us that the next major world event doesn't turn out to be another unreachable magical stone circle.

Come You Back, You Norfolk Soldier

by Sophie Brown – an autobiographical piece

It started as a rumour on the walkway, which turned into an email and finally a student's nightmare. All face-to-face teaching just suspended, like a misplaced apostrophe, hanging in mid-air. Life cut off mid-sentence. No chance to cross the t's and dot the i's; a full stop so heavy it bleeds through to the next page. A shitty cliff-hanger in an airport novel. Everyone made the wordless decision to go home.

The boy I thought I loved had walked out of my life and onto a one-way bus to London. Standing in the middle of campus, alone, in the silence and darkness, I allowed the rain to mask my tears. It was bitterly cold, as it always is on campus. And so grey. Just grey clouds, no sun, no expanse of blue and of course no stars at night. The Norfolk wind I know, and love, blows through you; it cleanses the soul. It makes you feel so alive. I felt fucking alive then.

Little did I know it was this feeling I would need the most in the coming months. I knew this was the end. A tidal wave was heading straight for us, ready to sweep us away to the places we had run from, no escape route, except taking a deep breath and praying to God.

Students had escaped their homes to start their adventure. Now it was from the adventure we had to escape. I was scared. I wanted to scream. I was angry. I cried. I laughed at the irony of it all. Most of all I was exhausted.

My phone buzzed in my hand. My best friend inviting me to something, to just be with people, to say goodbye, to drown alongside. So, I headed to a flat I did not call my own with people who I knew from nights out. Looking back, we were soldiers, all gathered and so aware of the hell we were heading towards but not sure of our fates. There was a certain comradery between us, as if this were the last hurrah before the last battle. I do not remember

the details, or maybe I do, and some things should be left unsaid. Nine faces cramped together, smiling, laughing for just a moment, forgetting the reality of it all. Those nine faces had no idea what to do apart from what students do best: have fun with others who have no clue what to do, in the hope someone might produce some plan. We may have laughed that night, thinking all will be well soon, we will be back, despite hearing the cannon and shotgun fire in the distance.

I did many things that night. But the two most important were finishing the last of my ice cream supply and applying for a job. A job I would eventually go on to get.

We clung to our naivety like a safety blanket, most of us only eighteen and pushed out into the weird world of adulthood. But A Levels and GCSEs and part time jobs could never have prepared us for this. So, we ran home.

Admittedly, I didn't have far to run. It was the same county I called home, from a town to a city and back again. Worlds apart in many ways. In others, not so much.

You know those neighbourhoods they talk of which are all white and try to be something it is not? That is home. There are two types of people in my hometown: the ones who will do anything in their power to leave, usually through university and education, and the others who stay because they are content with what life has given them, so instead they learn a trade and make money, in an honest day's work. I envy the latter. Norfolk will always be my home and I hope to return one day, in my old age. My parents live there, and I adore them beyond belief, but they instilled in me the fact that there is so much more beyond the boundaries of white picket fences and teenage pregnancies.

It is not all doom and gloom there. My hometown has no right to be as beautiful as it is, with its river walks and large expanses of fields all around. Sandwiched between a nature reserve and the North Norfolk coast, to the untrained eye it would be paradise. It is only because I know what lies beneath the peeling paint that I judge it so.

After about a week or so of being home and trying online classes, I had my induction at one of my local supermarkets. I was going to be on the home delivery team with my best friend from sixth form. At least I would have a routine, get out of the house, and see people. The hours were gruelling with a 4am wake up call, and at times shifts would overrun due to the considerable amounts of orders. But I was thankful, I still am so thankful. It kept me sane. I saved for university, for the future and I treated myself a little. I was one of the lucky ones.

Walking up and down aisle after aisle for hours on end makes you think. It gives you time to wrap your head around things you would not have been able to. Like thoughts of the boy on the bus and whether he will return, whether you want him to. Whether you want something else, someone else, whether you want yourself again. Instead of bending to the will of someone who will never accept you for you, who will spit venom and hold your whole self against you. I cried, I laughed, and I resigned myself to nothingness.

My parents worked throughout the pandemic in local primary schools; for them, life went on. My dad and his friend painted the two primary schools together, listening to cricket and drinking lukewarm tea. My mum was held up in the office reading the mounds of essays sent day on day by the government about updated guidelines, with me helping to organise files and folders on my days off. Everyone I knew poured themselves into their work; it was something to occupy their minds.

We savoured our days off. The weather was so beautiful, we spend afternoons in our blossoming garden with snacks and drinks, from gin to ciders and ginger 43's and my mum's famous, jacked- up sangria, with cocktails from cans and old bottles of wine hidden at the back of the garage. We sun bathed and read and watched as all our plans got re-arranged and re-scheduled for years in the future.

And the walks on empty tracks and beaches that would have made tourists envious – if they had been there. Expanses of golden sands, so tropical you could be abroad. Crystal blue skies, jet trails and the sound of the icy sea all to ourselves.

The rustling of pine trees behind you, infinity in front. A private space so precious you wish you could share it with every single one of those nine faceless students who are inevitably locked up somewhere else. To share the real Norfolk, not the concrete slabs glued together by debt and dimming dreams. To be able to scream into the wind, or natter about inconsequential nonsense as if it were just another day at the beach. These bright days do not last long.

The grey skies come rolling back in again, as they usually do as the weather gets colder. I used to like saying "There's a storm brewing" as I looked out of the window in an ominous tone. I liked the thought that something was about to happen, something unbelievable, magical almost. Except this time, things happened, but there was nothing remotely amazing about it.

These bright Norfolk days only last so long. You can think there is city life and provincial life, but it is all the same, really. There are only so many days you can sit out in the sun, before you must return inside, to the cell you have made. You try to talk inconsequential nonsense. But not even plans and talks of the future excite you.

The boy on the bus returns only to leave again. But this time it is fine, everything will be okay, I knew it was coming, maybe not the blows he brought with him, but I fought my corner none the less. I showed myself there is still a fire within, that no one and nothing, not even a pandemic can take away. I may forget it or forget to fan the embers. But it is still burning. There is a joy in finding myself again, bouncing back despite it all.

But still, as I stand in my bedroom, the grey walls echoing the grey skies outside, I still feel out of place. Like the tidal wave is still surging forward, and there is still nothing I can do about it. It's getting darker and I am falling deeper and there's no end in sight. I don't know what to do. It is all guess work now. Still forever marching on in a battle with no purpose. No leader and no rhyme or reason. The comradery has gone now. Even now, with the mud underneath my boots as I walk a path many have walked before, a small voice spurs me on. We must just try to swim to the surface, break through, take a deep breath and survive.

Cricket, Lovely Cricket

for Max (Ferdinand) Maxwell, by Zoe Mitchell

One

The bat is heavy in his hands. Max thumbs his way around it, searching for grip on that well-worn wood. It's older than his skin, this bat – it's been softened by other hands, other games played long before he was born. But, for Max, this all feels fresh. He's played cricket every day for a whole summer now. And yet the novelty is still there. He wakes every morning with the bat already ghost-like in his hands, fresher than the night's dreams. It's almost a ritual: when he gets up, he dresses fast, wrangling the clothes over his head as he makes for the door. He can squeeze a few hours of cricket in before school – and after, if he's quick about it. With every lapse in the day, every moment of quiet, he makes for the cricket pitch. The set-up is makeshift, scrambled together from old equipment, but it's enough. For Max – for all the children – this is the stuff of life.

He steadies the bat in his hands, lowers himself into his batsman's stance. He's braced here, poised for action, rocking with fresh screams of adrenaline. This never gets old.

Two

Max steps onto the field, swinging his bat so it just noses the ground. The bat feels lighter to him now. It doesn't drag so much, doesn't strain on his arms. Now he's older – ten years older, and hardly a kid anymore – he's plenty big enough to wield this bat proficiently. And he's got a whole childhood of experience. He steps into place in front of the wicket, just as he's done a thousand times before. Only this time it's different. Max eyes his teammates through the grating of his helmet. *Teammates.* The word clings heavily to his ear. He's used to a team,

of course he is – but usually, his teams are as makeshift as the pitch. He plays with schoolfriends and the kids hanging out on the street, scrambles together a hotchpotch of them till there are enough to fill all the roles. This is different. Max turns from player to player, meeting the gazes of every member of *his team*. They've practiced together, grown together. And now they're about to win together. Max steps up to the line and crouches, bat outstretched like a fifth limb. This is so much a part of him. It's gouged into his muscle memory, wired into every tendon and fibre. These hands are steady. These legs are ready. And Max has never been so excited to play.

The crowd quietens and leans in to watch, but Max squints them all out of sight. Right now, all that matters is the ball, and the bowler's windmilling arm that holds it. As the bowler lets it fly, Max forgets all about the pressure. He forgets about the tournament, about the kit he's wearing and the crowd staring. Right now, all that drives him is that same old instinct. He squeezes the bat and it seems to squeeze right back, familiar like the hug of a friend. And when the ball hits, Max is ready.

Three

This time, Max isn't playing.

He wriggles forward right to the edge of his seat, balancing with about a third of his tailbone. Not that he minds. It's one of those days so giddy that you can't feel pain. You don't notice the discomfort of a hard chair, don't notice the way your eyes strain from staring too hard at the TV. Some things are worth the suffering. And right now, Max hardly notices a jot of it.

He's not here – in the family room, watching the telly – not really. When he squints hard enough, it's not a stretch to believe that he's *there*. He looks on, in through the pixels and the hard glass of the screen, seeing past the feedback till the picture is as clear as the room before him. Clearer, in fact. As he clenches his fists, he can almost feel the bat set within them. He can feel the weight of that sun searing down, lashing its warmth out in fierce sweaty bursts. And he can feel the tension.

This moment – this day – means everything. For the first time, the West Indies are in the World Cup Final. And it looks like they're damn well going to win.

These guys on the screen are just like Max. They were grown in the same places, fertilised with that same pure cricketing spirit. They found their feet on the same streets, made their first runs in parks just like the one down the road. They, like him, learnt cricketspeak even as they gummed out their first words. And now here they are, in the Cricket World Cup Final – the real one. Max understands these men, feels the adrenaline in their steps like it's his own. Everyone around him feels it too. That heady stadium atmosphere extends well beyond the field. Max senses that same atmosphere in the living room, in the way his family gripped their hands to their knees. The atmosphere stretches through the ground, ripples like heat on the roads, holds tight to everyone in Barbados. Every eye is captured, every throat closed tight around the same breath.

For all of Barbados, this moment is significant. These men – men just like Max – are, for this day, the centre of the universe. The world sees them now.

Four

Today's the day – the final.

Max wipes his brow, feels the hair heavy at his skin. It's been a long, hard match already, and he's only just begun. 30 runs in, and he has no intention of going out just yet. Max eyes the bowler, pulls back the bat and readies himself to move again. He's taking it one ball at a time, but he can't help noticing the score racking up. They're winning. If it goes on like this – if *he* goes on like this – they could actually take home the Aidan Cup.

He looks around at the faces of his teammates, all poised and posed around him. These men have played with him, served with him, on the cricket field and in the army. He's travelled the world with them, laughed with them, trusted them with his life. And now here they are, ready to win the Cup together.

The ball whizzes towards him and Max raises his bat, knocking it back in the perfect swoop. He visualises the moment of impact before it happens, narrowing his eyes till all he sees is that ball, hurtling ever closer. The bowler put a real spin on it, but Max knows how to handle that. Angling the bat, he lets his muscle memory take over, lunging forward in the beat of one breath, just as he has a thousand times before – ten thousand times? A million, maybe? Whatever way it is, it doesn't matter now. Hitting this ball is a part of who Max is. It's a direct result of every action he's taken up to this point: every moment of training, every innings he's played since he was six. And yet, when he hits the ball – when it soars obediently off the flat of his bat – something in him is surprised. There's no time for thinking about it now, though. No – right now, all Max has time to do is run. And so, he does.

A few innings later and he's out. 54 runs – he's rarely played so well. His teammates surround him, reaching out with their wicket-keeper's gloves to hug him. They congratulate and clap him on the back, grinning so wide that their faces are transformed. Max has done them justice. When the match is over – when they're lifting the Aidan Cup, celebrating their victory – he knows he's done his part to secure it. His fingers brush the hard skin of the cup, dashing against that tantalising shine. He's earned this.

Five

Max pulls the bag across his shoulders and steps from the bus onto the pavement. He likes a London bus – having worked as a bus mechanic here for years, they hold a comfort and familiarity for him. But now he's stepping off, and the air is colder than he likes. Even now, when London shows its chilly side, it takes Max by surprise. But then, he's used to a whole range of weather. He's broiled in the heat of Yemen, where the sun would bear down all morning and the warmth never seemed to lose its edge. He and his fellow soldiers struggled to get anything done before noon the whole time they were there – yes, Max knows heat. He doesn't need that kind of weather to be happy. London's conditions are perfectly acceptable, most of the time. And they're plenty good enough for cricket.

He continues his journey, bat pressing against the bag on his back. It digs at him with every step, niggling about his spine. It's as though the bat's eager to play, to be released to the field. Max knows how it feels.

There are several parks they play at, Max and his friends, all across London. He loves the regularity of these games – the structure of them, the precision of them. But cricket is now, as it's always been for him, about fun. Max plays for the love of it. When he's here, in these manicured London parks, he's stepping into those halcyon Barbadian days. Something of Barbados is carried in his bowling arm. It's alive on these grey British pavements, these quaint trees that line the streets, sitting complacently on the roadside. The trees are evenly spaced, like teeth at measured intervals. But the bat in Max's bag doesn't know that. It doesn't know where he is. It doesn't recognise the passage of time, or the way the world has moved on. As far as this bat is concerned, cricket is all there is. And now, for an afternoon at least, Max is about to step into that bubble. For the duration of this match, only one thing matters.

Max met his new teammates when he moved to London after retiring from the army. He met them all through cricket – they bonded over their shared love, took the sport as a common denominator. Cricket was the thread that tied them together. With it as the focal point, they became more than friends – they became a team, comrades. There's no cup to win now, no big final to train for. But cricket has always been about more than the glamour and the accolades. Max will play just as readily with no audience as he did in the Aidan Cup final. In the enormity of London, more than just physical space is needed to form community. And cricket does the trick nicely. It pulls the cricket lovers together, drags them out by their roots. Traipsing across the city weekly, they stake out new territory in parks, pushing their wickets into fresh ground. This week is no different. Turning into the park, Max feels the give of soft grass underfoot, feels the bat press anew against his back. It's time to play. He pulls the bag away from his shoulders and draws back the zip, fingers tingling and alive. All these years later, cricket holds that same thrill it bound him with at age six.

Six

Max folds himself back into his armchair and turns to the TV. It's a big screen – much bigger than the screen he had in 1975, on that wondrous afternoon when he watched the World Cup final. But, somehow, sitting here takes him back. Just as it was then, cricket is a uniting force. The thrill and buzz of a stadium continents away is pressed into every 4k pixel on his screen. Max feels the presence of that crowd, dispersed the world over, all drawn in by that one same camera shot. He sees the game through their eyes, and they see it through his. They all share a lens and a passion. And, now that he can watch on this big screen, it feels more real than ever.

It's been so long since he's played the game himself. That's the way of things, of course, the natural order – a strong grip weakens, fast feet grow tired. It's been so many years since these hands have held a bat of their own. But when he picks up the TV remote, Max feels something of that old weight, that heft. And when he watches these cricketers play – young, vigorous, full of that same giddy energy that fuelled him, once – he knows he doesn't need to set foot on a real cricket field. The spirit lives on, the game continues. Cricket never gets tired, never grows weak or old. It is reborn every day, made new in the little hands of some other six-year-old child. For as long as cricket is played, it will be alive and well. Max will always be a part of it – always able to watch it, right here from his armchair.

At least, that's how it seems to him. Right up until the day that lockdown is announced.

Seven

It's 2020, and the year is bulging into one months-long quarantine. Max is keeping busy – he helps out at the Pepper Pot Centre, supporting vulnerable elderly locals. Like always, he stays active and sociable as much as he can. Only it's harder to socialise in the middle of a pandemic. As always, he keeps tuned into the sport on TV. Only *that's* harder in a pandemic, too. Lately, there's hardly been any sport on to speak of. No cricket at least. Still – Max can make do.

The thing about Max is that he's adaptable. You have to be, to grow from a boy to a man, keeping your eye on a cricket ball all the way. You have to be adaptable to make that transition from amateur to skilled player, from skilled player to viewer. Max can deal with one more change.

For these few months when there's no regular cricket on his screen, Max will improvise just fine. He enjoys the games that *are* played, savouring each test match like it's the last. And in the interim, there's plenty other sport on TV. He watches football, mostly, or Formula 1. Of course, there's a world of difference between a steering wheel and a cricket bat, a racing driver's helmet and a batsman's. But the same spirit thrives in both. These people Max sees on his screen love their sport, live for their sport. The racing drivers might not have cricket drumming through their veins – but they, like Max, are there for the fun of it. In that way, the heart of cricket beats much like any other. The stadium energy Max once felt through his TV is the same now: even when the stands are empty; even when the sport is different.

Max sits back, listening to the racing cars harrumph and screech like mechanical banshees. In some ways, everything has changed since those summer days when he was six, batting down wickets for the first time. In other ways, nothing has changed at all.

Cricket lives in Max's core, lockdown or no lockdown. Until all this is over, he'll enjoy these other sports, fill the void with footballs and race cars. But cricket won't die. And as soon as it's back – back to normal – Max will be ready for it. He'll sit here and watch, TV remote steady in his hands.

My Covid Year

by Denise Monroe – an autobiographical piece

My husband came home from Italy in February 2020. He had been staying with his sister and her husband, a retired Italian doctor who had worked in Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak of 2014. He knew a thing or two about epidemics and what they could become. 'This is serious,' he told Alex, 'get home and get ready.' So it wasn't my government that told me to prepare for lockdown, it was my brother-in-law.

I was in my first year of university and living in Suffolk during term time while my family stayed in London. It had been challenging and, at times, lonely but I relished the solitude and luxury of study after twenty-three years of being someone's Mum. My cottage has a large garden and stands alone in the middle of a forest full of Scots Pine and ancient oak trees. It is the perfect place to study and think without the distractions of caring for a family. That was the dream anyway.

There were murmurs of lockdown in March as the rest of Europe started to close its borders. The British Government decided to carry on as normal, airports remained open, millions of people came and left the country. Supermarkets ran out of pasta and toilet roll as the uncertainty began to mount. We began to make plans. Alex and two of my daughters came to Suffolk. My mother-in-law lives alone in a nearby town so we invited her to stay with us. We were ready. The announcement finally came and on March 23 the country went into lockdown.

We tried to establish routine. I studied every morning as university moved into remote teaching. There were only a few of us in my first online seminar and we didn't know whether to have our cameras on, to talk in turns,

smile or be serious. 'Hopefully I'll see you all in a few weeks,' said my tutor. He was only being encouraging but I have always been the pragmatic parent and those faces on the screen were the same ages as my own children. I wanted to say, 'This is going to be awful. This is serious. Prepare yourselves.' Instead, I smiled and said, 'I think it might be a bit longer than that.' They looked confused and I felt mean for even hinting that this might be more than a blip in their academic year. They would find out soon enough.

It is amazing how quickly we fall back into our roles within a family. My husband worked from his shed, my mother-in-law gardened, my children lay around in the sun and I did the shopping which was a mixed blessing: escape from confinement, entrapment in my role. Once a week I would drive to my local market town and stand in an orderly queue outside the supermarket, carefully avoiding eye contact with the people around me. They might want to talk. They might have it. Distance was best. I found that I quite liked shopping in a near empty store. I drifted down half stocked aisles and fancied myself in a scene from The Stepford Wives; all I needed was a flowing kaftan and some oversized sunglasses to complete the look. Returning home soon put an end to that fantasy. I would unpack the shopping, wash the shopping and then put it all away. We had read that the virus could live for up to 72 hours on some surfaces and we couldn't put my mother in law at risk. She would offer to help me and I would explain again that I had to clean everything before she could touch it. Then she would stand at the kitchen door and silently watch me rinse down the weekly shop. I found this infringement of my personal space so irritating that I would hide behind the kitchen door and make faces at her just as I had to my own mother when I was a disgruntled five year old. I began to do yoga every day.

In April it was my middle daughter's 21st birthday and the planned trip to Paris was obviously not going to happen. We decorated the garden room with *red*, white and blue ribbon, hung braids of onions from the wall, drew an Eiffel Tower and an Arc de Triomphe on the windows, ate croissant and drank hot chocolate. I began to wonder when normal would return. When

would I see Paris again? Travel that had always been there was now a thing of the past.

By May the borders were bursting with lavender and the huge wisteria in the middle of the garden was dripping with flowers. A chaffinch nested outside the kitchen window and we counted three fledglings leave the nest. Blue tits bathed and chatted in the pond and a buzzard circled above our garden so frequently that we began to fear for the safety of my daughter's Chihuahua. We had been blessed with the most glorious spring and summer and the kitchen garden was offering up produce: lettuce and radish, beetroot and herbs. My mother-in-law spent every day planting seeds, pulling up weeds, potting on, making plans for the garden. It got to the point when we had to restrict her working hours and make her rest after lunch every day. On her 89th birthday we broke the rules of lockdown so that her daughter could visit. We sat in the garden for tea and I worried that we were too close to each other, that they shouldn't use the bathroom, that I would have to boil their teacups after they left. It was the first time anyone had breached our bubble and the first time I realised just how fragile my mental health had become. Not being able to hug our visitors made them seem like strangers to us. It was as though we had fought over the family silver and were trying to repair a broken relationship. The lack of touch and human interaction had made me insular and nervous. Irrational fears made me frightened of my visiting family. I left them talking and snuck into the safety of my bedroom like a moody teenager.

In June the restrictions were eased. My husband returned to work in London which meant that his mum had to return to her home as we couldn't risk him bringing the virus back from the city. That was a difficult time for her and she was becoming increasingly fearful of the world outside of the house and garden which had been her home for three months. Every evening she would talk online to her daughter who was shielding in the next village. There was little news to report so the conversation inevitably turned to Covid. Every night. The daughter was more fearful than her mother and told her that she shouldn't return home as all of the shops in town were closed and

she would probably starve to death or die of loneliness. After every call we would have to calm my mother-in-law down and explain that we would visit, that the shops could deliver, that she would not be alone. It was a strain on us all but her fear was real and another reminder of how dependent we are on consistent human interaction to be able to function as part of society.

Even the best lockdown becomes like a prison. After 3 months of being the one who did the shopping, washed the shopping, decided what to eat, it all became overwhelming. I wanted to get in my car and drive to London and go and see a play with my friends. Watch actors spit their words out on a stage, revel in the exhalations. It made me appreciate my friends and the time that we lived in. Facetime, Zoom and WhatsApp enabled us to stay in touch but there was a price to pay. Family quiz nights became a weekly event, another routine to give structure to our lives. Another routine to feel trapped by. That was when it hit me, the new routine was stifling me. Family meals, family fun, family walks, family time. What had become of me?

While my husband worked in London, my daughters and I stayed in Suffolk and revelled in our smaller family. It was a relief not to have a guest, not to have to eat lunch together every day, not to be on best behaviour. I spent an entire sunny day lying in a hammock reading a book and felt gloriously sinful. I reclaimed my space and started to heal. By the end of the July, the girls were ready to leave and to pick up their London lives again. They were also fearful and that surprised me. Where could they meet? Could they hug? Could they go to pubs? Could friends come to the house? What if they sat in the garden? Their normal had gone and they were, like all of us, trying to figure out the new ways of being.

Throughout the lockdown I had kept a routine of morning study but having a house full of family had kept me tethered to the role of domestic goddess and I felt my autonomy cracking. Now that the family had left I needed to recalibrate and set myself up again as an individual. At the beginning of the year we had talked of driving to Italy to stay at my sister-in-law's farm in Calabria. It was part of our plan not to fly again; instead we would take a month each year and have one touring holiday, be leisurely and reconnect

with nature. As we began to plan our road trip there was talk of second wave, France closed her borders and we had to rethink. The pandemic had taken my independence, my university experience, my confidence and my sense of self. I wanted to swim in the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean. I wanted to be selfish. Having said I would never fly again, we booked cheap flights to Lamezia and left at the end of August.

I hadn't seen my family for over two years. I automatically hugged them when we arrived at the farm but then instantly apologised and jumped back. I washed my hands and admired them from a distance. We ate outside, overlooking the hills of southern Italy; we swam in the Med and walked to pizza restaurants at night. It was almost normal but also skewed. I was aware of my foreignness in a way I had never experienced before. Italy had been hit badly by the pandemic, but the south had remained comparatively unscathed. I didn't want anyone to know that I was from overseas in case they thought I had the virus, that I might infect them. I spoke little and hid behind my mask. On the fourth night we sat on the terrace with family and friends from the nearby town. We ate pitticelle and pasta and drank homemade wine, more delicious than I ever thought possible. My phone pinged. A friend's child in London had tested positive. He was asymptomatic and we had seen them the day before we left. Our holiday came crashing down. We waited for the guests to leave before telling our family the the news. I felt sick to the stomach as my bubbling paranoia surfaced. There was a real chance that we had brought Covid to Italy. We were lucky to have a doctor in the family; he calculated that it had been five days since we had seen our friends. We hadn't actually seen their son and they had only been with him for 24 hours since his return from Croatia which meant that the virus wouldn't have had time to incubate. We should be clear but the fear was real and a shadow hung over the rest of our holiday as we stayed within the confines of the farm.

We are now in our third lockdown and swimming in the sea in Italy seems like a lifetime ago. Covid-19 has reminded me of the fragility of our lives, not in terms of death and dying but in the everyday that I take for

granted. How the best laid plans can spiral out of reach, be it a birthday weekend in Paris, a move to university or a simple meal for one. The things that we take for granted, the plans that we make with glee, the holidays we feel our due; none of it is a given. I am a wife, a mother, a student, a woman and have struggled to keep all of these pieces of me delineated within the confines of one physical space. Covid has made me bring all of these pieces of myself together, to name them and nurture them and I finally realise I haven't lost my independence, I'm just looking after it.

Plans Cancelled & Made

for George Freeman, by Ersi Zevgoli

Sitting at home watching the telly is not a state of being that comes naturally to George Freeman: "The television bores me stiff," he tells me. No wonder, then, that when I ask him how lockdown's been for him on our first call, he tells me that it's been bad. He greatly misses his Keep Fit Zumba class. Apparently, they have converted the building into a COVID testing centre, so who knows when those will resume.

George has been experimenting with doing things remotely. He has been ordering things off of the internet, but admits that he doesn't really like online shopping. "I like to go into the shops, and see the thing for myself before I buy it", George tells me, and I cannot disagree with him there. Maybe he also misses the sight of people going about their business.

His brothers live in Oxford and most of his friends in London are quite far away from him, definitely farther away than taking a government-approved walk. He keeps a couple of chickens in his garage for more immediate company. "They come and peck on the door occasionally, let me know they're there. The fox got the previous two."

George manages to stay in touch with all of his further-away relatives over the phone, checking in with his ageing mother-in-law, chatting with Greg, his partner-in-crime in many an adventure, and having his weekly call with one of his brothers. "I do miss my brothers… to a certain extent. All they talk about is politics." And George had much rather listen to a good record or CD than get entangled in a political debate.

That's one of the things that's been keeping him going during all these long months of lockdown: music. "I won't stick to one sort of music," he tells

me, and assured me he'll play the music he likes at full volume, and let the neighbours complain all they like. He perhaps has a soft spot for modern Irish music. George reminisces about the London band scene of the '70s. His late wife of thirty-four years worked with top bands, arranged their transport, hotels and hospitality, that sort of thing. Together, they got to meet a lot of the bands, touring the night clubs with them.

"Tell you what," he says on one of our calls, "when this virus business is over, you take the train to London, I'll come meet you at the station, and I'll take you round these places I'm talking about." That's the sweetest thing I've heard all week, and a trip down the sights of the '70s with George sounds like a nice way to shake off all the doom and gloom of lockdown.

There is no containing this active, outgoing man, so as soon as lockdown was lifted in December, off he goes again. He tells me he went to the theatre, saw a show that was not brilliant, but just all right, and had a night out with friends, with drinks, a meal, and a quiz. There were a couple of people he didn't know in the group, "but they were very nice people."

George is an easygoing, friendly man, and it's no stretch of my imagination seeing him getting on with just about everyone. I can hear this in the way he keeps asking about me when we're supposed to be talking about him. He is very excited to hear that I'm heading back home to Greece for the holidays. He's been going to Poros for the past fourteen or fifteen years there, and really enjoys his laid-back vacations there. He stays at the same hotel every year, wanders round everyday, "always on the lookout for things", and has made friends with the family that own his favourite taverna. When I ask him if he likes the traditional Greek treats, like olives and tzatziki, George hesitates for a moment before replying, "No, I'm afraid not." He likes plain food, he admits. Well, maybe next time he visits Greece, I can take him to my favourite tavernas, get him to try retsina (resinated white wine that is just perfect for hot summer evenings by the sea), and just maybe, change his mind on Greek cuisine.

"I'll be home for Christmas for the first time in how many years", George tells me. Money might've been scarce, but he and his wife always

managed to go places and meet people, despite the very high interest rates on mortgages. "Tell you what, you stay here, and I'll go to Greece to your people." The new rules for London means that he will have to forego his usual Christmastime routine: church on Christmas Eve, a visit to his mother-in-law, and a meal with friends on Boxing Day. Having managed, only just, to spend Christmas with my family, I can only imagine how tough it must have been on him. "Boring" and "quiet" is what he called it, and I suspect those are the two worst adjectives he could use. At least he managed to go for a walk in the park on Boxing Day with his mate Greg.

Nevertheless, George is ready to be out and about once again. He did a computing course at his local college, and is ready for another one.

"I wanted to take it a little bit further, know a little bit more", he tells me. He's curious to see what he can do with a system, tinker and try things out, be able to fix his own computer if there's a problem. But the course he wants to do is too expensive. And Keep Fit is not coming back anytime soon, either.

"This lady that I know from Keep Fit, really nice lady, she… passed on from this virus," he tells me on our first call after the holidays, and for a moment, I am lost for words. "The funeral's later in January, so there's that." Silence. I'm not sure how to respond or support him. It happens sometimes; he'll mention someone as he narrates his travels and exploits, and he'll add, almost like an afterthought, "Sadly, he's passed on now." It makes the pandemic and these never-ending lockdowns startlingly real; things come into dizzying focus, warm as you are in your home, perhaps as you complain about not going out, what is going on and why we are stuck inside, you realise we might be collectively going slightly mad.

Even so, getting these glimpses of George and his indomitable spirit through our calls, I know that once life starts going back to normal, he will be ready to embrace it at its fullest. He'll be ready to have a stroll and do a bit of shopping, ready to meet up at the pub, ready to book a holiday as soon as he's able to. He'd better be. After all, we have plans.

The Wanderer

for Steve Brooks, by Sophie Brown

As you get older you notice the minor changes. Things around you are so familiar, the streets are like the back of your hand, so when a new freckle appears you notice. Steve was sat watching TV when he spotted the change: media outlets playing down the onslaught that was about to come. People put it to the back of their minds; instead, he educated himself by reading up on epidemics, preparing for that new freckle. Slowly, but surely, life ground to a halt. No more Zumba at community centres or pub quizzes at the Pipe Major. People locked themselves in, threw away the key, drew the curtains and pretended nobody was home. Except him.

He began to roam and explore, walking wherever his feet would take him, head full of thoughts and a pocket full of change. You would not believe how gloriously green Dagenham could be. He hopped from park to park where great oaks cast shadows over glimmering lakes. How perfect the weather was, it was one of those springs you could never forget, where all you could do was watch the flowers bloom; a spring where life and death took on new meanings.

Standing at the water's edge, the wind rippling on its surface and ruffling feathers on the waterfowl, he noticed a swan. A mother hiding in the bushes guarding the nest whilst the father glided across the water, basking in the freedom of no pleasure boaters to dodge. For weeks, he watched the family to be until cygnets appeared, following their parents in an obedient curtain call. "You must see these cygnets," He told his friend, and soon they were off on a wild swan chase he goes with friends in tow. Overcome by stage fright, the cygnets of this particular swan lake took refuge upon different water, until finally they were coaxed out to twirl effortlessly by the shore. Soon they lost

their dark down and plumes of white were primped and preened. From there, the 'walk and talk' began.

He called up friends from Zumba and all over. "Why don't we get out? It would be good to catch up, it's good for you," He told them. Only he would find a club in a pandemic. It started with walking and talking, socially distanced of course, until he was imploring the lady at the community centre to let him run yoga classes. "Only you, Steve," as she begrudgingly said yes to what could be the cheeky smile of a lady's man. But that is the smile he flashes to those he cares about, connected in his ever-growing circle. A single man who wishes to never be alone, knowing what those dark times feel like a well with oil-slicked walls that only you can provide the rope to escape. You must climb out yourself, no one else can do it. Only you stand in your own way.

He remembered the wandering souls who used to come to him for help when he worked on the mental health wards, doing what was right and all he could for them, from behind the front desk, the face they needed to see. And now he is getting people like himself out of the house, cherishing human conversation, and Lord knows he can talk. A familiar voice of an old friend, someone you can trust, who welcomes you. No wonder he had an overflowing social schedule. Despite being disconnected from the world wide web, he was more linked to others than one imagined.

"It's not about what you know, but who you know," He proved through his rendezvous with the black market of horticulture, paying premium for flowers sold by neighbours, friends of friends, friends, and sketchy farm shops. He took deliveries in the dead of night to transform his garden into an explosion of colour, a personal paradise for his eyes only. Planting the pansies and magnolias, knowing he is one of the lucky ones really, gave him joy. The trees sang to him as he worked, the leaves encouraging the beautiful hanging objects to shimmer in approval, objects saved from the streets, combed them from the sidewalks as if he were back at the beach again. The chalk gnomes too would applaud the days he spent with dirt under his nails, not knowing it was their turn next as he produced tins of paint. They would scuttle under the

bushes and behind the bins in terror of his brush, but one by one they would receive a new lease of life in a lick of paint.

Life goes on. We must accept and adapt, he thinks as autumn turns into winter, learning to text and use apps as the weather gets colder and the nights longer. Now the wind batters him and the trees on his solitary walk and talks, but it doesn't make them any less interesting. The skies are just as blue as they were before, and even if things aren't as green, they're still full of life. They just sing a new song now; no longer the leaves, battering branches instead, a more minor key percussion section.

He notices the ducks follow him around, instead of scattering at his shadow. 'They must be hungry,' he thinks, 'of course they are, no one's about.' The parks are now barren and bare, people are hiding away once more, this time from the weather. He feels guilty he's forgotten to bring some bread, feeling bad for not looking after the waifs and strays. But he doesn't forget them, taking leftovers to the donkeys and ponies in the nearby fields, dropping fruit and veg to the floor, cracking the frozen mud the animals roam in. They may try and nip, out of love and a certain desperation; not everyone treats them as well as he does.

And as Christmas rolls around, he plans to celebrate, bring light and warmth into his friends' lives' once more. He has three (yes, three), Christmas meals planned. A true socialite; a real man about town. Only one goes ahead before plans are scuppered. But it's a beautiful day, overlooking the park, large windows letting that light and warmth in, in more ways than one. They laugh and eat and drink and everyone feels full again, not just from Christmas pudding and turkey, but with life. It's the days like this they must be thankful for. Even though the other meals can't happen, his mood is not entirely dampened.

Then comes the alert that says he must self-isolate. But how? Why? He's been so careful. But he hides away now, with others helping to do his shopping and just a phone call away. He becomes acquainted with Netflix and watches *The Last Kingdom*. He's read all the books and could quite literally

recite all the rulers of England until kingdom come. Bernard Cornwell writes of Agincourt and Vikings slaughtering Saxons, but he doesn't write of this battle we face now. Still, for a while he can lose himself in another man's life, Uhtred fighting for his life, kingdom, family, and friends. But around and about is a silent killer, no one can see coming; at least with a Viking you know where you stand.

His world, the real world, isn't without loss; it seems no one is safe. He loses loved ones to the virus. It's heart breaking to hear; how fragile life is always shocks. And we can talk of walks and meals and pub quizzes, but we cannot appreciate the light without the dark. He mourns, grieves but he is strong. Steve Brooks is strong. That fact is undeniable.

Now turning three-score-and-ten, he jokes he's living on borrowed time. I don't believe it. Steve Brooks is still so full of life. If a pandemic cannot crush his spirits, God only knows what can.

A Jog in the Park

for Alov Odoglu, by Jack Pascoe

"It's always hopeless to talk about painting –
one never does anything but talk around it."
~ Francis Bacon

Alov is looking at his laptop on the little dark brown wooden school desk he found on the street. Drops of many colour shades are spattered around the edges of the worktop as well as the black metal legs. It's four in the afternoon and he's only been home for a couple of hours. His group counselling appointment at Toynbee Hall has gone well and it has helped to talk. Now he has some time to kill before his evening run.

He's searching through testimonials from various scientific experts and sources on the internet. He finds an article suggesting that Covid-19 was made in a military laboratory in Wuhan as a retaliation to Trump's hiking of tariffs on goods from China to America. His eyes start to narrow as he continues to scan through the paragraphs. Nobody seems to have been held accountable and the virus is still being classed as a natural phenomenon.

However the virus came about, he certainly believes that the British government is in panic mode and has been since March. Restrictions of freedoms have changed almost weekly, it seems. Now people are being fined for not wearing masks in the required places and the government has spent billions of pounds on a vaccine that they are not even sure works at all.

Despite the madness in the news, Alov's area has remained much the same. He always kept himself to himself without the government telling him to stay indoors. Even before the outbreak, his contact with neighbours was limited to a quick 'hello' while passing each other on the stairs. The only real

change to his routine is that he's not able to go to his Wing Chun class on Commercial Road each week. Still, his indoor exercise and occasional evening runs have been keeping him fit. He checks the laptop clock and realises it's about time to change into some comfortable clothes and leave his flat. He takes a look at one of the paintings propped up in the corner. The swirls and waves of paint widen in his eyes as he begins to inspect the composition. He wonders if a darker shade of yellow might have been better. Maybe the frustration and confusion he felt that day didn't match his current mood. Nevertheless, his sense of pride and accomplishment comfort him on his way out of the door and on to the streets of London.

Alov moves through the cars, vans and buses of Commercial Road, heading north. It's eleven in the morning and the sky is clear and bright. His grey hair is trimmed with the precision of a marine veteran's. His thick black eyebrows are relaxed, creating an easy focus on his face. His running shoes beat on the tarmac as he heads north onto New Road and the bottom corners of his mothballed dark purple hoody start flapping freely as he breaks into a slight jog.

Passing by Cream's Cafe he watches a younger lady putting on her face mask. Her long black hair and bright red nails make his chest rise and his shoulders straighten as he jogs. He wonders what kind of wife she would make, and whether she could make him happy, complete the missing part of his life.

She turns to meet his gaze through her thick black sunglasses. He acknowledges her with a comforting commuter's smile before tilting his head back down and moving on.

As he reaches Whitechapel Road he looks left towards the gaudy towers of the City of London obscuring the sky. He takes a second to marvel at the skyline, walks briskly over the crossing, and picks up the pace on to Vallance Road. As he fixates on Repton's Gym, the building that used to be the boxing gym where the Kray twins used to spar, he hears the sounds of an overground train heading over the graffiti spattered bridge towards Bethnal Green station.

As he hears the electric snap from the train lines, he recalls Nakhchivan and the tracks he used to live next to with his family. These were the lines that connected Southern Iran to neighbouring areas and were used for transporting oil and gas.

His father was the head director of the railway in the area where he also worked as a railway electrician. The communist regime had moved the family (consisting of mum, dad, six brothers and four sisters) to a building that had stood since 1901, known as the railway school. Here, they had eight rooms to share between them and only the equivalent of one hundred and eighty pounds a month as a salary to live on.

Alov would often spend his time helping out with the family's farmland. They would grow vegetables and keep geese, sheep and buffalo. His mother would make yogurt from the buffalo milk, rich with oily content, his brothers and sisters would cut the sheep's wool, occasionally slaughtering one of them for food, and during the summer they would collect straw from the fields in order to keep the animals fed through the winter period.

He was the third oldest in the family so he had a certain degree of authority over his younger siblings and was allowed to allocate certain tasks to other members of the family unit. Being a lover of agricultural life, this gave him a great sense of purpose. His other siblings were not so keen on the lifestyle. However, they were left with very little choice but to chip in with the rest.

Living under communist regime meant that the working person's environment was extremely contained. Their life was the railway. Everything was so expensive that their meagre salary could never afford much more than the chance to clothe and feed themselves. When the regime collapsed in 1991, the communist leaders in the area managed to appoint themselves to the same positions of power they had been previously occupying and became more like a Mafia family. They paid the workers nothing and a few billionaires hoarded all the country's accumulated wealth from oil and gas.

Alov's immediate environment was a den of thieves. Where he lived, most people had the mentality of screwing other people over for their own monetary gain. The KGB would also recruit a lot of spies in the area due to the opportunities of transport over local borders. They would offer extra food and clothing for their families in the hope of getting the information they needed. It was all geared towards mistrust of neighbouring capitalist 'enemies' such as Turkey and Iran.

The poor people of the Nakhchivan district were used as nothing more than tools. Nobody was looking out for their personal interests, so most had to do whatever they could to maintain some sense of dignity.

At the entrance to Weaver's Fields, Alov bends down to tie his shoelace. The perimeter of the field is protected by black iron fences and a six-foot hedgerow just inside of them. The grass is scattered with brown patches from people sitting in small groups of no more than six people (as permitted by the government). Gangs of lads gathered on the benches smoke spliffs and laugh loudly at each other's stories. Neatly dressed hipsters wander the tarmac paths contemplating their new lockdown projects. White drones hover above the trees which shed brown and yellow leaves. Children hide behind bushes with sunshine smiles.

His shoulders are aligned perfectly as his torso bounces with every stride. His brow begins to bead with sweat as he observes the scene around him. It's a wonderful melting pot of many countries, religions and backgrounds. He flicks past faces who pass by him like grainy photographs in an old leather-bound book.

During his time in lockdown, Alov has spent a lot of time watching TV and reading the newspaper in between his mandated exercise. One particular program about aliens has caught his imagination. It explained how aliens actually lived among us at one point and have been keeping tabs on us for years. However, alternative life forms are not ready to reveal themselves to humans yet due to our destructive and divisive nature. If we were introduced into their society, we would be the virus spawned to put infinitely more intelligent species at risk. He tries to assimilate the facts and lessons from the programme with all he sees around the park.

As he approaches the corner of the park, he notices a couple of old wooden pallets leaned up against the iron barred fence. He makes a mental note of their location for later use and jogs on.

Further along the path, he sees a young girl with long messy blonde hair and a winter coat. She's carrying a sleeping bag wrapped around her arm in a

bundle. Her face is covered in sores and scars and her eyes are fixed at the path directly in front of her. Her face is devoid of expression.

A pang of empathy begins to take over his thoughts and his pace slows to a brisk walk.

When Alov first arrived in Britain on November 26th 1996, after a year in Istanbul working in a shop and doing his best to earn a decent living, he only had a passport with a visa for documentation. He tried to find work while living in hostels with the little money he had saved, but was informed by legal aid, the Home Office and several businesses he applied for a job with that a work permit was needed.

This concept was completely alien to him. In the past, a passport would have met the requirements for securing a job. Now he was faced with a waiting game. Originally, he was told to wait five years until he could get the papers he required. However, when Tony Blair was voted into power in 1996 this was extended, making it eighteen years he'd have to wait to be able to work.

British bureaucracy was an animal he was made to fight in a cage for his dignity. Unable to find work or claim benefits, and now labelled an illegal immigrant, he was forced to live on the street hiding from the police and in fear of deportation. For eighteen years.

He slept in every London borough. Under bridges, in doorways, abandoned building sites, wherever would shelter him and keep him out of sight. Most of the time he spent alone. He stayed away from the drug users on the street so as not to get tied up in addiction. Rule of thumb on the street is that you share whatever you have with your peers. Alov didn't want anybody to share their drugs with him. He wanted no part of it and also wanted to keep his record clean.

He would attend day centres for meals and hot showers whenever he could. During one of his visits to the Dellow Centre in Whitechapel, a place that helps the homeless community in a huge number of ways, he attended an art class where he tried his hand at impressionist art and became hooked. He would collect wood from the street in order to build canvasses so he could paint. Francis Bacon was a great influence and it was art that kept him sane throughout the ordeal.

Alov's logic and moral compass remained intact. Several occasions would arise on the street that could have been negative for him, but he rose above them. Alov's instincts

were to kill or be killed, but he knew deep down that ultimately this would cause more problems for him.

On September 5th 2013, Alov finally got a work permit with the help of an immigration lawyer. In November of 2014, he was given a home in Aldgate that he could finally call a base. However, this did not stop the stigma of immigration. Because of his name, most businesses preferred John Smith or Peter Green despite his qualifications and the dues he had paid. There was also the issue of experience and age. He couldn't gain experience unless somebody gave him a chance in the first place and now, moving into his sixties, he was not classed as a desirable candidate by any company.

Through all these adversities, Alov kept his dignity and morality. He was well aware that survival of the fittest was a real thing and not just a Darwinian quotation. He had lived it under the communist regime, under the inhumane British legislation process and now, in 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic. This was a man who accepted his ill fate, adapted to his environment, and did his best to come out on top regardless of consequence.

Alov picks up the pace again as he jogs back down Vallance Road towards the home he has fought to find and keep.

He unlocks the door of his flat, where piles of his paintings are stacked against the walls and all over the floor. He recalls the pallets he saw in the park and makes plans to go back and collect them. The wood will be useful as a canvas for his next piece of work.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, he sits down in front of the TV and opens his copy of the Evening Standard. He exhales and relaxes into the daily news stories about revised lockdown restrictions and the underbelly of London, which he had once hidden inside. He begins to daydream and make plans about life with his future partner, who will bear his children and fulfil his sincere urge to be a father. A flash of inspiration lights up his mind, and another idea for a painting begins to take form.

Connection

Do Your Best and Leave the Rest

for Claire Chatelet, by Nic Peard

When Claire and I have our first call, she is in a hotel in Folkestone, two hundred and seventy-two miles away from me in York. I can hear the gulls keening nearby as she tells me she's just getting settled after walking like mad to keep our appointment. I take a quick glance out of my grey, northern window as Claire says she is trying to find a sunny spot to sit in her hotel room. I immediately picture a cat stretching out in a sunbeam, which illuminates dancing dust mites in a picturesque sort of way.

My first question when she's ready is: *how have you been?*

Claire does not hesitate in her answer, and over the next few weeks she will not hesitate to answer many more that I have for her. "Up and down," she tells me frankly. She'd been feeling unwell, and had to get out of London. She'd over-committed and was worn out. According to Claire, this is a mistake she has repeated several times throughout her life. "Every time I think I've learned a lesson," she says. We both laugh.

What did you over-commit on? I ask.

"Oh, it's a long story,"says Claire. I will learn over these next few weeks that these words promise a story of an incredible, profound experience that she is about to share, and I will be honoured to relive those experiences with her. "Did you get a chance to read my previous story?"

I did! That was one of the questions I wanted to ask you – how is it having seen two pandemics in your lifetime? That must be mad.

She responds instantly. "It was very strange – I don't know which one to start on." She pauses briefly. "Shall I start on the first pandemic?"

I affirm – *go for it. Whatever you want.*

She launches right in. "I burnt out in '97."

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When Claire began to recount the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown in the UK, it was hard not to recall the old fable of the boy who cried wolf. The key difference was that in Claire's case, the wolf was not only there, slinking up the hill, but he had been there before, and she'd always been telling the truth. That is not to say she knew what was coming before anyone else – in the beginning, she was tempted to dismiss the whole thing out of hand, even admitting frankly that there were moments that she laughed about it all. It was only when news from Italy began to reach the UK and Claire saw the images of all the coffins, stacked up on top of one another, that she stopped laughing and began preparing.

Friends who weren't too worried at the time observing her efforts speculated that she must be frightened.

"But I wasn't," she said to me. "I wasn't scared. I'm not afraid to die – what will be will be. If I catch it, I catch it."

I was not the first person that Claire had told this to. She had already told herself the same from 1987 to 1997 in the ten years that she was a nurse through the HIV/AIDs pandemic.

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With no small amount of irony, Claire tells me that she applied for a placement on the Genital Urinary Medicine (GUM) Clinic at Newham General Hospital in 1986 because people weren't dying there. Claire's training as a nurse had concluded in 1983 at Royal London, and she

was frustrated by what she saw. It was a time where managerial bureaucracy was beginning to stifle the effort of nurses who were already jumping through mandatory hoops to prove their professional competency – requirements that still live on in the NHS today in various forms. AIDS/HIV was slowly on the rise – doctors were returning from the United States and reporting that gay men were beginning to die of an unknown disease. At first, Claire's work at the clinic offered a welcome relief from the mounting frustration she had endured during her training, which was coupled with systematic sexism that prevented nurses from speaking up to the male doctors and from even having boyfriends. "The sisters were very strict!" Claire would tell me as she sketched out the restrictive atmosphere she worked and trained in.

When her training concluded, Claire worked part-time, and took up a programme at the University of East London. There was a balance between her work and her personal life. But there came that first wolf up the hill, low to the ground. In 1986, cases of HIV/AIDs began to appear in the UK and in London, government-run awareness campaigns began and testing became available. The atmosphere changed overnight, and the fear, says Claire, was comparable to the early days of COVID-19 in the UK. It was at this point Claire declined the invitation to return to Royal London, who were becoming quickly overwhelmed and applied to the Newham GUM clinic. Cases that came under the remit of Claire and her colleagues there weren't too significant, and – crucially – there was nothing that wasn't treatable.

But as the HIV/AIDs pandemic truly got underway, and patients began to arrive at the GUM clinic, this was to fade quickly. Claire and her colleagues were faced with a never-ending catastrophe. For the next ten years, Claire would watch many people die slowly. It drained her beyond belief. And as the bureaucracy tightened its grip on the hospital's operations, Claire – whose native language is French – was called upon constantly to translate for patients dying of HIV who were often refugees from Central Africa, having found a home in the Labour borough

of Newham. Day in and day out, Claire had to work twice as hard, communicating in French and English and trying to keep up with her own duties. She was the voice for those who were dying alone, far from home.

Her feelings on the enormity of what she faced are here in her own hand, written in 1996 as she rapidly approached the limits of her capacity:

Too much grief, not enough time to recover from the last death, too many problems accessing services, not enough energy to be heard adequately.....so the not enough have their share of the too much, the type that the care workers eventually find difficult to contend with, to address adequately, that leads to burn-outs or bring out to the fore the competition of do-gooders...

God I need a rest.

Claire, in 2020, puts it to me plainly in our first conversation:

"Who cares for the carers?"

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This sentiment resonates with us both as our interviews continue. In York, autumn arrives with more grey skies, and Claire returns to her flat in London. The sounds of gulls are replaced with sirens that go roaring by on the other end of the phone.

Claire tells me about how she had initially responded to the call for retired health practitioners to return to work as the NHS began to struggle, with the hope that she might help out with a tracing system that was similar to the work she did during her first pandemic. Explaining how she detailed all of her telephoning experience and previous work on the response form, Claire explains to me the complex feelings she had toward a potential return to nursing, so soon after her retirement:

"But then I thought: *why do I want to do it*? But when you are a nurse there is always this thing... you want to respond to crisis."

It was the bureaucracy that punctuated Claire's nursing career that held her back from returning, and was at the core of the burnout that was still with her nearly twenty years on. She backed out of the recall.

The mismanagement of the HIV/AIDs pandemic had forced Claire to think about her own limits, then and now. At the end of her time nursing during those difficult years, she had a postcard on her desk. It said: d*o your best and leave the rest*. It was to contextualise her exhaustive efforts in trying to do all she could for people who didn't stand a chance against both disease and systematic prejudice – whichever killed them first.

Claire had done her best, and in deciding not to come out of retirement during a second pandemic, had decided to leave the rest.

Do your best and leave the rest...I think you've given me the title for this piece just there.

"Oh, have I? Good!"

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That is not to say that Claire has been idle during the pandemic and varying stages of lockdown. If anything, *do your best and leave the rest* came to serve her actively once again in the months that were to follow.

Long before masks were mandated and even before lockdown itself, she was already hard at work with a sewing machine, making masks at home in her flat in Tower Hamlets that she shares with her daughter. ("I got very intimate very quickly with that sewing machine," she would tell me. "I even read the instruction booklet!") Hand-made hand gel followed swiftly after. As masks became more and more popular and demand rose, she was even able to sell a few. But before the demand came a lot of scepticism from friends, colleagues and other community members who simply didn't want to hear what she was trying to tell them – that something awful was coming, and that they should take measures now to help themselves and their loved ones.

Like a lot of the population in lockdown, Claire was fixated on the news. For the first six weeks, she drank in headlines and took on hours of research outside of the reporting from the typical news sources, forming her own opinions on a huge range of material. And those parts of her that still wanted to respond to the crisis did what they could – she tried to spread the word. As someone who was involved in a lot of different volunteering and community efforts, Claire was in a couple of Facebook community groups where various organisations discussed and planned group activities.

The thing about Claire is that she is the kind of person who, upon seeing a problem, addresses it. When everyone else is ignoring the elephant in the room, you can trust that Claire will be there, looking it in the eye. According to her, this has typically resulted in two scenarios: becoming the one who should fix the problem, or the one who is silenced.

"So many times in my life I have told myself, 'Claire...*shut up*...'"

In this case, it was the latter. In her groups, her posts on how masks reduced the spread of disease would either be deleted or would spark heated debates in the comments that declared she was talking rubbish. There came that wolf up the hill, and the village didn't want to listen to the woman who had seen the total human catastrophe the other wolf had caused before.

One thing that struck Claire in this was how very glad she is that there was no internet during the time of HIV/AIDs. The stigma that enabled the UK government to brand the crisis the "Gay Plague," given free reign on the internet? Unthinkable. But she also had some hopes for how the internet could bring thinkers, scientists and leaders together in this pandemic, and she talked a little about this during our numerous conversations on the topic.

"I also naively believed that the knowledge – because of the internet, when we didn't have it in the eighties – I really believed that scientists would get together and exchange their knowledge peacefully and rationally. But what I've witnessed is conflict of interest and money still speaking louder. When we talk about health, you would think doctors would really want to heal people...

but the powers of money speak louder -- it's always a bit disappointing when you come into nursing by wanting to help."

Well, no one goes into nursing for the money, I say without thinking.

There is a pause, and the pair of us burst into laughter.

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Claire would eventually leave those Facebook groups that didn't want to listen to her, and she stopped watching the news. She had done her best, and she would have to leave the rest – even if the rest was in some ways an ongoing frustration and a disappointment.

During this time and during early lockdown generally, Claire went out very little – every three to four days to start. In the midst of all the panic buying, Claire went about with a calm and clear head. She would tell me that she had used up all of her panic in the first pandemic and had simply run out of it for this one.

There was also plenty that Claire missed while in lockdown. She was enjoying lots of things in her retirement, going here, there and everywhere on various volunteering efforts or just to socialise with friends. Pottery classes, meditation – Claire had a lot going on, and missed it when lockdown put a stop to a lot of it. But one thing that she still managed to retain were her visits to the Bethnal Green Nature Reserve.

"Thank God," as Claire says herself. "I had the trees. I feel so bad for everyone who were stuck in tower flats or had no garden."

A little way from Claire's second floor flat across the junction is the Bethnal Green Nature Reserve. Once home to the gardens of the London elite and then a church that was bombed to ruins, it has been transformed into a private oasis of greenery and wildlife. Claire's descriptions of the reserve sketch a total oasis tucked away in an urban sprawl with the remnants of the church stood there still poking through the grass. She is one of the lucky few to have access to the Reserve through volunteering work.

Knowing the combination to the lock, in the first weeks of lockdown Claire was able to visit the Reserve on her trips home from the shops. Masked up and her hair in her turban, she would sit under the trees and find a moment of solitary peace before pushing on home.

Many ongoing projects at the Reserve were halted when lockdown hit; among them, growing trees for members of the public to adopt and take home with them in the summer months. It fell to Claire, who had volunteered with the Reserve previously, to water these trees in their pots. At first, it was only a couple of visits every two or three days, but as the months went on and the heatwave came, she was going every day. She still visits the reserve now, meeting a friend to go through some Tai Chi in that space.

Claire feels a little uneasy about being one of the few who have access to what amounts to a little patch of Eden in Bethnal Green and that others are kept out, but, in her own words, the Reserve was everything to her in lockdown – a space that held great importance for her and was safe from COVID, with access only granted to a few.

"It's a very strong place for me with this connection of impermanence, where it was a place of worship...and nature reclaimed it, and so on. It has a lot of significance for me, in that. I never would have gone so much if weren't for the pandemic. It was a chance to for me to be outside. You can sit outside, you can sit on the benches, knowing no one who has sat there has had COVID."

So it was a welcome reprieve? I ask.

"Oh, god, yes. A total present."

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Our chat about the Reserve was in our last session, and by that point, the connection Claire had felt with that green space during lockdown made total sense to me.

Over the course of my sessions with Claire, I had the privilege of getting to see some of the writing she had done over the most formative years

of her life. The writing that she did during the HIV/AIDs pandemic painted a picture of a young woman who was struggling to keep giving when she had nothing else left to give, and it made total sense that to *do your best and leave the rest* was a thought that Claire had connected with so readily.

The other piece of writing that Claire shared with me, also written in 1996, was from a writing group. The group had been tasked to think about who they would want with them when they died, and the instructor couldn't understand why Claire would want to die alone. Claire was not be dissuaded; furious at the thought that someone else could dictate how her own ideal death should go, she wrote it anyway:

Sunset – It is time to go....gazing towards the blue hills of the West, the sky is a crescendo of reds and golds. I am at Peace, appeased. I dismiss the last traces of sorrow for leaving this planet and with gladness turn within, deep within this old, soon to be useless shell. I have learnt to rise above the pain and those old bones will sure make a joyous flame. I will not miss them where I am going.

GOODBYE NOT ADIEU.

With the subject of our talks being the pandemic we were both experiencing, it was understandable that, as well as talking about Claire's experiences of two pandemics, we also talked about death. Claire has met death many times before in her work as a nurse, but is unafraid of it. Her spiritualist beliefs, which also deeply impacted her time as a nurse in the HIV/AIDs pandemic, say that death is a natural part of the cycle of reincarnation. It is only through reincarnation that one's soul can finally break the bonds of the material plane and fully ascend. But Claire does tell me that she would not like to die in pain, unable to breathe – and this is why, above all, she hopes she will not catch COVID. With winter coming, she is preparing herself for the difficult months ahead, stockpiling medicine she knows from experience might mitigate the worst of the symptoms.

When she says that, my pen stops on the page of my notebook. For me, in York, the experiences that Claire has walked me through click into place, and – even though we are two hundred miles apart – I feel like I can see Claire in the midst of all our words. I feel so blessed that we were paired.

Distantly, I hear seagulls.

God I need a rest. *I am at Peace, appeased.*

Do your best and leave the rest.

Don't you think it's strange that you pictured your perfect death as being under an open sky, and you're telling me now that you're most afraid of not being able to breathe? I ask.

For the first time, Claire pauses before she responds. She gasps.

"Yes. *Yes!*"

Home is Where Safety Meets Empathy

by Marta Guerreiro – an autobiographical piece

With loose hands and bare feet, my home is my altar. I have always been like this, I want candles and incense, I want blankets and time to clean the house, if I am being honest, a lot more often than necessary. I like the world outside, but I like the world in here much more.

Being restricted to my altar did not bother me. I was clearly concerned with the world outside, but in no way frightened that my home was now an obligation. I always saw it as a universe, more than a prison.

A dog, two dogs, three dogs, my wife, one of my best friends, her twelve-year-old sister who moved to this altar in the middle of the lockdown and my fourteen-year-old sister, who lives with me and is almost a daughter. Our kitchen has a yellow wall, the living room doesn't look so big with our massive TV, the sofa is not too small or too big, just the perfect size for our Netflix marathons. My home, our home, has this cool silence, the inherent feeling of acceptance, and it always smells like incense burning. Suddenly, the incense was insufficient, the candles burned faster, the noise came from all the compartments and, although it took me a while, I realized that home used to be a universe to me because there were so many moments that belonged only to me.

Being and existing, socializing and communicating, are things that I like to do… but moderately. I like "not doing" more than "doing." The hands started to feel tense and the feet were dressed more often than bare. The television on, the obligation of lunches and dinners, the loud music, the bodies and the lack of space, *sigh*, I did not remember that there were so many of us. When did we become so many? As a joke I constantly said to them: have we all always lived here? I don't remember there being this many people.

Lockdown had this particularity: all the people who live with me had adapted to a rhythm in the outside world and suffered greatly when they were stopped from doing it. As for me, I had already spent my days at home, so I wouldn't have expected to go through a period of adaptation, but I did. My silence ceased to exist and now the house seemed a little less mine.

I have believed all my life that we are driven by the need and ability to adjust. I have believed all my life that we are moved by the balance between emotion and reason, and I knew, as soon as I realized that with Covid there was also a possible decline in my mental health, that I had to change, *I had to change*.

All my routines were rethought. Silent mornings did not exist, so I decided to wake up earlier, every day. A cigarette and a coffee. I ordered lounge chairs for the garden, and after a coffee and a cigarette, I lay down in the garden every day. As the hours passed, other inhabitants of the house gradually joined me. From my chair I could see faces that had not yet been washed saying good morning. My morning began even earlier, as it gave me time to exist independently, so, when the faces I love so much appeared, I already had strength, I already had time to fill myself with self-love, with joy taken from alone-time, and then prepare to divide myself into sounds and activities that had not been part of my routine until then.

Since the beginning of the pandemic I have maintained that Covid would drastically affect those who become infected and those without emotional help. The virus came to deliver us a true blow to the stomach. It would be very audacious to compare the non-poetic deaths that the virus brought with it with the ills that remain in those who do not die, in those who do not even catch the virus. Depressions, anxiety and paranoias. Nevertheless, I was worried about that. I still am. Perhaps because of my way of seeing the whole picture, I tried to focus on self-care as much as possible; otherwise, I would see years of work on my depression being interrupted.

After a month the noise became like a new home: the movement, the agitation and the new routines were already running in my blood and were

already associated with this idea of my house being an altar. After a month, I yearned for every face of these people I love. At the end of the month, mornings were full of the girls' homework: math, science, art. The routine was multiple, and the rule remained, as always – whenever someone needs space alone, they could say. Personal space has to be respected. If one was tired of a school subject or had a different idea on how to teach it, we would say, or we would ask any other person to keep doing whatever we were doing. There were moments where I couldn't handle any more religion studies, so I would ask my wife to take over. There were moments where learning about climate change through massive amount of text wasn't fun anymore, so the girls would ask to watch a documentary instead. We went on like this, all of us, on the basis of respect and the joy of being well and healthy -- that was the gift. That is the gift.

I never clung to a utopian idea that people would start to make the world a more beautiful place after all this. Emotional intelligence is not aroused that fast, even during a pandemic. I readjusted my routine, made a bed with self-love blankets and early mornings, but I was not protecting myself from the impact of what was happening outside my door. George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. So, we made posters but told the girls that they could not go due to the virus. But my sister said that if her place was not in the fight for Black Lives Matter then she did not understand everything I was teaching her. So, here too, we ended up going together. I left the altar, we took the posters, we put on masks, we held hands with the girls, and we went, and we shouted. It was one of the few times that we went beyond the portal that is the paradise of our home for a period of four months. We had to. Because of the pain, the injustice, and the need to add our voices.

I never clung to a utopian idea that people would start to make the world a more beautiful place. I managed to change my routines, I managed to love the noise that previously interrupted my desire to be alone, I managed to love a house so full every day, but I was not protected from the sadness of seeing a society collapsing due to health issues, accentuating what is already

known: the pandemic is Covid's fault but racism, inequality, the lack of health support for minorities and those in countries exploited by economic powers, are not Covid's fault. They are people's fault – not everyone, but many.

Having left home to go to the protests didn't bring any joy; we weren't happier because we had the chance to make some contact with the outside world. What I took from it was that in a moment of extreme importance to protect ourselves, we had to leave, we had to ignore "safety comes first," so we could make a statement: it is not because we are inside that we will not go outside if needed. However, the home we were building based on mutual respect and the need to adjust and adapt to the other seemed far from a reflection of the world. This home was and still is ours, and we embrace the feeling of being protected without forgetting that we cannot protect ourselves if we are not willing to protect others.

Here at home, we go on our way, hand in hand and bare feet, ready to adjust to each other, but also ready to leave the warm altar when political dictatorship makes itself visible, when it emerges and is even more explicit than in a world where we are all the same, but some are more equal than others. I can let the incense stop burning, maybe there are not enough candles for a lockdown and yes, the noise wasn't always welcomed, but I can proudly say that regardless of how many times I need to readjust myself, I will always do it for love, justice and equality. Holding hands with the ones I love, we turned our home into a castle, where wars weren't welcome, but there was plenty of space to let empathy and safety grow.

A Phone Call Away

by Imogen Ince – an autobiographical piece

My sister and I used to play a game, if you could call it that; we'd count the number of planes that would slice up our little piece of sky and, if we stayed up late enough, spot a satellite in the dark. I'd been jolted into this memory at random, having spent the afternoon lying, cat-like in the sun, and staring up into an empty sky. It turned out that most flights were cancelled and new government measures to stay home meant our rat-run road had also come to a halt. The neighbourhood was quiet for the first time I could remember.

"It's so nice to have you home," my mother declared in between tanning sessions, rolling over on the grass to get a good look at me, as if she couldn't believe I'd return. I knew what she meant, though; "I'm glad at least one of you is safe."

I perched next to her and picked at the long-dead ground and asked if she'd put on any sun cream, even though I knew she hadn't.

"You don't need to worry about me, my skin's tough as old boots!"

I still ran inside and found the bottle from whatever kitchen cabinet she'd hidden it last, staring her down until she caved. That was our routine, and routines were more important than ever.

July pooled around us, hot and slow and honey-like. It was a long month, each hour melting into the next, the days blurring together – of course, tensions ran high.

"What a family of hypochondriacs!" (This came after my father had locked himself in the living room, certain he was running a fever.) "It's 34 degrees, of course he feels hot."

There was nothing to be said that would convince him he wasn't sick; no amount of reasoning could persuade him. It was common knowledge that

my father spooked easily, lovingly nurtured every phantom ache and pain, and so routine became ritual – with each day came a new diagnosis. One such diagnosis had been bequeathed upon me as I left for my first day of secondary school. I had caught mumps, apparently, my face too swollen to be normal. The word he used was 'jowly'.

"That's just puppy fat," my mother countered. "Let her go to school."

That evening he had me cornered and warned of the dangers of obesity: Greater risk of strokes, greater risk of heart disease, greater risk of diabetes, greater risk of liver cancer, pancreatic cancer, breast cancer. I grew less and less sympathetic to his 'spooking' as time went on.

University meant newfound independence, so it was unsettling to be, yet again, surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of my childhood. The pair of size two tap shoes, a diary from 2008 kept only for the summer, photos and their respective albums – these belonged to someone else. And so, I found myself bitter, resentful, that I was trapped back in a house that wasn't mine, in a town on the cusp of the Capital, so close yet so far. My parents had moved away from London to raise a family, but I could tell my mum missed the relentlessness of city life, the freedoms and creativity it had afforded her. It seemed we'd both outgrown Essex.

"At least we're giving the neighbours something to watch," I said to my mother after a particularly loud argument, topped off with the accusation of attempted patricide, a slam of the front door and my father's car pulling out of the driveway. How very Shakespearean, I thought. In any case, someone's finding this entertaining.

It was around dawn when I felt the mattress dip under someone else's weight. My mother's rough hand brushed coaxingly against my face before ripping the duvet off me like a plaster, a technique she'd mastered from years of juggling two obstinate kids.

"Up. Up! You're coming with me."

Bleary-eyed, I began to recognise the path she was taking me down, which ran past the cemetery and now-abandoned pub and through the nearby

woods. The emerging sunlight began to filter through the leaves, scattering shadows onto the craggy ground. I grumbled for the most part, kicking the crumpled beer cans and dirt along the way.

We continued through the trail at a marching speed, my mother's mind set on some unknown final destination. Trudging farther and farther off the beaten track, we clung to unearthed roots as we made our way down the steep hillside.

Hands dirty, eyes bright, my mother came to an abrupt halt and threw her arms out.

"Tada!"

The land in front of us dipped; a large pond lay nestled into the hollow. The water was perfectly clear and still. Tranquillity made a nice change. The islands dotted within the pond's centre were guarded by a number of geese, settled in amongst the reeds; however, it was the flowers that were most noticeable, rows upon rows, upon rows of bluebells, climbing down the surrounding hills.

"How did you find this?"

"I used to take you and your sister here during the summer holidays. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"The – the flowers? If they're trampled, they can take years to recover. That's if their leaves aren't crushed – they'll die if that's the case."

They were already dying, I noted. It was early July, but July all the same, and the fog of purple was rotting at its edges, furling in on itself the way paper ripples when alight. They bowed further and further under their own weight until those that skirted the dirt path had all but shrivelled up.

"When I die, I'd like to be scattered here."

Abrupt shock turned to abject horror. I couldn't help myself. Here? Just a few miles from the town she so despised? The same place she had spent, trapped, for nearly thirty years

"You're going to make me come back *here* when you're gone?"

She laughed and peered at her reflection in the water, toes hanging over the edge.

"That's the point!

--

That evening my sister called. Wished us well, demanded we send her photos of the cats. I could see her perfectly in my mind's eye, exhausted from work and slumped against the red brick of the hospital, coffee in hand.

"It's in chaos in there," she said. "And the roads in Belfast are a mess. You'd hate it, mum."

Pregnant pause.

"If it's alright with you guys, I was thinking I could come home? Just for the weekend."

Before anyone had a chance to object, my mother jumped in.

"Of course, lovely. There'll always be space for you here."

A heavy sigh of relief.

"Thanks, guys. I'll check the flights tomorrow, see when I can get back." She groans. "My break's over. Talk soon."

Something strange happened then. The sudden urge that, before she hung up, I had to tell her. Share that memory I know she'd forgotten too – share that game we had spent hours playing as children, before she'd left, before I had, too, when our worlds seemed so much smaller, safer even and everything was so simple. I'd tell her I'll watch out for her, stare at the sun if I had to. I took a breath, about to speak. The line went dead.

A Story for Peggy

for Peggy Metaxas, by Nacima Khan

"Hello?" The phone clicked quietly as Peggy's clear voice echoed through the line.

"Hello?"

It was never a formal nor distanced hello, but one which always opened up a door into Peggy's home, one which invited you in for a cup of tea, one which made you stop and take a deep breath as the humdrum of life seemed to come to a halt in those few moments of opening up a conversation.

"I am so afraid. But we have to do what needs to be done."

The lockdown had hit in March of 2020 and Peggy had become resigned to life within her home. Unable to leave the house, with fear of a virus which, at the age of 95, meant she might not be able to fight it off, she was scared to face the outside world. But Peggy's outlook on the whole pandemic from within her home is what struck me the most in our conversations.

"Well you just get on with it. I spend my time deciding what to cook, looking through my recipe books and seeing what ingredients I have. I tend the garden as much as I can. I have two cats to take care of. I keep myself busy."

Peggy takes me through a journey into her home and there I imagine myself to be, every time we speak:

The front door opens and Peggy looks out with a smile. Blue eyes shining in a face framed by dark hair as she leans against a walking frame ordered under the insistence of her daughter, from Toronto.

"I don't like to rely on other people. I am quite independent when I can be."

Continuing on into the small hallway, the colour blue is dominant as it reflects throughout the décor.

"I like the colour blue, and I like my things."

She chuckles as she tells me this unapologetically. Books and trinkets line the shelves and any other open space. China plates are framed on the walls, sketched with blue paint as they depict various patterns and scenery. For the first time, I hear a sense of hesitation in her voice as she reflects on her possessions.

"Perhaps I have too many things and should get rid of them."

But then as if having settled the matter already to herself: "No…they are my things and I like having them."

A phone hangs on the wall in the hallway. This has been the connection to Toronto – a life that once was and still is being lived through her two children who now reside there. "They would like me to go back, but I am not sure." Peggy lost her husband, George, twenty years ago, when he became ill. They moved to Canada with their children to live a life which was comfortable and quaint, until Peggy decided to move back to London after George passed away when they were still living in Toronto. The mention of George sparks youthfulness in her voice.

"He always made me a cup of tea and would bring it to me in bed. That was every night without fail. And it was lovely and that was George. He always thought about you. I do miss that."

I follow Peggy's voice as she imagines George sitting at the kitchen table reading the *Telegraph*, with his hazel eyes perusing the words of a language that was never his mother tongue. Years of hard work had made his English vocabulary perfect, while it interlaced with his Greek accent; it had been a journey that began from the moment he met Peggy working at the Greek Embassy.

"This would all have been so much better if he was here."

Peggy spots a picture of Yorkshire and remembers how it was one of the places she had planned to see with George when they had returned to the UK from Toronto.

"But he never got to see this flat in London. George passed away."

I imagine her shrugging her shoulders as she accepts life for what it is now.

"I don't get sad about things like that. I am quite sensible in that way."

The smell of spices cooking from the neighbouring homes is a stark reminder of where Peggy lives. A heavily populated area, mostly by Bangladeshi families, it's a world away from the busy city of Toronto where Peggy lived for many years, and the common east London accent is a contrast to her accent as Peggy speaks.

"It's lovely where I am. I am blessed with the neighbours that I have."

There is a knock on the door. Another George, who lives upstairs, has come to do his daily check-in to see how Peggy is. He was the first on call when Peggy had a sudden fall. Something she told me in our calls, but not to her own children.

"They will only worry."

I can't help but think of Peggy's George who no doubt would have done the same for anyone else.

"My George would have been the first to lend a hand if you needed help."

I can see Peggy's George standing in the doorway, handsome, with a greying beard and hair that still curled ever so slightly as he nodded to the neighbours. Peggy sees him too, but she remembers the 23 year-old George decked out in a naval uniform as he walked into the Embassy for the first time.

Peggy laughs now:

"He didn't change my life – I changed his."

As she looks out into her small garden, Peggy's voice is laced with vulnerability as she reflects.

"I wish I could get someone to clean up the garden for me. I don't know who to ask."

I see the fruit trees blossoming through the sunlight as the lockdown creeps into spring and then summer, with a sigh from Peggy wondering how she can reach for the highest apples, resigned to collecting what she can. I see

the leaves being blown off their branches as autumn runs through the garden leaving behind an orange and brown trail of a mess with Peggy only now venturing to the door to look out for her cats.

"I've kind of adopted them."

These particular cats seem to have chosen Peggy's kindness to keep them fed and warm when the cold hits and when they need somewhere to call home.

"Do you fear the unknown?"

Peggy chuckles at this question.

"I was a child who went through the Second World War."

I am hurtled through a snapshot of a young girl having to suddenly move schools, live with another family in the countryside, reveling first in the adrenaline of this change which then shifted to a constant fear of German bombs and not knowing when life would go back to normal.

"I *was* afraid. But you do what needs to be done."

In my mind's eye, I see Peggy poring over her recipe books as she talks me through what she will cook that day. Nestled between her books is a copy of her very own recipe book – something which her children had put together. This is where I see Peggy the most animated as she describes the simplicity of cooking delicious and wholesome dishes.

"You just need to roast chicken with herbs and butter, and some vegetables, like broccoli, on the side if you like. It is so simple but lovely."

I think about the complicated dishes of spiced meat and vegetable curries which have often been offered to Peggy from her Bengali neighbours.

"They're much too spicy for me."

But out of politeness, Peggy never refuses the food parcels that sometimes get sent to her door, though they often stay untouched and unopened.

She takes me through the set up on the kitchen table. It is always dressed with a tablecloth; today a white and blue one. A plate is laid carefully with cutlery on either side, with a napkin. Here, Peggy teaches me the importance of taking care of the little things.

"Set up the table for the morning so you don't have to think about what to do."

I imagine Peggy walking into her living room and sitting in her armchair as she looks down at her slippers hiding the toenails which have become too overgrown for her liking but much too hard for her to reach down and trim herself.

"It's all getting to me now. But I don't like to ask for help."

Peggy looks at the clock and realizes the time.

"For lunch I think I shall have a cheese toasty. It's very simple, just butter the slices of bread and grate some cheese inside and fry in a pan. Yes, that is what I will have for my lunch."

I hear her smile and a heartfelt wish for me in one simple word as the door to Peggy's life closes once again.

"Goodbye then."

The phone clicks once again and I am engulfed in sudden silence.

Lockdown in Newham, West Ham and William the Cat

for Eileen Wade, by Catriona West

Eileen's initial response to the coronavirus was that it was something happening in a far-away place, on the other side of the world, that would never be a problem here. In general, Eileen is not a worrier, and indeed she refused to worry about the virus either, even when it did reach Newham, where she lives, given that she is in reasonably good health. Her family jokingly call her "Dr Eileen" and say that whenever someone is feeling under the weather, she gives them a prescription of an early night. In fact, her youngest son was more worried about her than she was, warning her against even going out to her local shop. Eileen thought he'd be reassured knowing that she was still managing to get outside instead of sitting inside on her own all day, but he would nag her about the risks, and she had to remind him that she was the mum, not him, and that he couldn't tell her what to do. Eileen confirmed that they had found a compromise: she stopped telling him where she'd been so that he couldn't worry. Her son lives with his wife and children, but for Eileen, who lives on her own, it's more of a necessity to get out of the house. Eileen knew two people who caught Covid in the first wave, who fortunately both recovered quickly.

During the lockdown, Eileen was determined to keep busy. She continued with her hobbies of knitting and sewing, creating handbags in her living room. When her friend gifted her some lavender, she made fifty lavender bags and donated them to the local community centre. Eileen enjoyed keeping busy and was glad to have finished some projects, as she is often one to start something and then begin something new before finishing it. She is fortunate to have a small garden and, when the weather was good, would spend time

outside painting and decorating. Eileen was not completely isolated from the outside world, either, as she has a laptop that her son bought for her a couple of years ago. Despite immediately putting it in the cupboard and not using it when she first got it, Eileen learnt how to use her email account and, when the lockdown began, carried on with her guitar lessons on Zoom. She jokes that she doesn't know which she is worse at, Zoom or the guitar.

When it was allowed, Eileen would meet two local friends twice a week to go for a walk around the park. One of her friends had a smart watch, and they would try to reach 10,000 steps on their walks and see how many calories they'd burned so that they could then go home and have a slice of cake. Occasionally, the three ladies would venture into Central London, where it was completely empty and deserted, as there were no tourists or people going to work. She said you could almost imagine the tumbleweed blowing down the empty streets. As much as she enjoys going out and seeing her friends, Eileen also doesn't mind her own company, and will read in bed when she wakes up and before she goes to sleep. She's a "bit of a history geek", and enjoys books set in the time of the Vikings or the Roman Empire.

It's important for the elderly and those living alone to get out of the house, Eileen says, and she thinks it's sad that the lockdown caused a lot of elderly people to lose their nerve a little bit, as being alone inside for long periods of time is when depression and anxiety can set in. The new rules surrounding the use of masks and hand sanitiser in public places creates anxiety for elderly people, she thinks, and has caused drastic change to their everyday routines. A lot of people in her local community were also dependent on the clubs and organisations that they were a member of in order to get outside and socialise, leaving them feeling cut off and alienated when these had to be put on hold.

However, Eileen also remembers a real sense of community spirit during the lockdown. She says a few of her friends received phone calls from the local council asking how they were and if they needed anything (such as food, or for someone to pick up a prescription for them). She also remembers that people would stop elderly people in the street or in the shops to ask if

they were okay or if they needed anything. Fortunately, Eileen lives very close to her local amenities and everything she needed was a short walk away, so she didn't even have to use public transport during the early stages of the lockdown. She would go to her local Iceland for her food shopping, and her youngest son, who also lives in London, would come by and drop off the items that she couldn't get nearby. Eileen even wrote a thank-you card to express her gratitude for the staff at Iceland who kept working through the pandemic. A couple of weeks later, when talking to a member of staff at the till, she was chuffed to find out that they'd posted her card up on the wall in the staff room. One of Eileen's granddaughters also made her a rainbow to put in the window to support the NHS staff and keyworkers.

Eileen is an avid West Ham supporter, and she and her son are both season ticket holders. Due to reduced crowds, all of the season ticketholders were put into a ballot to see if they could be one of the 2000 people allowed back into the stadium after lockdown, and although Eileen hasn't been picked yet, she would love to go if she has the chance. Eileen has been a member of Any Old Irons, a community group for West Ham's over 60s supporters, ever since it started up in 2015. She misses being able to meet at the pub with this group, as she's made very good friends with her fellow members. One member used to be a choir master and started a choir group for Any Old Irons, which Eileen joined, and they would sing old Cup Final anthems. They were going to sing at London Stadium, too, but then the pandemic hit. Over lockdown, the organisation still sent out its newsletters, and everyone living on their own received phone calls to check they were okay. Eileen herself delivered groceries to a friend from Any Old Irons who was living on his own and having to self-isolate, and she notes that men living on their own who have recently lost their wives might struggle the most because they're not used to being so independent. Every member received a letter from West Ham player Declan Rice, as well as the captain Mark Noble, during the lockdown, to check in on them and wish them well. West Ham manager David Moyes also phoned one of Eileen's friends in Any Old Irons, as she had caught Covid

and recovered, to offer her free tickets to the next game that would allow spectators, and this encounter was made into an article for the *Daily Mail*.

Eileen's "lockdown hero" has been her ginger cat, William, whom she got from a rescue centre two years ago. Eileen is petrified of mice – she says she's exactly like the women in films who stand on a chair and scream whenever they see one – and she was having trouble getting rid of the mice in her house. The final straw was one night when she was sitting in bed reading and a mouse came and ran across the headboard behind her head. That's it, she thought, I'm getting a cat. Although Eileen has always had cats, her last one before William died ten years ago, so it had been a little while since she'd had one in the house. Eileen got William from the Celia Hammond Animal Trust, founded by model Celia Hammond, who campaigns against using fur and for the neutering of feral cats. William seemed very sad when she went to the shelter to pick out a cat, which is why she decided she would have to bring him home, even though he is a ginger tom and she has always had tabbies. He's very timid around her grandchildren, and hides under the bed whenever they come round, not liking to be picked up. Her grandchildren also call him fat, but Eileen insists he's just fluffy. William has a bit of a rough past, as part of his left ear is missing, and when he was taken to the shelter the vets found that he had an air rifle pellet in him where someone had shot him. Eileen jokes that he's a real East End cat, because "he's got an ear missing and he's been shot".

During lockdown, William was such a blessing to Eileen, as he was there every day to keep her company. She says that every time she opens the door into the house, he comes down the stairs to see her, and the sight of his little face looking up at her always makes her smile. When she was decorating in the garden during lockdown, he would come out and sit with her, or sunbathe on the roof of the shed. Eileen talks to him so much that her sons joke that one day he'll make his way back to the shelter just for some peace and quiet. In fact, Eileen wrote a letter to the shelter and gave a donation to the Celia Hammond trust during the lockdown, telling them how much of a difference William has made in her life. She also jokes that "William is an

ideal man because if he's getting on my nerves, I only have to open the door and put him outside". A couple of years ago, whilst on holiday, Eileen bought a sign to put in her front window at home that says: "Stop here for the best ginger cat in the world". And, of course, he catches all the mice for her.

In reflection on the lockdown and the pandemic, Eileen feels as though she can't really afford to lose a year, as she doesn't know how many she has left. Although she's since been able to see her grandchildren who live close to her in the park, where they feed the squirrels ("They come right up now and take the nuts out of their hands"), Eileen misses not being able to spend as much time with her other grandchildren, who live further away. Her eldest granddaughter, Hannah, enjoys singing and dancing, and when she and her brother would visit Eileen before Covid, Eileen would get the disco ball and karaoke machine out for them to have a sing and a dance. Eileen teaches Hannah traditional dances such as line dancing, and Hannah tries to teach Eileen trendy dancing like the floss, but Eileen isn't as good at that particular move ("You're rubbish, nan").

In terms of the government's response to the virus, Eileen agrees that they perhaps haven't done as well as they should have, but makes the point that it's difficult for anyone in charge to make decisions in such a time, given that it's a completely new situation and it would be hard for anyone not to make mistakes. She also feels as though the gratitude that people had for key workers and for the NHS during the first lockdown has already slipped, which she says is human nature, as people are always quick to forget how lucky they are and find something to complain about again.

The most positive things that arose out of the lockdown for Eileen were that she saved money as a result of not being able to go anywhere to spend it and, more important, she realised how much pleasure she took out of the little things in life, like sitting in the park for a coffee with friends. When it's safer to do so, Eileen looks forward to spending more time with her grandchildren and taking a trip to the seaside.

Lockdown Stories

by Elif Soyler – an autobiographical piece

Right before lockdown, I heard an old song for the first time. It was Carole King's *Bitter with the Sweet* from *Rhymes and Reasons*, released in 1972. Those last few days were tentatively spent wandering around the emptying streets of Norwich. I admired the last of the magnolia blossom and picnicked at the viewing point in the north of the city. From up there you can see the cathedrals, the castle, the town hall, the newly built student accommodation, now quiet and hollow, and the Norfolk landscape laying low for miles in every direction.

It was my second year studying English lit and creative writing at the UEA, barely six months out of the perpetual chaos and euphoria of life in halls. I found myself in a suddenly bare house, my friends all home safe with their families. I wandered around eating their hastily abandoned fruit, brown bananas and bruised apples, and I made piles of books to take home on my bedroom floor. The house was on a very quiet street on the edge of Unthank Road and if it had not been for Carole's voice floating through the thin walls and filling the vacant rooms, I would have felt lonely.

Sometimes I'm tired and I wonder
What's so all-fired important
About being someplace at some time
Woah, but I don't really mind
'Cause I could be on Easy Street
And I know that
You've got to take the bitter with the sweet

The week before, I had been bundled into a car by my housemates and driven to the nearest beach. We spent hours there, just escaping. I had been crying a little, all day. When I found a patch of good phone reception in the car park I called my mum and begged her for answers on what was going to happen next. She had nothing to say.

But, I had a sinking feeling that soon, my parents would want me home.

The night of the Prime Minister's first major announcement, I sat cross legged on the floor near my window, clutching a glass of wine. A text from Mum said;

"Might be coming to get you tonight instead of tomorrow. Be prepared."

I looked at Ardin, my boyfriend, and he tried to smile. The morning after, my mother's car was parked outside and she helped me load up any remaining food I had left, my beloved houseplants, my record player and a small suitcase of clothes.

Like a lot of people, I hoped I would be back to normal after Easter.

On the hour and a half journey back, I held his hand in the back seat. We're long-distance, since he lives and works in London. Before the pandemic, we spent many weekends travelling back and forth for each other. The train tracks run past Ilford, Forest Gate, Stratford, before reaching Liverpool Street. On my covert missions to visit him I would shrink back, away from the window seat, worrying needlessly, that some unknown stranger, neighbour, or family member would get a glimpse of my guilty face as the train hurtled past. My dad rang the carphone as we reached the Redbridge roundabout at the edge of the city border and I let out a "Hello! We'll be home in ten." The words leave my lips in Turkish, laced with fake cheer. Ardin squeezed my hand tighter.

My dad doesn't know about Ardin. I'm not sure if I'll ever tell the truth. University life allowed me an escape from his staggeringly high expectations and strict, devout lifestyle. It was complicated and it still is now. Although my mum is English, and a stubborn atheist, my brother and I were raised to be committed Muslims. This duality in my home life was confusing as a child;

during primary school other Muslim kids teased me and accused me of lying to fit in. It was frustrating as a teenager; I wanted to go to house parties and taste alcohol and kiss people but, I was faced with an early curfew and harsh punishments. It was terrifying as a near-adult; but I had nowhere else to go. I am still trying to make peace with never really belonging in one place.

We dropped Ardin off at Redbridge station. I got out to say goodbye properly but he wouldn't kiss me while my mum watched us in the wing mirror. I held him for a minute and then watched him disappear into the Underground, heading West. It would be three long months before I saw him again.

In some ways, it was nice to be back home. I felt content while I was on Easter break, my studies had paused for a few weeks. Those final assignments loomed on the horizon, but still slightly out of view. I poured energy into new writing ventures, starting an Instagram account for my poetry and pondering questions and ideas for the dissertation I would write in the autumn. The weather was glorious: it was almost as if the sun had decided to shine brighter when no one could come out to enjoy it. Spiteful. However, I was one of the lucky ones, living in a house with a garden, with green grass and a leaning willow tree, where there was ample room for all four of us plus our cat to breathe the fresh air. In the evenings, I retreated to my bedroom, still painted repulsive shades of pink and purple that I picked out when I was fifteen, and I would video-call Ardin. We whispered each other to sleep for weeks on end.

My brother, Emin, was just turning fourteen, thrilled to be missing school and able to play video games to his heart's content at all hours of the day. It was a chore to peel him off the sofa and take him outside. My home is near an entrance to Wanstead Park; I know that lake so well I could do the hour's walk on its banks on tiptoes, with my eyes closed.

Everything was bursting with bright green life, the surface of the water was coated in pondweed, the ducks and geese left swirling trails of disturbed water as they circled around. On warmer days, terrapins would sunbathe on half-submerged logs.

We rarely saw other families together, mainly a few like-minded locals, fellow worshippers of the lake. I wished and wished we had a dog but my dad would never agree to it. So we just walked him every day instead.

Quickly, April was over, May was underway, and then it was the holy month of Ramadan and I was staying up until three in the morning to force down soggy Weetabix chunks as the light of dawn collected in the kitchen. My father, brother and I would then finally go to sleep, and not even be able to brush our teeth in the morning when the day began. The evening meal, Iftar, became the real highlight of every day. I remember leaning out of my bedroom window to take blurry, poorly-angled photos of a mediocre sunset for most nights and then rushing downstairs to devour my dinner as soon as the sun disappeared.

At the same time, the remains of my second term were happening virtually. Some tutors required students to keep their cameras and microphones switched off throughout seminars to improve internet connection. Those two-hour sessions made me feel empty and increasingly numb.

I hadn't ever imagined that I would be debating literary concepts through a tiny chatbox, ignoring the typos (and there were many), trying to squeeze in a response to a question before it was lost in the forsaken chat feed. It did not feel worthy of nine thousand pounds a year.

Other tutors, seemingly quite chipper and cheerful, couldn't understand at all why so many students let their resounding silence behind the black screen speak for them, every time they asked to see some faces.

The weeks had become months yet every day, I felt the same. I felt tired of being tired, I felt bored of being bored, I felt guilty about all the self-pity, and I missed my freedom so much.

I guess it gets to everyone
You think you're not having any fun
And you wonder what you're doing
Playing the games you play

Hey, well, it's true what they say
If you wanna feel complete
Don't you know that
You've got to take the bitter with the sweet

It was a Wednesday night on the third week of fasting, at the witching hour. I could hear Emin getting out of bed in the room next door; he was always the last to get up so I knew I was almost out of time to eat. I was close behind him, coming down the stairs.

"Do you have to stomp like that, Elif? BANG! BANG! BANG!"

"Oh shut up, Emin, you're one to talk, I mean, shout!"

"Well, it doesn't matter now that you probably woke Mum up with your rhinoceros feet!"

"Oi! Calm down."

"Stop laughing!"

"Hey, hey, what is going on here? Be quiet, your mum is asleep."

It was my dad, on the top step. The three of us stood frozen, in the darkness, listening for the familiar snore and sure enough, he was right, Mum was deep in her dreams. We descended the rest of the stairs and turned on the kitchen light.

Our eyes adjusted slowly; my dad took a step towards the fridge, blindly searching for the milk. Emin was still blinking with annoyance under the light, a packet of chocolate cereal in his left hand.

I saw her first. I did a double take and then realised she wasn't breathing or blinking or basking by her food bowl. I let out a cry and turned away. Emin's eyes flashed to where I pointed but he couldn't believe it, he rushed to where she lay and shook her. She was still warm and soft, her limbs flopped about. Her face and whiskers were wet with dribble that had oozed out of her slack face.

She trembled in his arms as he cried.

She wasn't an old cat, just past twelve years.

Emin can't remember life without her.

A friend of mine once told me
And I know he knows all about feelin' down
He said everything good in life
You've got to pay for
But feelin' good is what you're paving the way for

She was named Cilla. She was black and white and according to my mother, it just fit.

She was greedy and spoiled and a little overweight, fond of sitting next to whoever was in the armchair but, a notoriously silent and deadly farter. She had a knack for catching bumblebees in the garden during summer. She didn't like being picked up and carried like a baby, never biting or hissing, just squirming in your arms until you relented and let her go. When we came home from work or school or Wanstead Park, she would snake between our legs and gaze with green eyes up at us, wondering if it was dinner time yet.

Anyone who had a heart would have loved her immensely.

You've got to take the bitter with the sweet
You've got to take, you've got to take, you've got to take
The bitter with the sweet
The bitter with the sweet, sweet, sweet, woah, sweet

The next morning was the beginning of the hottest day of the year so far. None of us had slept. It was quarter to nine and still, lockdown hung over the street. All the neighbours' cars were in the driveways, no one was going to work, or school or anywhere other than there.

We set off, all together, in the direction of Wanstead Park, Emin carried in his arms a bundle wrapped in a white pillowcase.

We buried her hurriedly. My dad's hands slipped off the handle on the shovel several times, the sweat collecting between his fingers like water in cupped hands.

I stood with Emin a little way away, my hand on his shoulder.

When we returned, we all went to bed, and slept for twelve hours. The smell of food and the call to prayer were what woke me. Mum had made macaroni cheese: Emin's favourite.

You've got to take the bitter with the sweet
You've got to take, you've got to take, you've got to take
The bitter with the sweet
The bitter with the sweet, sweet, sweet,
woah, sweet

The Shape Our Hands Might Be Making

by Rowena Price – an autobiographical piece

MARCH (GLOUCESTERSHIRE)

The garden of my family home is graced with new growth: pale green shoots of daffodils and anemones. Last night the government told us that we can enjoy these green outdoor things on our own or with one other person, but only if they're far away enough that I'll have to put on my glasses to tell what facial expressions they're making. There are plenty of green things in the West Country, though, so I'm thankful for that.

I leave my boyfriend's birthday cake on my doorstep, the first day that seeing him is illegal. He walks through the fields and up the hill to pick it up and stands three strides up the drive while I shout *happy birthday* from the doorstep. I have a very strong urge to make a stupid, obvious joke about Boris Johnson and the MI5 watching us with binoculars behind the neighbour's hedge.

Thanks. I wish I could hug you.

Me too. I don't know what to do with my arms. I stretch them out across the steps towards him, feigning desperation.

Keep your arms and legs inside the household at all times, Madam.

I laugh, but not properly. *Yeah, yeah, good one.*

At this point imagining a hug being against the law is pretty funny, but it doesn't stay funny for very long. I start talking about the cake because I know my Mum can hear everything from the kitchen where she is making her breakfast porridge and also this is much more stilted an interaction than I imagined it would be. I thought it would be vaguely tragic in a heart-warming, cinematic kind of way, but actually it has made me realise how weird it is not being able to touch the people you love when you say hello and goodbye and

all the time in between. Even if you've known them for a long time and by all accounts it should otherwise be normal. But I can't imagine this ever feeling normal.

Anyway, um, the cake is the same as last year, kind of, but I left the sugar out of the whipped cream because d'you remember it was that weird American recipe and way too sweet?

It is vanilla sponge and whipped cream and jam, a fractal of sliced summer fruits pushed into the top. I have started making origami, too, not very well but with a nice purpose in mind, because birthday presents are expensive and my last-minute coach ticket home from uni was fifty quid. I have made him some wonky paper cranes in varying colours of the rainbow, descending round a circular loop of bent coat hanger. It is meant to be a mobile but frankly it is a bit shit and maybe quite a childish gift for your boyfriend who is turning twenty.

Yeah, I remember. It looks amazing, thank you.

He is standing like someone who really doesn't want their photograph to be taken. Like he's trying to compress himself into a smaller, less painful existence. I think about his hands pushed into his pockets. Are they balled into self-conscious fists, fingers fluttering, picking at the bits of fluff and old crumbs that seem to be impossible to completely remove in jacket pockets? And what will this be like when we are still apart in a month, in two months? In three? Will this still feel wholly, horribly bizarre? How easy it would be to walk over and loop my hand through his and slide both of them back into the pocket, like we always do when it is cold and we are walking somewhere together.

Well. I hope it tastes okay.
I guess I'd better go. Or the government will be after me.
Alright then, (and, affectionately), *piss off. I love you.*
I love you, too.

––

Later, he sends me a picture of the cranes hung from his bedroom ceiling. The sunlight is casting the colours in a wide arc on the wall above the bed – these things that I have folded and frowned over and the time I took with my hands to do this, now a ridiculous paper aviary wheeling above his head. He is 0.2 miles away, just down the hill and past the maypole and the grotty old Tesco express, instead of the usual 300 while we're both at university. My best friend lives two minutes' walk in the opposite direction, up the hill to the nearest village, passing at least seven houses of people I know on the way. It is strangely somehow more painful to be apart, but so tortuously close.

I've been thinking quite a lot recently, about how the space we take up with our hands is quite a personal thing. How we hold ourselves when we don't want to be seen, when we're thinking, when we're proud – it shows in our hands. When I'm thinking, I curl up my fingers into the palm and press the top of my thumbnail between my teeth. And when I'm nervous I'll pinch my earlobe between my thumb and forefinger like a penny. You can't really hide how you feel with your hands like you can with your eyes – with your eyes there's an extra dimension between the surface and what it shows.

And I wonder what the people I love but can't see or touch are doing with their hands right this second. There are a lot of people we love that we can't see right now. Maybe they are stirring some soup or rattling a pen against a desk or scratching the back of their neck. I'm not really sure why this interests me, but it does.

'Origami'
little talisman
impression of moving hand
upon moving hand
wrappered symmetry
enfold time upon time's side
tenderness, furrowed
press patient fingers

into every corner pleat
love, corrugated

APRIL-MAY-JUNE (GLOUCESTERSHIRE, STILL)

Every day I get up at midday and read a couple of hundred pages from something dusty I've picked out from the living room bookshelf. It feels good to touch these things that haven't been handled in years. They smell of old oak furniture and the pages are mottled and yellow. Some have notes pencilled in from the 80s and 90s: *happy birthday; merry Christmas; thinking of you; from _ with love.* Yellow oak. Old hands. Pencils. I wonder what trees went into making these books, in what land and time. Possibly there is a little bit of every continent in this bookshelf.

The spine of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* is cracked with familiarity. I read a little bit of it every day in the rocking chair, legs crossed, trying to make it last for at least a week, between cups of tea and hysterical circles around the garden. I have been wearing the same woolly jumper and stripy trousers for probably five days.

Mum pokes her head around the doorway.

Hellooooo. Captain Corelli's Mandolin? That's one of my absolute favourites. I bought that when it came out, you know.

Nineteen-ninety…?

Five? Or something. Do you want any lunch yet? Dad's made soup.

Not yet please. Can I have it later? I've got to a good bit.

--

March and April come and go in an indistinctive swathe of grey skies and the occasional rain shower, but in May the earth swells into full bloom. Here, summers are rosy efflorescence and a horizon trembling a haze of heat and pollen. Picture buttercups and cowpats and sitting on dry stone walls. Picture sun-bleached commons bristling with

the full-throated cries of larks. Between the shoulders of wooded hills, the Severn valley stretched like a collarbone, the river a polished meditation of sky. The hills hand me summer through my bedroom window, and I am mostly seeing it through from behind it. My soundtrack is the chug-chug-chug of my Mum's sewing machine and, faintly, underneath this, sporadic drifts of *Women's Hour* interviews.

It would be a lie to say this isn't all a bit of a love letter to my childhood home. But it would also be a lie to say I don't miss my university. I miss my seminars, meeting people from all over the country, even the world, for the first time, and hearing what they think about all the things we have to read. Hearing their poetry and their jokes. I miss dancing with my friends, dragging each other home through windy streets in November, dressing up in tiny glittery clothes. I miss painting tiny blue stars on my eyelids, and drinking cheap vodka with cheap juice, and running down the long corridor of our flat in the costume wizard hat I found in a charity shop. Standing in the kitchen and trying to hit a ping pong ball with a frying pan all the way down the corridor, through the gap in the bathroom door and into the toilet. The disgusting messy hilarity of all of this is how you want to live when you are eighteen. We will do these thing again, I know, but how much older will we be? Will we still want to hit ping pong balls into the toilet with the back of a frying pan?

So I think that this is a love letter to more than one home.

JULY-AUGUST (WALES)

In July, when the ban on mixing households and travel is lifted, my boyfriend and I go to stay in his student house in Wales. We have the place to ourselves and make macaroni cheese every day, argue about the crossword clues, and drive in his tiny silver car up the coast to swim in the sea. One night we stay awake and sit at the seafront and watch the sun come up behind purple-heathered hills. The tide is so far out that you can't really see it at all. The three weeks we spend here are a break in the clouds.

'Blanket'
all night we sit
and pin definition -
justice, reason,
truth -
until the lining of the sky
begins to pearl
with *the necessity of revolution*.
silk of mud flats, dense
with embroidery of oysters,
your hands weaving your relation,
your voice sewn into seams.
who else will change but the young
bastes itself horizon-wide
and I am in love
with patchworking the world to rights.
cushioned by the thread of your words
and moored under your two arms,
I listen, watch your words
slip stitching stars, seas,
a world we want to live in,
plaintive quiet of the button moon;
and all this within a thimble.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER-NOVEMBER (NORWICH)

In early November, I leave my student house one Saturday to pick up some more cereal from the corner shop and I get a call from Dad. *Mum is ill again. Ring your sister. We love you. Carry on being normal as much as you can.* When I call off I continue walking to the Co-op, pick up milk and bread and cereal and walk back again. I make myself a bowl of granola but I leave it on the counter-top and go outside and smoke two cigarettes in a row and then forget about it. I call my sister.

'Hello? Meg?'

'Hello… where are you? Are you okay?'

'Fuck cancer. Fucking bloody cancer. Again.' I look at my bowl of soggy Country Crisp and start crying. *'I let my cereal go soggy and it was fucking expensive cereal.'*

I can hear her voice catching down the line. *'Can I come and pick you up? Please? Please let me come and pick you up?'*

'I want you to but you can't. It's lockdown tomorrow.'

'It doesn't matter, Ro. We have the car, it's fine.'

'I have to stay here. My plant needs watering and I can't leave my friends-'

'I'm coming to get you and you can stay with us.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course.'

--

Right now I am exhausted by the noise of my brain, the sight of the insides of my eyelids. I keep thinking about how I'm the only person I have to live with for the rest of my life and that means having to forgive every oversight and cruel thought and missed opportunity.

In lockdown you are confronted with yourself, and truthfully, not the best parts of yourself. It's not that I don't enjoy my own company, but when you don't have certainty about things to look forward to or any news to tell about interesting things you've been doing, it can feel like an echo chamber inside your own skull. I know I am not unique in this at the moment, and that I have a lot to be thankful for in the current situation – a warm home with enough room to move around a fair amount and have privacy, and family who are safe and (mostly) well, a lot more time to spend with my elder sister who usually I hardly get to see – yet nobody's situation right now is at all conducive to good mental health. Even people in the best possible situation during a lockdown are not exempt from those difficulties. I miss my friends from home

and my friends from uni and my independence there and my family home and my parents and my boyfriend and my cat. I know everybody misses those same things in their lives. But honestly, I think it's allowed – necessary even – to mourn for your small, everyday losses, the derailment of your usual life, over your separation from the people you love, the ability to move freely – however temporary those losses are.

It is likely won't hug my parents until sometime next spring. My sister and I won't be at our childhood home for Christmas; we'll be at her home, in a different county, with her husband and his family. This is where I've been over the second lockdown after we got the news about our Mum. By now we are all used to paying these small prices for the sake of survival – even if it isn't our own. Bodies and brains are fragile. They might do any number of things at any point in time, and usually when it's the last thing you need. Your legs take you from one day to the next and your brain is a vastly complicated instrument so it ought to be kind to itself. And as I've said, your hands do a multitude of beautiful things. If looking after your body is the only thing you can do right now, it is even more important to do it. I don't really mean exercise or whatever. I mean care, and hope.

'Oh No! The Weevils Have Eaten My Vital Organs'

the bathroom sink
has swallowed me.
I was peeling my face off in the mirror
when the plughole pulled it in.
freckles flaked off,
old paint and rot the sweeping sinews
of my cheeks.
my eyes old pennies
marked with the mint of a dead Queen
that slipped through floorboards ribs,
swelled with water and worm

and the kisses of bootsoles.
the small colony of shrews
nesting in my throat and hair
were embalmed for posterity
in the oiled embrace of soap scum.
the glycerin smile swilled off my skin,
I fulfilled my corporal destiny:
fleshéd membranes grilled on sewer grates
with cartoon refuse and a little tea.
when it was done
the bones were spat out
on the linoleum.
the dog ate those,
and with a series of howling ejections
heaved them up again.

DECEMBER (OXFORDSHIRE)

On Christmas Eve my sister and her husband and I drive west to Mum and Dad's in Gloucestershire, and sit on the steps in the front garden, where my boyfriend stood holding his birthday cake nine months ago. It is very cold, but this is the last chance we will get to see their faces in a while, given that the tier system is changing on boxing day so we won't be able to go anywhere. We have about seven layers on and a blanket stretched over our shoulders, but the wind does not bite as hard as seeing my Dad open the front door, eyes joyful but shoulders heavy. I take one look at his face when I put the presents down on the doorstep and I burst into tears. To comfort our various sadnesses (and warm up our hands), Dad makes us tea and brings out mince pies, shop-bought because he doesn't have the time, nor Mum the energy, to make them homemade with the little pastry stars on top like most years.

This is because Mum had her first surgery just under a week ago. She is sitting in a chair at the window upstairs, wearing pyjamas and a face that's

almost grey. Unsurprisingly, she is in a lot of pain, and taking a vast concoction of different pills and potions that combat the side effects of the other pills and potions that stop her getting an infection. That's enough to make anyone grey.

So, we sit on either side of the door to swap Christmas presents and try to make each other laugh and share the tiny, quite boring little things we have achieved recently. But the oncoming dark and the constant draught because of the open door don't allow us to stay long. I'll come home again, just not yet.

--

'Christmas Tree'
these little bright shards,
held and hoarded and
loved into shapelessness:
the missing arms of papier-mache
stars,
glass-blown apples jewelled with cracks,
2-4-1 tinsel plucked bare by the dog.
dust and glitter look the same after
thirty-five years, let me tell you.
in any house
there'll be someone begging to *bring down the box*,
holding up to the light
these tiny traditions, furred and felted,
immortalised in the gluey whorls
of ancient sticky fingers

Lines

for Charlie Burke, by Elif Soyler

The first time Charlie speaks to me we are about one hundred miles apart, but we share a grey, shadowy sky. Out of his window, in his flat in Stratford, the East London skyscrapers of Canary Wharf are smothered in a low-hanging fog. The neighbourhoods of the East End that lie between these two points – West Ham, Canning Town, Bow and Poplar – are blurred from view. But Charlie's voice is cheerful and warm; I can hear his smile in the words he speaks down the telephone line. Though lockdown has been mind-numbingly boring and every day has felt the same for weeks on end, you couldn't tell it from the lightness in his voice.

He describes himself jovially as an "elderly, old-aged pensioner" and I learn that he's turning seventy-five next April. He's quietly hoping that it will be safe enough to see family and friends when the day comes. He has a daughter, Julie, and a granddaughter, Eden Rose.

"They're my two babies," Charlie sighs. Charlie's very close to his daughter; they talk on the phone more than once a day. They live in Dagenham, close to where Charlie grew up as a kid. "Things were different back then, neighbours were in and out of everyone's houses, chatting, drinking cups of tea. There were always kids playing outside in the streets and there was always someone keeping an eye on them. Things are different now," He tells me.

These days, Julie has more than one lock on her front door as well as a security camera running day and night. On the plus side, this has allowed them to get friendly with a local fox, who comes over in the evenings to sniff around the bins so now, Julie leaves food out for it. From upstairs, Charlie, Julie and Eden Rose watch the fox share the food with her cubs.

This year has been incredibly difficult for him. He used to live in Canning Town; he spent twenty-three years there and misses those days terribly. He misses knocking on his neighbour Jim's door every morning on the floor below and enjoying "a cuppa tea and a chin wag". As he moved to sheltered accommodation in Stratford just over a year ago, his new start coincided perfectly with the start of the global Coronavirus pandemic. This made things quite lonely at times.

Charlie is lucky and he knows it. He has his family and a psychiatrist for support. But during the first lockdown, there was a point when he felt so low, he couldn't handle it: "The light at the end of the tunnel was getting dim, almost dark," he says. Everything was getting him down; the loneliness, the fear and the feeling it was never going to end were getting too much. He didn't want to worry Julie, but she could sense that there was something seriously wrong. Even though he was saying he was all right, his daughter knew.

The next call he got was from the psychiatrist. He said: "So Charlie, tell me what's wrong."

"Having someone to listen to you is really important," Charlie says.

--

The end of October rolls around, the clocks go back and it gets darker and colder and harder in just a matter of days. Then, the second national lockdown is announced. When we started talking in early autumn, neither Charlie nor I anticipated this.

It's now often too cold for walks around the garden with the other residents in the flats and with the catered meals being brought up to his door, three times a week, Charlie doesn't spend much time socialising these days. Throughout November, week after week, we call, we make each other laugh and remind each other of the things we can still appreciate.

"I talk to me daughter about three or four times a day, she texts me late before she goes to bed, saying: 'God bless, see you tomorrow'. Them words mean a lot to me."

I picture him sitting in his armchair on a carpeted floor by a large window, with his view of East London and cup of coffee in hand. We share a moment as he describes looking out across the city. He is gazing at its skyline of tall buildings, their different shapes and volumes, utterly familiar to my mind, and for a minute I feel like I, too, am home in London. My father is an electrical engineer in the Financial Conduct Authority, one of the skyscrapers Charlie was looking at. Charlie and I are still, imagining the inner workings of the towering oblongs of metal, like anthills housing hundreds of workers. Nowadays, though, they are mostly empty; sometimes my father is the only body on the premises.

We talk about Charlie's life before lockdown, before the pandemic. He tells me he drove London buses on one line or another for thirty-two years. When he was a driver, Charlie's favourite shift was New Year's Eve. He remembers the way people would cheer as they saw his doubledecker red bus careening around the corner towards their stop. He felt like everyone's hero, like he was driving a fire engine, the champion of the night.

"When they started putting the barriers up, and changing the locks, you see, now they open the doors from the inside. I didn't like none of that," He says. He preferred being closer to people. We talk about public transport, the way he remembers it, which is very different from the way I know it. The last time I saw a 'bendy bus' was when I was about nine or ten years old and I have no memories of the driver's seat being as accessible as he describes.

Driving buses were some of the best years of Charlie's life. He remembers it fondly, but he wouldn't go back to it if he had the chance now. "People out there, getting on the buses and the trains without no masks, and I have to bite my lips. If I was younger I'd tell 'em. At my age, I can't do nothing."

Cases are high in London and have been throughout this crisis. When Charlie does venture out into the cold away from the safety of his flat he sees how little some people care. He even witnessed someone spitting at a policeman. There are usually a couple of officers standing guard near the bus station, occasionally stopping people without masks from boarding. The

drivers, however, almost never bother. Charlie strongly disapproves:

"If I was still driving I'd definitely be wearing one. Got to keep people safe, got to set a good example."

With Christmas and the New Year approaching, he asks me if I am travelling back, coming home to be with family. I reply that thankfully I am being picked up to avoid the two hour train and tube journey on the other side. It's going to be a strange festive period, we agree. I can hear Sky News playing in the background, explaining the tier system and the new rules.

--

We stay in touch over the winter break. On December 19th, I am collected by my mum and driven home. Barely an hour after I've kicked my shoes off and drunk a cup of coffee, the government announces a new tier, Tier 4. Almost immediately I think of Charlie, suddenly unable to spend Christmas Day with the two people he loves the most. I listen to the announcement and try to make sense of the news; it seems that people who live alone are still allowed to mix for just a day. I text Charlie, hoping to explain or help in any way possible, and he replies with awful news.

"I saw Julie and Eden last week as normal, came home and then Julie rang me and said that Eden and others in her class had tested positive."

This meant, Tier 4 or no Tier 4, Charlie has been pinged by Track and Trace and instructed to isolate for at least ten days, at the most wonderful time of the year.

I tell him that being back home now, in Ilford, hardly even around the corner, my family and I could help with shopping or providing a friendly face from outside. But Charlie tells me not to worry, that his neighbours were good to him and that he would be "rocking around my Christmas tree with my walking stick. Stay safe my friend."

I smiled at my phone. I thought about his three-foot tall, plastic tree, propped up in the corner of his sitting room. I pictured him in that

same armchair, the crossword in his lap. The white paper changed colour every couple of minutes, first blue, then pink, red, orange, bright green and gold, the twinkling of the fairy lights reflected in the lenses of his reading glasses.

We speak again, one week into the New Year. Britain's third national lockdown had been announced a couple of days prior. I expect Charlie to sound tired and miserable, because that's how I am feeling, but he didn't. I am glad to hear that a downstairs neighbour had brought up a plate of Christmas dinner for him, on that special day. We talk for an hour or longer, about smaller and bigger things.

"That Boris. I'm going to buy him a pair of bloody hair clippers!"

In the background, I can hear many more sirens than usual. After the third one, Charlie acknowledges them dejectedly, admitting that the ambulances have been racing past on the main road by his flat non-stop for almost two weeks. He then goes quiet. I sense the worry creeping in from the corners of his mind. I cracked a joke about making tea for my brother with a spoonful of salt instead of sugar, after he coughed twice in one morning, and I get half a chuckle in response.

To my surprise, Charlie tells me how one afternoon, he was sat reading as he normally did and then out of nowhere, he just burst into tears. He rang Julie and told her about it, not sure what was wrong with him. "Nothing, Dad. That's normal, it happens to everyone. And it's good to let it out. Nothing to be ashamed of," She said.

I agree with her, I tell him. Then I share with Charlie how low I had been feeling too, worried about not being able to complete my dissertation, not being able to return to uni, missing my friends. The new variant of Covid-19 had burst the bubble of hope we had been cautiously blowing into in just a matter of days.

But there is always hope. I tell Charlie that it's not like last year, we have vaccines on the way, there's more hope, there is an end in sight, a light at the end of the tunnel. Soon, Charlie is prompted by his G.P. to set up an

appointment for his first dose. He rang up and finds himself number thirty-seven in the queue.

"Some phone calls are worth waiting for, and I'm not afraid of needles!" He says through an audible smile.

This is not the only important call he got recently. An old friend of Charlie's recently got back in touch with him. It had been months since they last spoke. Her name is Michelle. He learnt that she had been struggling with depression and loneliness, which Charlie has far too much experience of. I think he was relieved to hear that she was doing better, slightly. She was trying to reach out to friends and loved ones instead of isolating herself. People worry, the police were sent round once, and they almost broke her front door off its hinges.

"Help is always out there, but you have to ask," Charlie reminds me.

Robyn: The Narration of Life

for Robyn Wells, by Marta Guerreiro

It was being a mother that brought her the ability to adapt and adjust, Robyn told me. She does not remember always having this talent to accept whatever life brings, remembering that being a mother meant learning that not everything will always be perfect, that not everything will always be as desired. She carries in her voice the calm and lightness that time does not remember that time has forgotten – at least, these recent times. She brings in her voice the calm that is contrary to the pandemic; she brings the tranquillity that feels like a hug.

Although very patient, Robyn found the start of lockdown difficult. She recalls the lack of options for lunch and dinner, recalls the inability to cook a good meal.

Meals were made from leftovers, soups were made from what was left, lemon or orange peels, whatever it was, I had to reinvent, rebuild.

I didn't mind going somewhere to buy food, but John didn't want to.

John, the love of so many years, a love that stayed after a divorce, that remained for being light and for bringing with it a lot of knowledge.

He is very brainy -

says Robyn, after a few moments of silence. John, who represents a contemporary relationship, but which comes from other times. Each one in their own houses, they decided, giving Robyn space to devote to herself, her art and her passion for dance, also giving space to John, to grow individually and then, in the relationship.

The pandemic did not treat him well and, consequently, the relationship made of space and dedication also seemed to be in a whole new state: pandemical.

He didn't want me to buy anything, he went into this weird obsession, had a lot of anxiety attacks, he needed to make sure that everything was disinfected and that I didn't put myself in danger.

For Robyn, the lockdown was another opportunity to learn to adapt. She did not live-in fright; however, with John's anxiety, she was living in stress.

The lockdown reminds me of dark red roses, the smell of them and the afternoons of good weather, the sun. It also reminds me of hunger, I was very hungry.

Robyn's hunger was different: it didn't arise from the impossibility of buying – the lack of money – but from a loved one whose mental health was in decline.

I didn't know John could go to such an extreme. I knew he was anxious, but not like that. Now we are fine. He sought help. He fortunately realised that he needed to calm down.

Robyn is the epitome of calm. She can't remember the last time she could walk in the middle of roads, without the cars occupying the space that people should occupy. Nature marks this as a period of abnormality: the sound of birds, the green of the parks and the bare streets. They mark the change in looking at life as a gift, accepting and absorbing whatever there is, as it is, regardless of restrictions.

The nature and the absence of stress in the streets recall times that were left behind.

That part was good, but I feel sorry for the young people now, without a job, without socializing.

Robyn is observant. Every sentence she says comes after a pause, consideration, reflection, as if she were sewing the words instead of dumping them. Measuring, cutting and studying, leading her to art: sentences full of intensity. She imagines the world for those who are young. Even though she enjoys this distance from the stress, she also knows that life needs movement.

I've lived a lot, but there are those who haven't lived enough, I can't imagine how life goes with a lockdown for them, and what comes after the lockdown.

In the midst of the madness of life in this very peculiar phase, there was enough time to get to know her partner, a side she wasn't aware of, but there was also time for the healing process. Homeopathy. While speaking with Robyn we realised that we both share a taste for alternative medicine and the

certainty of the importance of conventional medicine. We are from different generations, it is so beautiful that we have the opportunity to share the space and time we have, to talk about adventures and misfortunes of a pandemic, with links that unite us and others that do not, I tell her: You seem to be such an easy-going person. She agrees.

She says that she doesn't waste time with fashion, that she wears practical clothes that allow her to walk and that at home, she organizes herself to present painting classes when asked, if the teacher can't make it. She speaks of Zoom as if it were the only tool that takes her to the spaces that once were filled with bodies.

I miss socializing, art classes and music classes. We usually had lunch together and laughed heartily. Now John helps me with technology, and we share art on the computer.

There is a lot of routine in a lockdown and Robyn's life was no exception. She would meet John for long walks together, have lunch, and in the afternoon they both looked after the garden or made art, and had dinner. Sometimes John stayed, sometimes he didn't. Routines served to bring mental organization, even though there was time and space left to ramble, to travel mentally, time to ring friends or to enjoy the silence.

I enjoy silence.

Robyn told me in a tone that, surprisingly, also resembles silence. Few words, serene, thoughtful and from time to time accompanied by deep laughter.

I don't like television. I prefer books and music.

I can't imagine the expressions she made while talking to me about herself, her life and such an odd time for the world – I couldn't read her expressions, now that we are all required to keep physical distance, now that we need to think twice before deciding to hug someone. As a writer I never thought I would be able to get to know someone in such a beautiful depth, like I did with Robyn. Our conversation happened over phone and while I was laying on my bed and taking notes with a messy handwriting, I

would imagine what was Robyn doing while speaking with me. I couldn't read her expressions, I could take, however, from our conversation, take the tranquillity with which I also like to sew life together. Robyn speaks as one who dances, and dance perceives her. Perhaps that is why the sentences were carefully choreographed, thought out and created in a rhythm of love and understanding. I don't know her face, nor have I seen her hands, but I imagine she has a soul painted in all the colours, colours from the art she paints and a face of someone who lives like life is a ballet.

Every time a call was over, I would close my eyes for a second and think about Robyn. Robyn, the mother who learned patience, not necessarily from the major events that the future would bring but since the beginning, since the moment that as a human being she would have to accept that not everything would always be perfect as a mother and that is okay. Robyn, the lover in a relationship that was exhausting, but which is now serene, with soups that resemble hunger and roses that resemble luck. Me, growing with every phone call, for having heard about life as if it was poetry, even what is not good, even what is not perfect. Robyn, with the voice of someone who narrates what life means and with the conviction that life is to be lived and preserved.

From Russia to Toynbee, with Love

for Miry Mayer, by Sam Dodd

"So many times, assumptions are made. 'We know better because we design the rules.' But no, that is not how it works. People are not voiceless, faceless numbers. Listen to their voices, *ask them what they need.*"

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Just before lockdown in March 2020, I started seeing someone, so I had company during that time. I had a sense of happiness amongst all the sadness, loneliness and loss around us. But there was also a sense of guilt: "why am I so happy in my personal life, when it's lockdown? What about those who are lonely right now?" Lockdown was a lonely place for me at times too, but it was also empowering, because I had the opportunity to sort through my priorities. I realised that I no longer need to chase people that don't get back to me, or go to social events I don't want to be at; it helped me to figure out who I wanted to make an effort for, and let go of all the things I fill my life with just to have a sense of belonging, or being part of something. Basically, I discovered I really like my own company. And I don't think I knew that before lockdown. We do still need company, people to ask us how we are, how we're coping. I might be saying something different if I hadn't had the new relationship starting at that point in my life.

I also discovered it's OK to go walking in the park for an hour. I used to do that all the time, but it had dropped off over the years. Suddenly, that sort of activity was almost mandated with our daily exercise allowance… and it slowed me down, helped me to enjoy not rushing. It's not generally seen as 'cool' to go and look at flowers and insects for half an hour in the park. But

in lockdown, it was; it was almost like we'd been given permission we didn't know we needed. I've always felt like if I want to stop and smell a flower, I must check no one is watching first. I won't do that any longer; I'll just stop and smell them.

But at the same time, there was a painful awareness that as I'm stopping to smell a rose, people suffering; dying; desperately lonely; not speaking to another human being for days at a time; barely coping as a single parent; queuing at a food bank… it snapped me into action and reflection mode. I realised that I was wasting a lot of time and energy on activities and people that I didn't get any sustenance from; I changed things around, became more focused.

I remembered what it is like to be so lonely you can't even articulate it, because it's almost physical. Sometimes, you can be in a room full of people, and still feel lonely. We have so little time on this earth, and there is so much work to be done.

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I started working at Toynbee in December last year, 2019. This is my dream job, I wanted it so much. My last job made me unhappy – I wanted more responsibilities and projects, but they just weren't there. I was bored. So, I started doing a lot of volunteering. Crisis at Christmas – 3 years at the catering warehouse, very physical work that I really enjoyed. Last year was my first year in a centre working directly with the guests rather than out the back, and I loved it. Then another great opportunity came along for me to merge my skills with what I love – I am also a runner, and part of a running group charity called the Outrunners. They use the skills of the runners to give back to the community – so runners that live in Hackney take part in career days for the local community where they talk to young people about how to get into the careers they're in. They're not the standard mainstream careers either. Yoga teachers, chefs, fashion designers, actors – well, we're runners! So of course, we're from all walks of life. We do still have the mainstream jobs there,

but from people that are more relatable to Hackney youth – a lawyer from a mixed-race background is one example. We want the kids to feel like they could see themselves, that it is possible for them to do that sort of job too, if they want to. We've done three now, every six months, and each one attracts about 100 young people. Running those career days gave me confidence back that had been knocked out of me at my last job.

So from all that, I realised I wanted so badly to be more involved in the community. It fired me up. So, I started applying for jobs. I had an interview somewhere else and was offered the job – but then I also got the job at Toynbee! The loveliest thing about Toynbee was that I'd had the interview on the Wednesday, and they said they'd call me by the Monday to let me know. But then they called the very next day – and that boosted me so much, because I felt wanted, and like I'd be valued. It was exactly what I needed and I love it.

We support the community in a host of different ways here. There are debt advice clinics, legal advice clinics, a research team, a community centre, a heritage team, a food bank, and we even have a few community celebration days – we do a lot of things! We also hold feedback days, where we ask people what they need in the community – things like disabled access to buses, just as one example. After those days, a policy suggestion is designed by our research team, and then taken to the London Assembly or Tower Hamlets Town Hall. We want to know what people think about what their councils are doing well, and what they can improve – we push for user led, community led, tailored services based on what real people need – based on listening to their voices, not just nodding when they talk but then going in a totally different direction. The research team here really cares about this. The fundraising team go to the research team meetings so that they can really understand what money is needed for – and explain that in real terms, with real voices, to potential funders.

We also do a lot of research on schools and poverty. How can you understand a situation or a problem unless you go into that group of people

that is affected, and ask them, talk to them – and listen properly? This is their lived experience. You cannot design policy without it, and when we do, it doesn't serve the intended individuals. So many times, assumptions are made. "We know better because we design the rules." But no, that is not how it works. People are not voiceless, faceless numbers. Listen to *their* voices, *ask them what they need.*

Then lockdown happened!! On Tuesday 17th, we'd decided to close. I talked to some of the clients that day, who said they'd still come in even if there were no events being run. That really concerned us, here we were going into a full-scale societal lockdown and people still wanted to visit! We couldn't have that weight on our minds if anything happened to them. So, the team decided to close fully, and set up shop from our respective homes. I picked up everything on the Thursday, and it all went into a huge bag. It was so last minute. That bag was so heavy! And while I was there on that last day, I found medicines for one of our clients in the fridge, so dropped that off at their home too! I'll tell you something, I was never bored in lockdown. Work kept me busy, and I was grateful for that. There was always something happening.

My main concern was how we'd keep in touch with our clients. Quite a few of them say quite often that if they didn't have Toynbee to visit, they'd be depressed. Either that, or they were depressed, until they found Toynbee. They also love all the activities we do here. And so many of them don't even have mobile phones. So, as I didn't know whether we'd be able to access the database from home, I had to download our clients, more than four hundred, so that we had a way to be in touch with them. The first week was just mad. We just called everyone to let them know that we were closed, and because I was still fairly new, I didn't know all their names properly yet. At one point, I thought maybe we can use Outrunners as guinea pigs for volunteer telephone befriending, or maybe even for medication or shopping runs – they are runners, after all! The coach runner and CEO backed me, and I got in touch with the runners. They all mucked in, it was just absolutely amazing and so very moving.

So many people didn't have food or prescriptions – they didn't know how to go and get it, or were too frightened to leave the house. Prescription runs had to be done in pairs, to hold each other accountable for the medication staying safe between the pharmacy and the community members' home. I got in touch with the Tower Hamlets Volunteer Centre and they published my advert, and within a week I had over 50 volunteer sign ups! There was so much goodwill, so many people, in this community who wanted to help other people in their community. It was easy to recruit – but the admin and coordination side was a bit trickier. We also made sure to evaluate and reevaluate as we went along – what was working, what was not. Initially, the telephone befriending scheme was meant to run for 12 weeks, but it has gone so well that we are continuing it indefinitely, and recruiting for a new role of Befriending Coordinator.

I do this work because I believe in community. The way the world is headed feels so insulated – always stuck to our phones, our front doors locked, very individualist. Almost as if we fear each other, but there is so much beauty in people, in community, what are we afraid of? We cannot survive without each other. We need each other. But there is so much division, and in the East End where there are so many different communities who live side by side who don't mix because they've been taught to keep themselves to themselves, because there's a fear that people will try and change them if they allow them in, you can feel it strongly. We need to better understand who wants and needs what, and how we can make that happen. Listening to people, and creating spaces where people are safe and feel heard. Not bombarding the community with impossible to understand surveys and notices, and building things for them that are of no use to them because they've been built by policy teams with totally different lived experiences. There is so much money being spent on services that are only useful for a very small percentage of the intended users of that service. What is the point? We need to listen to this. We need to change how we do things.

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I HAVE A WEIRD background myself, so I'm invested in this way of thinking from a deeply personal place. I was born in 1982 in Russia, when it was still communist. So, I grew up with the idea that you have extended family as well as your biological family. If there was nowhere to go, you'd be at your neighbours – there were always people around – for example, I don't remember my mum ever taking me to school, there was always someone in the community doing school runs, and things like that. It was a real community. Obviously, communist Russia was terrible. But in the community, where it mattered, we helped each other – possibly because the government wasn't doing that for us. We had solidarity. It was us as a community against something unpleasant, so we stuck together.

When I was 8, we emigrated to Israel. I didn't even know I was Jewish till we started planning the move, as my family could not be open about religious convictions in Russia. I didn't even have a concept of God until then. So, when I moved to Israel I was handed a prayer book all iof a sudden! I used to hide my own books inside the prayer book and pretend that I was reading prayers. In Israel, there is also a very strong sense of community. If you are stuck in the middle of the street without money, you can tell people there what happened to you and they would help. But at the same time, this only happens if you're from a certain background. If you are Jewish Israeli, this is you. But when I emigrated there were very few Russian Jews, so there was prejudice against us, "who are these weird white people who speak Russian". But now it is better. However, if you are Muslim, Christian, or Atheist, you are still excluded, you are not part of that mainstream community. But I didn't realise that, I didn't have a vocabulary for it.

Then I went travelling, and for the first time, I saw community that wasn't based on religious convictions, people not being excluded because of their beliefs. It was then that I realised I could never return to Israel. Because as lovely as some parts of it are, I don't belong there. It is a macho society. On

paper women are equal, but in reality they are not. Expectations of women are very high. Women are multi-dimensional. We are not just what people think women should be. In Israel I experienced it in the form of having good grades, which was viewed as positive, but wanting to be outside a lot, which was viewed as negative and inexplicable. I wanted to go travelling, but then I also spent a lot of time in libraries. So how do those things tally? The expectation in Israel is that if you're not married with at least one child by the age of 26, then you're straying from your purpose. I wanted to get away from that, and find my spot in the world. But then I realised I don't have just one spot, I have many. As many as I want. I was able, then, to let go of wanting just one spot. And of course, there are the terrible things happening across the border of Palestine, and either willingly or unwillingly, people do not want to see it.

So when I came here, I initially sought out Hebrew speaking people, just to still feel a sense of belonging to something, but eventually I realised I was just separating myself from everyone else, and it was making me unhappy. London can be a tricky place to find your community. But in a way, that can be a nice thing – you can have several communities, pick and mix, and get different things from all the groups you belong to. It is very common to move to another country and find your own people, but in doing that we don't experience the joy of getting to know other types of people, with different backgrounds to our own. I want to learn more. I don't want to live with the fear that has been installed in me based on politics and religion. There are so many similarities between Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Especially in the Middle East when you look at custom, culture, food, family attitudes – but we never talk about the similarities. We only ever focus on the differences. There is always a divide. Whether it is a physical wall or a mental one – if you're not the same, you're just not the same, and that's that.

But it can sometimes be lonely, trying to find your community, trying to find where you belong. I felt very lonely for a long time. A lot of socialising in Britain tends to be around alcohol, and I don't mind a drink, but I don't like being drunk. And I'm not a girly girl, so I don't enjoy being in a big group of

girls, talking about makeup and all that. I like football, so I always hang out with the guys more. But then you're in another sort of box. Like, 'ooh, what are you?'

Running helped me. Initially it was just for a few months, I wanted to lose a bit of weight – I didn't want to go running unless it was 'necessary'. But it gave me so much freedom, so much confidence. It's a different sort of confidence to the one we're sold as desirable, though. It's a quiet, internal confidence. It's about how you feel about yourself *really*, not just wanting to look a certain way, but feel a certain way too. It's fine if you like make up and heels, but your confidence shouldn't come primarily from that. I looked down at myself one day when I was running. I was wearing shorts, bright light green top, bright orange trainers and weird socks – and I looked ridiculous. But I didn't care! I didn't worry about what my body looked like. Instead, I was thinking about what it could do, how it *felt*. That day, during a 10 mile run, I went and explored Little Venice. That's something I never would have done if I wasn't running. So, it's things like that. It makes you braver.

Running is solitary, which is nice. But there is a very strong community in the running world. I was reluctant to join a running group for a long time, but then I found a group that met up regularly in Victoria Park and I joined to see what it would be like. Over time, I built friendships that were more substantial and significant than 'we just like going to the pub every Friday night. I still like running on my own as a sort of meditation, but it's nice to be able to share that with other people as well.

For me, finding a safe space, and a comfortable space, to do my own thing but also be with people, was really valuable. We can be individuals, be ourselves, but still need people around us. We can still be an individual in a group. But we cannot just be an island. Or think our actions don't affect other people. There is so much joy to be gained from making someone smile or laugh, or being there for them when they're having a tough time, or accepting support when we are struggling ourselves. We need community. We need to be vulnerable with each other.

Vulnerability is a strange thing. I can easily tell others how important it is, but it's often much more difficult for me to allow myself to express it. To be honest about my needs. If you're used to being the helper most of your life, how do you switch roles and admit you need other people? It is easier to be needed; empowering. It's the 'I'm being a nice person, I feel good about it' effect, but you're still in the position of power in that dynamic. So vulnerability, too, is important in our communities – for all of us. A lot of people who want to help, in my experience, have a fear of losing control. They regain power and control by helping others, because honestly, often, people feel powerless. So you don't want to feel even more powerless by being the person accepting help, instead of the one giving it.

We have clients that swear they're fine, but we know they're not. When we offer those people support, they don't want it – there was one person who cancelled a service we provided because they wanted it to go to someone else. That person is very sharp, very independent, a real survivor – so when we gave them a laptop to increase their connection with others, they wanted it to go to 'someone else who needs it more', because 'I can still entertain myself somehow'. Yes, there are people who need those things as well. But it is not a competition, resources should never be finite but we are taught by society that they are, and they must be – so we learn to assume someone else needs it more. It is heartbreaking. And we have people who we ask directly, 'do you need help, do you need food?' they'll say 'no, I'm fine', because there is a stigma around food poverty, a shame in needing help.

However, there is sometimes the opposite thing, of people who take a lot more than their fair share. But this is much more complicated than surface impressions more often than not. For example, if they lived in poverty for a long time, they're now used to not knowing when a resource will be available again, so they stock up. It is too simplistic to default immediately to 'they're greedy' – there is a reason for everything, people behave in the ways that they do based on their life experiences, so it is never black and white. We always make an effort not to blame or shame, because that isn't fair at all. We try to

understand instead. The mind goes straight away to judgement. But when you hear that judgement come up inside you, you can decide to think more deeply about why this may be happening. Why are they stuffing sandwiches into their bag? Is it because of what they've been through?

Some of our clients have incredibly complex stories. I wish I had time to hear everyone's. But sometimes there is a huge language barrier. And the problem I've seen with that is that when there is a language barrier, everything becomes simplified in order to relay the message, so it becomes about the very basic needs – food, rent, heating, etc. Every person has so much more than that. Thoughts, dreams, life experiences. We don't want to reduce them down to whether they need to use the food bank or not. They are so much fuller than that, they are a whole person, and we need to always remember that when delivering services. The people who come to us are human beings. Same as all of us. We are human, trying to survive, trying to love as fully as we can, do our best with the tools we were given.

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CityLife Stories

www.citylifestories.co.uk

CITY LIFE

LOCKDOWN STORIES

In the midst of lockdowns, from 2020 to 2021, we paired younger CityLife writers with older East London based community members for conversational sessions on the phone, in which the elders told the writers about their lives — the past, the present, their communities, their hopes, their sorrows, and their joys. Our writers also shared with us their own experiences — of lockdown, life, love, and loss. Thank you to all our storytellers, all our writers, and all our community partners who make these conversations possible. This is our book of stories.

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