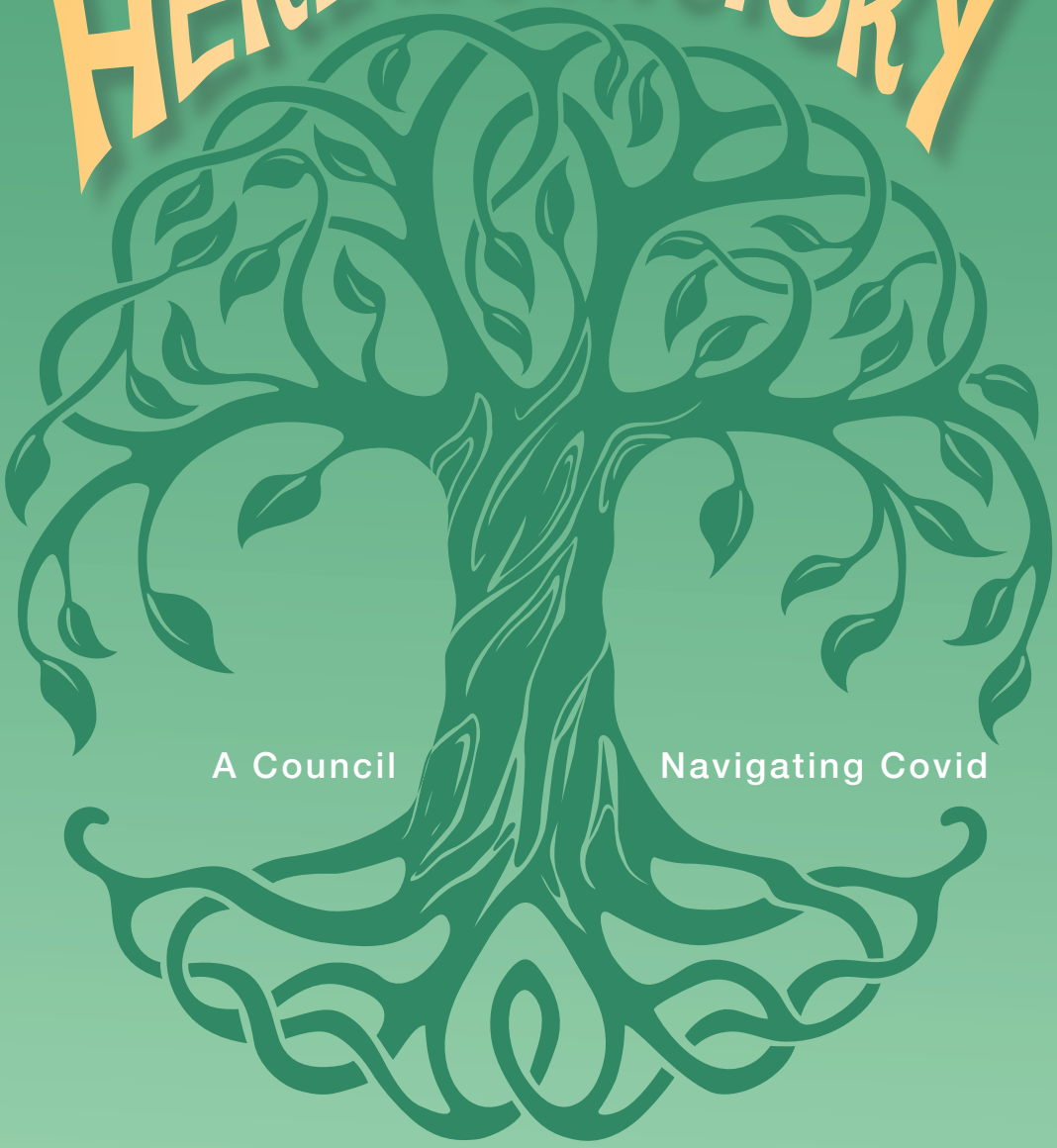
HERE IS OUR STORY



A Council Navigating Covid

AN ANTHOLOGY BY KAREN CAMPBELL

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From August to December 2020, Karen Campbell was Writer in Residence with Dumfries & Galloway Council in south west Scotland. This is a collection of twenty one stories written during this time, which capture and reflect, in fiction, the experiences of employees during the initial stages of the Council's COVID-19 response. The writer would like to thank everyone at Dumfries & Galloway Council for their assistance, generosity and kindness in supporting this residency. A particular thanks to Derek Crichton, Claire Baillie, Rebecca Coggins, Liz Manson, Darren Burns and all in the Communities Directorate for hosting, signposting and spreading the word, and to all across the Council who helped and contributed to this work in any way. Thank you too to everyone in the Atlas Pandemica Team who made this project possible, by beginning the journey of making Maps to a Kinder World. And the most special thanks of all goes to the Dumfries & Galloway Council staff who shared their stories - and who work so hard to shelter our communities from the storms.

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Yesterday, Tomorrow was Today

It was a funny wee place, the museum. Not that wee in fact, when you stepped inside, but it was tucked away from the rest of the town, high on a hill to the east of the river, a place you'd to seek out as opposed to one you would chance upon. From the outside, it was a mishmash; a jumble of disparate timelines and architectures. On arrival at the old sandstone gates, you were greeted with what looked like a long, white 1980s bungalow, retrofitted with awkward roof windows. This bungalow was juxtaposed against a 16th century windmill without its sails, which now housed a Victorian Observatory and Camera Obscura. Oh – plus a random statue of Old Mortality and his pony, resplendent on a glazed-in cupola in the garden, which was also home to a fountain, some Covenanters' gravestones and a Russian cannon captured during the Crimean War.

Andrew finished securing the last of the wooden boards. 'Cheerio then,' he said as the statues disappeared from view. Old Mortality, or the Sinclair Memorial to give it its proper name, had a tragic tale behind it, which really needed a guided tour to go into fully. Suffice to say it involved gambling, death and a ship's surgeon. Unfortunately, the shelter in which Old Mortality reclined was missing some glazing, so Andrew was boxing up the sculptures inside to protect them from the elements. It seemed strange, sheltering the shelter, under a clear spring sky. The cherry blossom in the garden nodded its agreement. But who knew how long this surreal time would last, or what weather there was to come?

He put down his hammer. Took out his mobile phone, along with a small Lego Lady Devorgilla, which he placed amongst the violets beneath the trees. No one could say his job wasn't interesting. 'Smile please,' he said to the unblinking object. He took several snaps, to get her in the best light. Then he gathered her, his phone and his tools up, and returned to the museum.

It was the first time he'd had a proper look at the rainbow display from outside. A bit shoogly in places – not as easy as it looked, sticking pictures into an arc, on a window, the wrong way round. But not bad. Andrew had written *Dumfries Rainbow of Hope* above his own big, rather wobbly rain-

bow, then pasted all the children's drawings in a semi-circle either side. The words *tutto bene* caught his eye. The messages on the rainbows were a mix of English, Scots and Italian. Every summer, a group of Italian schoolchildren from near Lake Como, would visit – a relic from when their town used to be twinned with Dumfries. That wouldn't be happening this year; Northern Italy had already been impacted by the pandemic. So they'd been exchanging Rainbows of Hope instead. He'd thought the display might cheer up anyone walking in the gardens.

Andrew unlocked the door, went inside, passing into the big, oblong gallery, which soared to a higher balcony. Five more floors of galleries were packed into the windmill. The museum was one of those wonderful places which contained multitudes, as jumbled inside as it was outside. Yet there was a sense and symmetry to it too. Kirkpatrick Macmillan's bicycles stood near reception – a bold statement to the world, proclaiming that the transport revolution had started right *here*.

The main gallery told you the story of how Dumfries and Galloway was made: its geology, archaeology. Its people. Andrew walked past Pictish stones, Roman altars, a burial kist. Nodded to the skull of Robert the Bruce (only a cast, alas – but they did have some fragments of his real bone too). Textiles, maps, silverware. Early farming, life on the land. This cornucopia held it all. One of the few museum services in the country that still lay entirely in council hands. Their collections belonged to the people. That was important, thought Andrew. Being guardians of your community's past, as well as shaping its future. Looking both ways, like the little Roman coin of Janus in the display over there, close to the Altar of Minerva. He was in awe of that altar: such beautiful stonework, carved near Ecclefechan by the Romans almost two thousand years ago, and standing before him, now. Another Italian connection.

He never understood those who sneered that councils lacked vision. *You'll atrophy in there*, his CO had said at the exit interview. *Full of bureaucrats and broom-pushers*.

Andrew had come to the Council from an unusual route – was an Army man, until the army didn't need him anymore.

Damaged goods.

He ran his finger along the top of a cabinet. Dusty again. How could it be dusty when there was nobody here? It used to quicken his heart, that

empty hour before the visitors arrived, when he'd the place to himself, and could pretend the museum was his secret. Took him back to the imagination of his childhood. Hearing a creak, and conjuring a ghost story. Seeing faces dancing in the fire. But today, the space felt lonely. Lonely, because it would remain empty, all that day. All that week, and all the coming weeks, just like the few weeks before. Andrew didn't know when they'd reopen. He was only in to do 'essential work'. But, like a dutiful soldier, he'd scoped out all the possibilities of what that might mean, and masterminded a plan. Namely: checking the alarms by opening every display case. Emptying the dehumidifiers, hoovering the filters. Greasing the ropes in the Observatory (the Camera Obscura was running much more smoothly since he'd done it – a clean, crisp view through 360 degrees). Washing the staircase in the Main Hall. Washing the back stairs. Legionella checks in the water supply (ie: flushing toilets). Fire alarm checks. Checking for leaks. Devising Covid-safe working practices for when the team returned. Reading the electricity meter. Giving all the cabinets a thorough clean (vacuuming behind the 'dinosaur bone' had been a disaster – he'd managed to knock the adjacent high-value case, thereby setting off the main alarm. But he'd deactivated it, and got the reset code from Chubb. Situation recovered.)

And of course, capturing Lego Lady Devorgilla doing some gardening. Her various activities were playing a starring role on the Museum Facebook page – along with a very popular 'Art from Home' thread, where people recreated famous paintings: everything from 'American Gothic' to 'Venus Rising from the Waves' (modestly clad in a towel, thank goodness). They had to keep folk interested. Do something fun for the kids. He'd a wheen of Easter eggs in the office, which were meant to have been part of a treasure hunt. Maybe the foodbank could use them instead?

Andrew carried on with his daily checks, moving up to the first floor gallery. He flicked a switch, and the light shone, bouncing off the lustrous wood below. He'd already got the floors varnished, and the benches painted. Though even that was sad in a way, because the sprucing up was wiping out more signs of human contact. The museum was a spectacle that required to be *seen*. None of the relics in here breathed – they only came to life when there were people to bear witness. Weaving their own lives through the folds of history.

His boss was calling this a 'World Reset' rather than a lockdown. The

team had been asked to make memory jars, depicting what they were missing. Andrew was going to put a model of the museum's windmill in his. Ever the curator, he'd also begun collecting: the paper facemasks some had started wearing; a few thin, blue, wrinkled wisps of gloves; an empty bottle of hand sanitiser. A recording of the First Minister's Daily Briefing. Photographs of deserted streets. Photographs of folk queuing outside the supermarket, standing on lines painted two metres apart. These snatches of time would form part of the Museum's Covid-19 Project. Curios at first, which were becoming commonplace, yet would be ephemera again at some point in the future. He planned to build an archive of safety notices, government letters, newspapers, community bulletins too.

History was unravelling. Very quickly, Andrew had realised this. Saw they'd all be living though the tears and tangles to come. It's not often you get to document history. Seismic, world-changing, life-altering, global history. A roll of toilet paper a local artist had painted, with illustrations of paper masks, wrinkled gloves and folk queuing outside the supermarket, would take pride of place in his cabinet of curiosities.

Of course, much of the collection would be digitised and online. *Everything* was moving online. But a museum needed objects. Tangible artefacts which looked back at you from their glassy shelves, and told you their story. Who let you see their marks of wear, the hand that held or shaped them, or held the brush, or inscribed the text. He unlocked the 'Medicine Cabinet' display. The alarm sounded, but it was only a localised sensor, battery operated. It would stop as soon as he closed it again. No need to call the cavalry. One of the ampoules had fallen over. He righted it. Rescuing the wounded. The case was arrayed with mortars and pestles. Pharmacy jars, green glass bottles. Syphons and syringes. Two notices, hanging side by side. One of them was slightly askew, so he straightened it as well. *Board of Health: Notice of Cholera. To be treated with laudanum, camphor and essence of peppermint.*

Plague and pestilence had visited here before. Many times. Way before there was a line on a map around a chunk of land called 'Dumfries and Galloway'. Black Death had come to Scotland's shores in 1349, lingering for three centuries. The first actual reference he'd found to the plague being in Dumfries was 1439. (That document had ended in a plea for mercy.) Then came cholera: two epidemics in the 1800s, before the Spanish Flu hit at the end of the Great War.

A small draught rose from somewhere, brushed across his face. How many lives lost, altogether? How many families, sheltering, scared? Bereft. They say history repeats itself, and it was true, after a fashion. You could always make patterns from the past – but he didn't think that was the fault of history. Was 'essence of peppermint' any more risible than a flimsy paper mask? If you studied it properly, maybe history could better equip you for what was coming. But history is hindsight – and they weren't nearly there. Who knew how long this new epidemic would last? That's why it didn't feel like history. Not yet. History is framed, has a box around it, is pasted in a book, locked in a glass case, annotated, explained, contextualised.

History was not this flux.

But it was. People didn't understand, that they were surfing the wave, right here, right now. It was the thread they were riding on, being drawn and pulled from underneath until the fabric warped. Wrongfooted them.

He stood a moment in front of his favourite item of all. A finely-wrought silver casket, topped by four graceful, fluted feathers. Jessie McKee was only a child when the cholera came here. But that experience must have shaped her, for look at the woman she became. This casket was hers, awarded when she became a Burgess of Dumfries – the only woman ever to be granted the freedom of the royal burgh.

Just a wee girl of eight though, when she watched disease rip through her town. Seeing St Michael's kirkyard fill with the dead, hundreds of them, buried in a cholera pit, as her father worked tirelessly in the new Board of Health, trying to manage the crisis. Jessie had grown up to be one of the most selfless women in Dumfries. Spending her inheritance to pay for public baths and washhouses. Donating the land upon which the Ewart Library was built. Promoting education and health, transforming how Dumfries cared for its citizens. The museum's own fountain was built to commemorate the piping of clean water into the town, all the way from Lochrutton.

What a woman.

What morality must have motivated her? A person's principals, work ethic – they all had to have a source. He wished he could have met her. That he could reach out into the casket, and be transported to the 1890s. What was Jessie's wellspring? Andrew was driven by a sense of duty. Hadn't taken a day off in…he calculated in his head. He couldn't remember. But this work of his was not a chore. He felt, instead, a deep gratitude. How for-

tunate he was. To have this job, as around him, others were at risk of losing theirs. To have job security – even the museum's seasonal workers were being redeployed. Some staff were going to Mountainhall, to work alongside NHS colleagues as contact tracers. But Andrew got to stay right here. Given access to this wonderful, wonderful collection.

He could hear the phone ringing, through in the office. He bid Jessie farewell, and hurried to get it. He'd recorded a general message, telling the public they were closed, but that kicked in after a few rings. This must be an internal call.

He wished he hadn't answered it.

'Andrew? How's things?'

It was his boss.

'Listen. Wee bit of news. Bit of a rejig required. Stand by for a delivery. The museum's being requisitioned as a new call centre. One stop shop where we can answer calls from the public.'

'About the museum?'

A call centre? Here, amid Minerva and Jessie? On his newly-varnished floors?

'About anything, I think. Advice about grants and benefits, health information. Possibly dealing with bereaved families, people without food or money. Businesses going under. Be demanding work.'

'And you want me to-'

'I just want you to set up the equipment as it arrives. We need a bank of distanced workstations for the staff coming in. Trained staff, you know. I'll email you the plans.'

'But…what about the museum?' *What about me?* Not saying it, but feeling it, biting at him.

After the call was over, Andrew remained in his seat, phone still resting in his hand. They were evicting him. He was to leave his post. Lower the flag. He'd still be a keyholder, allowed to come into the museum for emergencies, but his job was now to be an itinerant caretaker, on call to deal with checks and maintenance in venues across the locale. Perhaps the Rainbow of Hope could come with him – he would take it on tour. His knuckles burned. He hadn't realised he was holding tight to the desk. He eased his fingers wide. Began to rummage through the drawers for any personal effects. Who knew when he'd be back? He was sure he had a waxed

jacket kicking about here. Opening cupboards, busying himself with bustle, the way he'd done the day he'd been discharged. A bale of fabric fell from a dusty locker as he searched. It landed with a thud, began to unroll. A vintage St Andrew's Cross, complete with toggles. Compared to modern versions, the flag was longer, and a deeper blue. Old enough to date back to Mr Truckell's time perhaps. Andrew began to refold the material, crossing in diagonals, military style. Puffing up stour with every crease he made. It would look grand, mind, flying in the grounds of the Observatory. Shame to lock it away again.

Morale demands we must keep flying the flag.

Ach – why not? It would give it a good airing if nothing else. Shoulders straight, Andrew packed up his bits and pieces, switched off the office lights. Shutting off all the lights, as he made his way along, and down, and out. Took his time walking through the main gallery, whispering his goodbyes.

Nothing was forever.

This wasn't for ever.

C'mon man. Get a grip. You'll be back in next week, to sort out the work stations. But it wouldn't be the same. At the main door he paused. Maintained a dignified stance, fighting the urge to turn around. It would all be there when he returned. Andrew slid the bolt across. Reset the alarm, then stepped out, into the day. Stumbled slightly on the flagstone. On a large, multicoloured pebble that had not been there before. Someone must have put it there. Andrew's first thought was to rattle the museum door, panicked in case he hadn't locked it when he went in. What if they'd got inside? But he had, he had, because he'd just this minute pulled the bolt and unlocked it; was still holding the actual door ajar, the actual handle in his actual hand. *Eejit*. He closed the door quickly, before the beeps of the alarm turned shrill. Squatted to pick up the stone, ever careful of his back. Arcs of red and yellow and indigo and green danced before his eyes. A perfect, painted rainbow.

Someone had painted a smiley rainbow on a stone, and left it for him to find. His chest filled with lightness. What a lovely thing. He'd leave it outside, for now, while he went to tackle flag and flagpole. The pebble's colours gleamed fine and bright, in the mild spring air. But he might add it to the collection.

Keep Your Distance

There are people out there who need me. People I cannot reach. All the planet is closing down, hordes running for the exits, there is an inrushing, crushing stampede as the shutters fly up and the doors get barred, yet it is my job, always, to extend a hand of welcome. No matter what you're fleeing – war, famine, persecution – I am here to greet and guide you. It is me who will lead you through the intricacies of assimilation. It is me who will help you cut and paste your new life onto your old. Such a strange, awful moment, when you first step off that bus or plane. I know that, I understand. For this is not my birthplace either. You stand there, on the threshold. Make those tentative, faltering movements forwards that tell you there's no going back. It might be a day you have yearned for, or dreaded. Perhaps a bit of both. But suddenly, it is here, after weeks, months, years of waiting, huddled under canvas, or in a concrete block, or in the ruins of another family's home. And then, at the stroke of some stranger's pen, you find yourself here. I have watched you sigh, and take your children's hands. Heard you tell them it is going to be alright, as you venture forth into your brave new world.

Inchallah.

God willing. Yes, I know that phrase, because I have heard it, often.

I think about you in my dreams. Oh not always. But there are fragments of you, of the many yous I have met, that I am honoured to share. Scattered shards of who you were and who you might become, and you let me in. Usually – it might be after many visits, many patient, slow hours of motion and mime – you let me in.

Except now, I cannot reach you. They are closing borders in a frenzy, bundling you up and throwing you onwards– you were lucky to get through.

Lucky. They always say you are 'lucky', don't they? Those of you who make it to our shores. As if the losses you've endured can be magicked away by a daud of Western glitter.

Daud – yes, I use Scots words now too. They lie, unfamiliar, heavy on my tongue, but then one will slip out, unexpected, and nobody laughs, and it just feels…right. Like there is no other word in no other place that you could have possibly, ever used. *Dreich*. That's one you'll be using a lot.

I'm so sorry I can't help you. I should be orientating you; showing you the dentist's, sorting you out with a doctor, a befriender. The Language Line. I should be co-ordinating your appointments with Education and Citizens Advice and ESOL and the DWP. Explaining to you what ESOL and the DWP mean! (Basically: language and money. Both currencies of equal value, in any country). I should be tolerant of those who moan and go 'why do they get special treatment?', when I tell them what I do. I should bite my lip and swallow my anger and use words like 'humanity' and 'dignity'.

Dignity. They have no idea of your dignity. Of how you stand, unhunched. Clear-eyed. Stoic inside your own storms.

I'm so sorry I have to try and untangle all the bureaucracy you'll face, at the end of a phone instead of at your shoulder. Talking of bureaucracy – for some reason I cannot use WhatsApp on my council phone. Even though it is the easiest way to talk to you, or link you up with interpreters, it is not allowed. So I'm sorry I had to sprint to Argos before it shut, and buy a cheap mobile so I could see your face. Having two phone numbers to reach me is confusing, I know it is. But needs must.

I should be patient with you, and kind. Spending time to help you fill in forms, not just dashing them off myself and emailing them to you to sign. I realise that helps nobody. But it is quicker, and I have so little space left in the day.

I miss those spaces my job afforded. I miss taking off my shoes when I enter your homes, kissing both your cheeks, accepting your delicious cardamom coffee. Telling you where you might buy your delicious cardamom coffee if you haven't yet found that out. (There's a shop by the Burns Statue in Dumfries. And I'm sorry that I started to explain to you who Burns was. I should have known he is universal.)

You were meant to get a welcome pack when you arrived, filled with spices and shortbread. I'm sorry that you didn't. We did our best – you should have got a basic food parcel? The foodbank is very thoughtful. They know not to put in pork, or baked beans. I hope there was some things, at least, that you could eat?

I think about you – about all of you, about my first arrivals as well as my last - wrestling with the barrage of different health messages. The guidance, the rules. Restrictions. If it is confusing for us, how must it be for you? I hope that *Read Me*'s been helpful? It's that software on our website, which

helps translate all the pages of information I keep sending you? Anything I think of that might help, I keep sending you.

I am sorry if I treat you like a child.

I think about those words you said, haltingly, via the translator, the day I rushed you to your new home. That mad, crazy day before lockdown started, when we were all like headless chickens.

Except you. You were very calm. 'This is like before,' you said. 'Like it was at the start of the war. Society changing.'

I am so sorry you had to shut yourselves away. To a place I couldn't reach you.

But then, there are many places I cannot reach you. None of you, none of you who it is my job to help. Because there are parts of you that will never be here. Every one of you has left relatives behind: your grandmother, your father, your sister, nephews, nieces. I know that some you buried, some you left in camps. I know those camps are rife with disease, and that the disease we are all hiding from might find them there.

I know that, amidst our wide green spaces, under our estuary skies, below our undulating hills, you might feel freedom. But you will never quite feel free. We none of us escape our shadow – but your shadows are longer than most.

I am sorry if you had to give birth alone, crying for your mother in a tongue no one understood. But trust me when I tell you, your child will learn new languages. I have seen it – they learn so fast. The children that come here are so desperate to learn.

I am sorry for those of you who have been afraid. When my occasional, masked visits in emergencies (and topping up the electricity *is* an emergency) or my video calls have not been enough to assure you all will be well.

What do I know?

I am sorry our borders have become boundaries once more, that in keeping ourselves safe, we have made ourselves small. I am sorry that, when you should have had arms to wrap you in, it felt like arms were pushing you away.

Most of all, I want you to know that things will change. Change. Who am I to talk to you of change? You know this. You know the world keeps turning, no matter what, and that light will return. Because it must. We will go back to meeting in homes and town halls, where I can read your mail

for you, make sure your kids get halal meals at school. Point you in the right direction to find a job, or start your own business. I promise I will link you up with other families, if that is what you want, or leave you to forge your own path if that's what you prefer.

One day, we will share a meal together, and we will walk in sunshine so much weaker than the sun you left behind. But it will still be the same sun.

Until then, stay safe.

Stars in their Eyes

So tonight, Matthew, I'm going to be a ….binman!'

'Can we get a wee twirl, son?'

'At last, they've found something to fit you!'

'Och, check you out. You're a proper Tango-Man now, bud.'

The young lad in the split-new orange overalls gives us all a bow. Sniffs the air.

'Aye. I'm even staring to smell like yous and all. Eau de... scaffie.'

'Cheeky bugger.' Auld Stuart takes a kid-on swipe at the lad's head. But you wouldn't mess with him, not really. Brian, the boy's called. Built like a brick shithouse: not that tall, but see the muscles on him? See the muscles on his muscles? Biceps like footballs, thick, sinewed neck, thighs thick as your waist, which gives him that bouncy, strutting way of walking. Ken, the type you just know could handle himself in any situation? Including here.

We've had all sorts here, since the call went out. Mostly boys from the Roads, who've been great. Proper grafters. It's funny how we're kind-of the same department, yet we're not. Used to be if Waste were short, we'd get in agency workers. Must've cost the council a fortune, but it was all 'no, that's my man. You canny use him.' I guess we were just as bad here. But now, it's as if the lines have been blurred. I hope that lasts. We *should* be a multi-skilled workforce, not just guys stuck in our own wee silos. I like how it's been, recently. Like we're more of a team, ken? Only we're the top-dogs. No longer the 'wasters'. Numero Uno. To hang with all you roadies, filling your potholes. Potholes can wait.

Our RCVs cannot.

Can't get more frontline than a binman. We have a statutory duty to collect the region's waste, see. Can you imagine if we didn't? Mice, lice, rats – it would be the bloody bubonic plague, on *top* of the Covid. So we - this motely crew of Auld Stu, and Billy Liar (don't ask – it's all to do with his poker-face playing cards), and Frank the … aye it does rhyme, but we don't say it to his face, and Jimmy Whizz (fastest binman in the west) and young Brian and me; well, we have been elevated to keyworkers.

Us. The men who pick up your rubbish. Who scoop your spilling, malodorous bin bags off the kerb. Who wrestle with seagulls as they peck your discarded chip pokes. Who cut our fingers on your jaggy cans and broken bottles. Who reverse down hidden, dead-end lanes, who collect your coughed-in hankies, heave up your old, stained mattresses, who manage all the debris of your lives.

We, it seems, are keyworkers. Not that we get the clapping, but that's ok. Tell you one thing though, the complaints have dropped off, so I'll take that as a bonus. No, I do not miss dealing with them: *'To whom it may concern. My bin was put back 10 yards from my property this morning. It's really quite unacceptable, especially as it was pouring buckets today, and I only had my slippers on….'*

'C'mon lads. Rock'n'roll time.'

Auld Stu starts up his RCV. At least, that's what *I* call the vehicles, because I train the newbies, so you need to use the right words. At first anyway, until they start to learn what's really what. RCV : Refuse Collection Vehicle. Bin lorry. Ash cart. Freighter. Scaffie cairt.

And my new office too. I climb into my cab. Brian takes the other seat. A crew of two, not three, so we can keep far enough apart. Driver and loader. We've done the checks already, made sure everything's in order: brake lights at the rear. The packing plate, the crusher. All primed and ready for action.

First time Brian and I have been on together.

'Good luck with the gaffer, Brian,' shouts Billy Liar. 'You'll need it!'

'Aye, blind leading the blind, so it is!' calls Stu through his open window. 'Don't know what you'll learn fae *him*, son. You're just a penpusher now, Col!'

Not the most classic of banter. Not really worthy of reply – so I give them the finger instead. But I'm smiling as I do it. Smiling and shaking my head. I love this. It feels great to be out of the office – I didn't think I'd enjoy it so much. I mean – I'm knackered at the end of the day. Hours are longer than they used to be. But it's all just…good.

Is that wrong? We're fighting with a pandemic, and here's me, reliving my youth. I've been here since I was a seasonal worker. They're sound here, you know? We're all trusted to do what we're doing and just get on with it. And I've helped out before, when folk are off sick or on leave, but this is

different. This is full on labouring again, day in, day out. It's a right physical job, and I tell the guys I'm faster than they are, so there's aye a wee bit of competition.

Mind, I've nothing to prove with Brian, for this is all new to him. Got a lot of time for him already – he was great in training. Proper switched on. And he gives as good as he gets. Boy volunteered, you know. He's a gym instructor, for God's sake. Didn't need to do this at all.

'Alright? That you?'

'That's me, boss.' Brian circles a muscled arm towards the windscreen, and the road beyond. 'Wagons roll.'

I indicate, inch my way forwards out of the depot. There's been some right prima donnas come to us recently. A few of the ones who've been sent here – nose wrinklers I call them. You can just tell, the way they poke gingerly at the equipment: 'What's *that* bit for?', or shudder at the suggestion they might like to hose the cart down at the end of a shift.

People who think our work is beneath them. That's harsh, so it is. To see a job you value and take pride in, reflected in another's eyes, as a thing to be despised.

To see yourself reflected.

I did have to have words with Jimmy, mind, after I heard him shout at one lad: *'So does your shite smell different from mine then, son?'*

He's right though. We are all the same, all of us. Doesn't matter if you're a binman or a boss, we're all the same. We all work hard, and we all deserve respect. The trees flicker by; the lorry picking up speed. Green and gold, the long low hills of Galloway behind. A Beltie calf looks up as we pass. It's a beautiful, late spring morning. Sun just bright enough to ease your bones, but not so warm you'll be dripping after half an hour.

'So, how you finding it then?' I ask Brian. We're nearly at the start of our run.

'Aye, great. Good.'

'They're a nice bunch of lads, eh?'

'Aye, aye. Good craic.'

'Bit different from pumping iron though?'

Brian laughs. 'No really. Lifting bins, lifting weights - what's the difference?'

'True. And you don't mind the…' I glance at him. 'Well, it's no exactly glamorous, is it?'

He shrugs. 'I dunno. We work hard, we get sweaty, we make folk feel good about themselves-'

'We do?' I turn the RCV into the first of our streets. 'Right pal, jump out.' Painted cottages either side of the road, their doorframes picked out in blues and mauves and reds. A wee boy in a green jumper is playing in his garden.

'Aye. Have you not had any notes yet?'

'What?' I say, but he's down and out. We work steadily, to a rhythm. Loader goes out, fetches bin. Stands at the back, presents bin. Press the button at the back of the chair (it's what we call the lift), bin goes up, contents in, contents crushed, bin returned. Repeat. And repeat and repeat and repeat, for the next thousand bins.

Slowly, every fourth bin or so, I move forwards. I'll need Brian to guide me down the next road – it's a swine, really narrow, no turning circle, so you have to beep-beep backwards all the way down, craning your neck in the mirror, searching for that thumbs-up from your loader to tell you you've hit the mark. (Only not really hit anything, obviously.) Near the end of the street, I park up properly, get out to give Brian a hand. We used to work task and finish, so you'd batter through to get off as quick as you could. But this way is better. Steady is safer, I reckon.

'What did you mean about the notes?' I ask, as we finish up the street.

'The fan mail, you mean?'

'What?'

He grins, searches in the pocket of his overalls. 'Have you not had any yet? Wee notes, like? I've been keeping mine. Quite a few of the boys have got them. Just been happening in the last few days. Here, look. This one got left on top of a bin yesterday, with a box of sweeties.'

I read the note.

Boys, thank you for still working in these conditions. I hate to think what it would be like if our rubbish wasn't cleared all the time, on top of everything else. A huge cheer to you all. A grateful resident. Be safe and take care.

Standing there, in the soft, easy sun, I feel my throat go a wee bit tight. And then, it happens. The clapping. We look back down the street, and

there's a lady, leaning out her window. Another one, at her door, and an old couple on their front path. All applauding us, just like they do on the telly every Thursday. My cheeks grow hot, but Brian, he's lapping it up. Does that same daft bow he did at the depot. Then I see the wee lad, who'd been playing in his garden. He's coming up the street, carrying a toy car. As he gets closer, I hold up my hand. 'You need to keep your distance, wee man.'

'I know,' he whispers. He lays his toy on the ground. It's a chunky orange bin lorry. 'This is for you.'

The people in the street are clapping louder. The sun is positively beaming on us. I'm looking up at the sky and trying not to greet, and the light is so bright it makes me blink. And I am blinking and blinking until all I'm seeing is stars.

We Could Be Heroes

Bells ringing. Anna pushing, up, up, breaking through the surface of sleep. Knowing she couldn't stay; that it was fatal; she would slip back down again, easy as sinking into a bath. God, more washing – even in her dreams. Six am. Yawning with her eyes tight-shut, as if that would make the alarm clock stop. She'd had four, maybe five hours? Stayed awake until midnight, waiting for her shift to come in. Not her ship, her shift. The rotas came through on your phone, in an email the night before, giving you no time to think, or change plans. So your plans had to pretty much be foolproof. *Be Prepared*. Well seen Anna had been a Girl Guide. She yawned again, feet swinging down on the floor. Five hours wasn't so bad. She levelled her gaze at the clock, blinking. Dug her bare toes into the carpet. Perma-knackered; you'd think she would collapse each night, but sleep was an elusive creature, no matter what time she went to bed. Switching off her 'on' button, when it had been jammed at full volume all day. That was hard. Then, when she did close her eyes, seeing faces behind her eyelids. Frail imprints who remained there, and haunted her dreams. And were real.

Quietly, she moved round the darkened room, careful not to wake her partner. He was on backshift, so without even opening the curtains, she knew it was going to be a glorious day. No need to drag the kids from their beds, cart them off to the childminder. Martin could do that at lunchtime, and she'd pick them up at nine. Practically a holiday. Not. She was grateful though, so grateful that she'd found her childminder. Melodie. A song of a name. A gift of a woman. The Council had offered her emergency childcare – there were 'hubs' for the older two, but Ryan was just a baby. They were all just babies. Her babies. She wanted them kept together. To have a keyworker mummy was a pain, but to have a keyworker daddy too? To be shoved from their beds, their home, for long, late hours? Her children deserved better. She felt so guilty, shaking them awake. But farming them out across the region? To even consider it made her heart twinge. They'd offered her a place at a childminder, half an hour's drive away, meaning an extra hour would be added on, to the hours already away from home. It was

the worst possible timing: school closing as Anna's work exploded. Then her sister offered to watch them. To actually have them stay, for a week at a time.

No way! she'd shouted down the phone, not meaning to sound ungrateful. But how could she? How could Anna come in at night, and not have them there? To look, but not touch, their sleeping heads. To hear their breath and feel a fire light up inside her. She needed her children for comfort. For *her* comfort. How could Anna do her best work, distracted and distraught? But then she found Melodie, hidden in plain sight, at the bottom of their street. Lovely Melodie, who had her own kids and was as feart as everyone else. But who opened her door for keyworkers. Bless her.

Anna jumped in the shower. First scrub of the day. Kept her hair dry. It got washed at night time. Every night. She did her teeth, put on her uniform, the static crackling. Pulled her hair into a ponytail. Made a mental note to get conditioner.

When? When?

Made a mental note to ignore her inner voice. She put on her shoes and grabbed her thermal mug. Took a muesli bar out of the tin. Her first call was at 6.45 am. Which meant breakfast in the car. Sixteen on her list today. If she was lucky, she'd get a break around lunch, then start again at three. Three to five was dinners, then home for a break, but not for the kids – not worth it when she got there at 5.30 and was out again at 6.15, because the bedtime shift was seven till nine - or ten if, you were running late. Anna turned the car out of her street, shivering with tiredness. She took a gulp of coffee. She tried, awful hard, not to run late. It let down the folk who knew you, and upset the folk who didn't. Several of the people on today's list were names she didn't recognise, and might not see again, not for weeks at least. If anything, it was even more important to make a good impression on those you might not see again. Plus, she had standards. Even in the midst of this upheaval, when you were running from pillar to post, doing toilet visits and making porridge for old ladies you'd never met, dashing in and introducing yourself through your mask as you were reaching for the care diary with one hand and the kettle with the other. Even - especially – then, you needed standards. Anna's work fulfilled her. It was a privilege to care. Listening to a person's story, allowing it to unfold slowly as time passed, and you, passing it with them. Reliving their life, coaxing out memories, forgot-

ten strands of who they'd been. Of who they still were, inside. Because you were always seventeen in your head, weren't you? It gave her such pleasure, such satisfaction. The pleasure of a slow-cooked roast, as opposed to a heated-up tin of beans.

Sometimes they only got fifteen minutes. How can you learn who a person is in fifteen minutes? How can you gown-up, get in, greet your service user, find the pots and crockery and heat a tin of beans in fifteen minutes?

She peered at unfamiliar street names, trying to find the right house. If it was hard for Anna and her workmates, how much harder was it for the clients? So many more people needing help, just as carer numbers were dropping off - plenty of her colleagues were having to shield themselves. It meant some service users were seeing four different carers in one day. Literally not knowing who was coming or going. Yet carers like Anna might be the only visitors to cross their door all week. Here it was, number – she checked her phone – 35. She jumped out the car, opened the boot. Gelled her hands. Apron first. Apron, then mask, then gloves. Gelled her gloves. Chapped the door. She had keycodes for some of her regulars, especially if they had mobility issues. Luckily, this was an in-out breakfast visit. The elderly gent was already up and dressed, though she could see his pyjama top poking out from under his pullover. There were foodstains down the front of his jumper – grease, and maybe egg. He handed her his care diary. A thick tang of pungent sweat rose as he moved. 'There you go, lass.'

Every visit, you had to check the care diary. It would be kept in a folder, variously on the hall table, on the sideboard, inside a big envelope which was stuck to a kitchen cupboard. Each carer would read the previous entry, then make their own update before they left.

'Hello. I'm Anna.' She took a quick keek at the book as she spoke.

Dinner: Mac cheese. Bed at 8. Refused shower.

'And I'm Jeff.'

'Nice to meet you, Jeff. Now, what can I get you for breakfast?' It was a tiny hallway, leading to a living room with a wee kitchenette off it. In the sink was a pot of macaroni cheese. It looked untouched.

'Ach. I'm no that hungry, dear. Just a wee cup of tea maybe?' She noticed that his hands shook. The familiar quiver of Parkinson's.

'That's not a breakfast!' Anna opened the fridge. There was a box of

eggs, and not much else. You got any bread Jeff?'

'Aye, in the freezer bit. Thon wee icebox at the top?'

'How about I make you some toast and scrambled egg then?'

'Oh that would be grand. Have you time though?'

Anna checked her phone, trying not to make it obvious. 'We've a whole half an hour, Jeff. Plenty time. Tell you what, why don't we pop the shower on first, eh? Get you out of those jammies too. It's always nice to start the day fresh – plus I'll know you're no gonny just climb back into bed the minute I leave!' She grinned at him.

Eyes downcast. Cheeks red.

'I know your type. Typical man, eh?' It was always tough to judge the banter. You didn't want to offend, but a wee bit of cajoling, of kidding on and headshakes and arms on hips – often that could work. Tipping the equilibrium just enough to make them feel you were on their side; that what you were asking was reasonable, and just. A gentle kind of mothering, she supposed. This time, Anna got lucky. Within half an hour, she had that trembling body washed, dried, dressed in fresh clothes, had put a washing on, and laid a steaming plate of breakfast on a tray on Jeff's lap. He ate slowly, but steadily, egg falling from his quivering fork, and being scooped and patiently scooped again, until there was nothing left; Anna keeping on eye on him as she did the dishes with moments to spare.

'That was rare. Thank you.'

'My pleasure.' She wanted to lay her hand on his arm. Hesitated at the intimacy of it, which was stupid, given that she'd just washed his naked skin. Instead, she took out her pen, bent her head to write up Jeff's care diary. 'You look after yourself, Jeff.'

'Will I see you again?'

'I don't know. We never really know-'

'I hope I do, lass. That…ach, that was the best scrambled egg I've had for ages.'

'Loads of butter – that's the secret.' She patted her hips. 'Canny live without my butter!' Keeping it light and easy as she left, brisk and business-es-like and not seeing his face, watching her from the window. Watching her strip off gloves. Gel hands. Strip off apron, fold inwards. Gel hands. Strip off mask. Gel hands. Place contaminated items in ziplock bag, in boot. Gel

hands. Knowing he was watching her sanitise him away.

The day passed in a blur. More showering. Helping with the toilet, with getting up. Dressing. Taking medicines. Tidying. Folding. Cooking meals – at least they still got to cook from scratch sometimes. She'd heard other local authorities were reheating microwave meals at most. Not making it back home for her break – Anna was late, the house would be empty. It would be another forty minutes of driving back and forth. So she sat in the Tesco carpark, chewing on a falafel wrap. Resting her head on the steering wheel. Eyes shut. Not napping. Not seeing wee Elsie, the lady who could no longer have her son visit because she was shielding, and so was he. Who saw no reason to get out of bed, and thus lay there, day after day; her face turned to the wall, despite Anna's efforts. Anna, not seeing Mr McAllister: a neat, retired teacher, who tried to hide his exhaustion as he dealt with caring for his wife who'd had a stroke, while encouraging his son, who had Down's Syndrome, to keep up with the activities emailed by the ARC staff. Quietly accepting that all the Activity and Resource centres had closed, the respite they gave going with it. Doing it all with profound gentleness, with dignity and no reward. So many unpaid carers out there, keyworkers just like Anna, straining every physical and emotional fibre they had. Doing it only for love.

She jumped as a fist rapped on glass. Startled, then laughing, at the comedy duo waving and gurning in at her. Anna wound down her window. 'Oh look who it is. Haud it and Daud it! You keep your two metres, you two. Don't know what I'll catch.'

Colette and Ronnie, who worked in one of the few double teams, were hilarious. Anna envied them the camaraderie. It must be nice to have a partner to bounce off, or decompress with. Or just sit quietly beside, in the car. Though she doubted these two ever did things quietly. Ronnie leaned in at the window. 'Hullo rerr, china! Fancy meeting you here! Like a works' day out, so it is.'

Anna indicated the empty falafel packet. 'Just refuelling. You guys?'

'Same. Dead on our feet already. That's me two weeks without a day off. *And* she's been nipping ma heid an all. Moany boot. Bumping her gums, all: *Ooh, they love me better than you, pal*. Never stops.'

'How you doing, Anna?' said Colette. 'He's just jealous cos our last wee mannie said I was so much better at putting on his ointment than Ronnie

was. See, *I* go to the bother of warming my hands first.'

'Ach, you know what they say.' Ronnie fluttered his eyelids, gave a beatific grin. 'Cold hands, warm heart.'

'He said you were like a robot!'

'It's all the gear, isn't it? Goggles, visors, all your bits swathed in plastic. Crinkling and rustling like you're about to perform surgery. You've just got to see the funny side, eh? I telt him I'd to wear the mask, cos I didny want to frighten him with my face!'

'You can still smile with your eyes, though.'

'Aye, well, that nice Mrs Armstrong says I'm the best bed tucker-inner in the world.'

'Or maybe it's just that you bore her to sleep? Oh, here. Tell Anna what you were saying about women drivers, by the way.'

'Not every driver, dear. Just you.' The pair had recently transferred over to this area, and were already legendary at getting lost.

'Aye well, maybe it's your navigation that's suspect.'

'Aye and maybe you need glasses. You're no getting any younger, doll.'

Colette ignored him. 'What d'you reckon, Anna? To this Covid thing? Are we over or under doing it?'

'Honestly? I don't know. Things change so quick, don't they? First we don't need masks, then it's up to us to decide, then it's: oh, *you need a new mask for every visit.*'

'Everyone's got different levels of anxiety, don't they?' Ronnie opened his sandwich. 'But I don't think anyone knows for sure.'

'Aye, but that's what makes it more scary,' said Colette. 'Especially if there's a house full when you go in. I've lost count of the times I've had to dance round a family member who doesny even live there. No distancing, nothing.'

'Aye. But see the looks she can give folk, Anna? Hardly need to report them to the supervisor. Medusa here'll just turn them to stone.'

'Shut it, you. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best, I say. Just treat it like every house you go into, there might be Covid lurking. And I don't want to be the one taking it in or bringing it out.'

'Yeah, I know what you mean,' said Anna. Drops of rain began to spatter on the windscreen.

'You just have to take a deep breath, be brave, get your head down and get on with it. Folk need cared for, and that's the bottom line. Right come on you,' Colette gave Ronnie a shove. 'Get your erse into gear and get in that car. I'm getting wet, and duty calls. Plus it's your turn for the driving.'

'Which means she'll be navigating. God help us. Take it easy, Anna.'

'You too guys. See you later.'

She felt uplifted by their exchange. Just for a wee while, the fact of not being alone. Afternoon passed into evening. Quick nip home for a wash, and a change. Pot Noodle, speedy pee, then off. Staring wistfully at Melodie's house as she passed. Hoping Melodie was giving Anna's children something nice for tea. Driving up a surreal M74, bereft of traffic, save for a handful of lorries. Miles of emptiness snaking ahead, windscreen wipers swooping rhythmically left and right. It was vaguely hypnotic. An hour spent dealing with a district nurse and Betty with dementia, who didn't recognise either of them. She never did, but for that rare moment when memory flickered, and Anna got the odd smile or a sigh of safety; well, it repaid, in spades, all those other moments of having to start again from scratch. Betty was yelling, feverish, the nurse convinced she couldn't be left, or maybe it was Covid? Yes, suspected Covid, definitely. That was it. Adamant that she was right; she was a nurse Anna had never met, wouldn't listen that Betty had been this way before, until Anna shouted: '*But, have you tested her pee*?' Urine infection, same as the last time. Antibiotics, fluids and rest.

Clock ticking on, hours, miles, eating up. Daylight waning, Anna waning. Turning down beds. Sorting suppers. Counting out pills. Whispered *goodnights*. One more call, then home. The night was getting chilly. It had been raining again, the air moist. She felt it clinging to her flesh. Shivering, as she donned her apron. *Gel*. Mask. *Gel*. Gloves. *Gel*. Not one of her regulars, but she'd been here before, a couple of times. A farmhouse at the end of a lane. A farmer with no beasts left. A diabetic, with cancer. A father and a grandfather, whose children were scattered. A widower, who kept a photo of his bride by his bed.

She could hear the dog barking as she approached. An old collie, with no sheep to guard, so he guarded his master instead. Something Gaelic it was called. Luaidh? *Luath.* Bit smelly, but friendly enough.

'Hey, boy. What you doing outside?' The dog bared its teeth. Was whin-

ing, circling her, his ears flat. Submissive and snarling. 'Look at you! You're soaking.' Head seek as a seal, his black fur plastered to his skin. 'What's up? You get locked out?' She went to the door of the farmhouse. All the lights in the house were off. Anna banged on the door. 'Hello?' She couldn't recall his name, what was his name? How could she know the dog's name and not his? The dog was going berserk, barking at her, refusing to go near the house. He kept darting further down the lane, past where it skirted the yard, petering out to a gate, and darkening fields. Darting, then returning. Circling her. Yapping, demented. Was he going to bite?

Arthur! That was the farmer's name. 'Arthur!' she shouted, thumping louder. The door shifted, a bit of give. She tested the handle. Unlocked. Anna went to go inside, but the collie was grabbing at her trousers, snapping and tugging with his teeth. 'Get off!' she shouted. She lifted her arm, to beat him off, and the creature whined. She hadn't touched him, and he hadn't let go. Staring, they were both fixed on one another, her smarting, sleep-starved eyes, his black and wild and-

Pleading.

He wasn't trying to hurt her.

'OK boy. Here Luath. It's ok. Show me. C'mon. Show me.' She held out her fingers to him. The dog sniffed, then turned again, running down the track. Anna followed. Could see the gate at the end, agape. Pushed through, on into the gloaming, into the uneven, rutted quagmire of a field. Hard to see in this twilight and smirry damp. There was an outline of woodland along one edge of the field. She saw Luath's tail disappear into the trees, her, running after him, running and ripping off her mask, holding her phone up high. Weak torchlight cutting through the rain.

'Arthur! Luath!' She kept shouting their names, roots and undergrowth tangling, tearing as Anna ploughed deeper into the trees. Following the barking of the dog. She found them lying beneath a spreading tree. The old man was on his side, one arm extended as if he were swimming. Luath by his head, licking him. Whimpering.

'Arthur. Can you hear me?' She fell to her knees, banging her leg on a stone or a chunk of wood. Carefully, Anna slid her arm beneath Arthur's neck, turning him slightly so she could listen to his chest. The old man stirred. 'I'm no away yet.' His voice was hoarse. Painful.

'Arthur. It's Anna. Your carer. What happened? Did you fall? Have you had a hypo? I've a Mars Bar in the car-'

A tiny, slow shake of his head.

'Well, can you sit up? Here. Let me help you.'

'Leave me alone.'

'Sorry?'

'I don't want this.'

She could barely hear him. 'You don't want what?'

'This. I can't…I just don't want to be here anymore.'

The last light of day filtered from the horizon; the sky turning graphite, as the pale silver orb came into her own. Cold, wet loam beneath them. A tracery of branches above. Anna sat back on her heels. Moonstruck.

'I couldna do it. He was to go first. My boy. I wasna having him left to fend…' His words, breaking. In the cold, blue light Anna saw it was not a branch she'd knelt on, but the butt of a shotgun. Ice in her veins. The old man was crying.

'Is it the pain?'

'Och. I can take the pain. You ask any farmer about pain and suffering. We can take that, nae bother. It's the loneliness. I know I haven't long, but I had… ' A sob escaped, the farmer crushing it down, stifling it into a cough. 'I'm so sorry. I feel so foolish.'

'You're not. Not one bit. Arthur, you're so brave.'

He dragged his fist across his eyes. 'No I'm no. Believe me. I coulda even…'

Anna pulled off her glove, took his hand from his face. Held it. 'What's brave is the going on. Not the giving up.'

'Aye, and I was. I thought I could. But this Corona thing. The shielding nonsense. I canna even see my grandkids now.' His body shuddered. 'I just want to be with my wife.'

'I understand that. I can't imagine what it's like for you, Arthur.' She had to get him out of these cold, wet clothes. 'Honestly I can't. But what about your children? Have you told them how you feel?'

He didn't answer. Buried his head in the dog's sodden coat. Anna still held his other hand. She squeezed it. 'Arthur, please come inside, eh? Let's get a cup of tea, get you warmed up. Get poor Luath warm – look at him.

He's chittering.'

No response. In the distance, the long, high call of a bird drifted through the night.

'Hear that owl?'

'That's a red kite. No an owl. Thon can be bastirts wi the lambs.'

There was a beat, then they both burst out laughing. He keeked his face up from the dog's fur.

'Arthur! That's no language to use in front of a lady! Right, nae mair nonsense. On your feet you. C'mon.' Ever so gently, she pulled on his arm. This time, there was no resistance. 'Take your time. Can you manage? Careful. Your legs might be a wee bit shaky. I know mine are.' Her whole body felt apart from her, detached, yet moving in disjointed jerks. Breast pounding, pulsing bloodflow inside her ears. None of this was real. Together, with Luath circling and shepherding them on, they made it, inch by inch, towards the house. Anna had no idea what the time was. She was going to be so late for the childminder. As soon as the thought came, she put it in a compartment of her mind. Slid the door shut. She would text when she got a second. Melodie would understand.

Anna was there for another hour and a half at least. Waiting with Arthur until the doctor came. Promising him she wouldn't leave Luath alone in the house. Between calling her supervisor to notify Social Work, calling Arthur's daughter, and calling her brother in law, who was a cop and could discreetly deal with all things gun-related (and hopefully magic Arthur's firearm licence away), she texted Melodie and Martin. It was only later, as she was driving home, she thought to look at their replies. *No worries. Take your time,* Melodie's said. *The baby's sleeping & the rest of them are puggled with pizza!* Martin's told her he had got away early, and picked up the kids. It felt like a bird was trapped inside her, flapping to get out. A strange noise filled the car. Coming from her chest. From her. Peeling back her ribcage, and pouring out. Plenty of times she'd been driving home crying. But never like tonight.

Nearly twelve when she reached the house. Another text from Martin. *Your spa awaits you, madam.*

Arthur would be fine. His daughter was taking Luath, and there was talk of him moving in with them. After, when all this was past, and it was safe.

When would it be safe? Anna parked the car, went round the side of the house, to the shed. The window shone gold from the bulb-glow within. As usual, Martin had left a basin of hot water on the workbench. Sponge, soap, a towel. Her housecoat and her slippers. Anna went through the usual routine, stripping and scrubbing herself before she entered her home. Cramming her clothes in the washing machine the instant she got in the back door. Not even stopping to put on the light. Washing her hands in the dark. Again. Before she had her shower.

'Mummy!' A wee voice behind her. Her daughter stood in the dimness of the hall.

'Hey, baby! What you doing up?'

'Waiting for you. Want a hug!' Her daughter dropped her Makka Pakka doll, came forwards, holding out her arms.

'Oh, you know we can't, darling. Not till Mummy's had her shower.'

Her daughter's lip began to quiver.

'Will we do our wee dance instead? Mind the dance we made to say *I love you*?' Anna shook her bum. Made stars with her hands. Her daughter giggled, then began to copy her. Shadows dancing as they skipped and wiggled in their midnight kitchen. Anna, staring at the moonlight silvering the edge of the blind. Aching to kiss her daughter's soft hair.

Back to the Future

I am become my mother's mother.

Look at me. It's a joke. I am staring into the abyss.

Well no, actually. I am staring into the mirror and it's my gran looking back.

Nobody asked me if this was ok. It's like we're all full of the 'Blitz spirit', hundreds of Council staff diving about, saving lives, all frontline fire-fighting warriors, and here's me. Kids round my feet, keeping the home fires burning. He actually asked me to do that, last night. Can you believe it? Seeing as weather's still changeable, he reckons we should fill the log basket again, so could I just top it up this morning from the wood store?

That's always been his job. It's full of bugs and slaters in the wood store. But he's very busy, you see. Very busy being a key worker. Scores high on the clapometer, that does. Being *key*.

A key decision maker. That's what I thought I was. The meat in the sandwich (cut on the diagonal, crusts off. And served on a paper doily now. It's very important, how you present your food. When you spend all day bloody thinking about it, and shopping for it, and queueing for it and cleaning up after it, and making it.) I had staff below me, managers above me. I had responsibilities; folk who listened to my instructions, folk who asked for my thoughts. I thought what I said counted.

I thought I counted.

I know, I know. Does that sound awful? Do I sound like a whiny wee girl? I don't, I don't mean that, it's just…

Nobody asked me. You know, at the start, when they told us to fill in that form? Tick those boxes, state our availability. Well of course I ticked that I had kids– never thought; why would you? I mean, they're here and I love them, they're the best part of me, of course they are, absolutely.

But I'm a working woman, you know? Always have been. Part time for a few years, did a wee stint of job share, but I've always earned my crust. And I love it. I love my job. Love working for the Council too. You're part of something bigger, aren't you? Especially now…

Some of my friends have been drafted in to the Shielding line. It's been pretty traumatic, the calls they've been dealing with. Folk working ten hour days. Me? I've delivered three hot meals in Moniave. Oh - and tidied up my admin.

I'm on the amber list apparently. Amber for…champing at the bit… on permanent standby…waiting by the phone, day after day after day… hinging about …stasis…

Slump.

All dressed up with nowhere to go.

I would rather go out and pick litter off the streets, than sit here, twiddling my thumbs. And yet, and yet…the calls don't come.

Some of my pals, they're run off their feet. We have Zoom nights now (which are always a wee bit flat, since you are - essentially - still drinking on your own (but with the added joy of getting to see your own blotched, baggy, bleary face getting redder and baggier as you watch yourself get pished on screen).

But, yeah. When the stories start pouring, and the moans start coming…well, some of us just keep quiet. We're the ones listening and nodding, shaking heads or laughing on cue; the ones who don't really contribute to the work chat, except for the odd glimpse. The eye-flicker of silent recognition zipping in electric threads from one still face to the other.

You probably don't even notice it.

We'll be the ones with kids.

I thought about putting in an FOI, just to see. Och, I won't, that's daft, of course it is. But still. You do wonder.

I do.

I wonder who decided. Did they think they were being kind?

All women, all mothers, all doing nothing but mind the kids.

Do you mind?

I wish someone…

I mind that no one asked me. Yes, it makes sense, I get that. If the schools are shut, then the kids are at home. And if the kids are at home –

But did someone, somewhere just do it on a spread sheet? Just shift us wholesale, like that? *Over here, ladies! All women workers with weans in this column. Aye, the one marked 'Back to the 1950s.'*

Because that's what it's feels like.

Nobody asked me if I wanted to stay at home. It's not what I signed up for. Do I sound ungrateful? Thrawn?

Am I – God forbid – a *nippy sweetie*?

I'm just me. Me, who's an excellent worker. A juggler, a hundred-miles an hour, fly by the seat of my pants, never sit still girl. I *live* to be busy.

To be purposeful. I thrive on responsibility. I love people – *love* them, love helping them, love being surrounded by them. I am a sociable worker.

Not these last long months though. While the world's been going on reshaping and rebuilding itself, defending the barricades and saving the day, I've been in my pinny.

Solitary working.

It's a very nice, Cath Kidston pinny, mind – the sort you don't really want to get dirty. The sort of apron that Doris Day would wear in some film where she's the housewife to Cary Grant's square-jawed lead. I wear it when I prepare the family's meals. Monday is mince, Tuesday bolognaise – and we always do a meat-free midweek. Of course, I shop local now. Avoid the masked-up queue in Morrisons as much as possible. Once you could actually buy flour again, the kids and I did try some baking. I kidded on it was a science class, airily using weights and measures and the heat of the oven as an experiment (which failed). Went in as cup cakes, came out as crispy cakes. I didn't know a fan oven would be so fierce.

I think the boys lost all respect for their 'teacher' after that. My jaiket had been on a shoogly peg beforehand. Long division's all different now, and you don't have interpretations either, you have 'close reading', except its proper name is: 'Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation'. What a mouthful! Even essays - to hell with thinking for yourself and letting it all flow out, oh no, now you have to have a plan, and outcomes for each chunk and…aagh.

I think the kids look at me differently, now I'm at home all day. I think I seem…smaller?

I know *he* does. See me differently, I mean. I swear he went to pat me on the head last night when he came home. But I bodyswerved. Was too busy getting the casserole out. Ladling out bowls of goodness as he tells me about his important day. It *is* important, and I'm proud of him. Proud of us all,

how we've coped.

I wear my pinny when I dust and polish the rattling house.

I am so lonely.

I could scream. I honestly could. I could do my best damsel in distress impersonation right now, and it would be such a long and heartfelt primal scream.

I feel guilty. And ashamed. I've tried sending emails and asking for more work, any work, but my line manager's been seconded and it just goes in a black hole.

I need to be needed. Is that so wrong?

They say the world is simpler now. And, for all the pain, that is something to be glad of.

Look at me. Look at the torn-face on me – and that's in soft-focus as well. I've misted up the mirror with my ranting. They're all away for chips – to '*give me a wee night off*.' Bless. Maybe I'll put on some lippy for them getting back. Backcomb my hair too. Tuck it up tidy in a beehive, just like my gran used to wear.

I wonder if anyone will notice?

Sanctuary

To be honest, he was glad of the chance to stay at home. Glad, and guilty. Wanted nothing more than to pull up the drawbridge and wrap his kids in (disinfected) cotton wool. Peter moved the highest cushion so it supported the base of his neck. It was wedged awkwardly, between him, the top of the dining chair and the freshly-papered wall. Fine until you forgot, reached over for a pen, and the whole damn cushion-tower he'd constructed came tumbling down. Again. If this went on much longer, he'd need to get a proper computer chair. But his wife didn't want any more clutter; said he was messing the place up enough as it was, with all his work gear splayed over the table. She'd made him put a cloth down, in case he scratched the surface. It felt weird, typing on top of beige brocade. Made his laptop go springy.

The whole house smelled of paint – it was giving him a headache. They'd just finished decorating. Couldn't put it off any longer - when you stare at your own walls each day, you quickly become aware of the cracks. The dog-scuffs on the skirtings; the faint crayon marks you thought you'd already eradicated. The white ceilings that had, in reality, turned an unpleasant fawn.

From here, if he looked left, Peter could see the hydrangeas through the picture window, and the clothes poles out the back. Eyes right, and he could see through the eighties arch, leading into the living room. They'd argued for days about that arch. Should it stay or should it go? But when it was decreed you could no longer let tradesmen into your house, it seemed that fate decided for them. It wasn't a job Peter could tackle by himself. So they made a feature of it instead, painting the underside of the arch mustard.

It's kitsch, said his wife. *Ironic*.

Irony. There was a lot if it about.

He eased himself forwards, opened his inbox. The irony of his situation had not escaped Peter. Here he was, in his four-bed semi-detached. Thick rug in front of the fireplace, dog at his feet. Tulips in a spotted jug on the coffee table. Kitchen cupboards stocked courtesy of the Tesco delivery (at

last! At last, they'd managed to get a slot! God, the excitement was as intense as that time he'd finally got through to book tickets for Oasis.)

Yes, here was Peter, literally cushioned within his comfortable, welcoming home. Dealing with people who were homeless. He clicked on his referrals.

This had been his job for years. A difficult job, a necessary, worthwhile one. A job which could bring such satisfaction and sorrow. There were always days it got to you more, but this…this triage system. Running it from his own house, making assessments and decisions about kids with nothing, while his own kids were shrieking on their trampoline outside. It felt wrong. By opening the door to his own home, he was letting all these people flood in. It made him claustrophobic. Crowded. You had to maintain a professional distance, otherwise…

Otherwise you couldn't do the job. Not if you let them in. If you carried the baggage of every client you'd ever worked with, you would sink. It would leave no space for the others yet to come.

Still, the occasional one slipped through. Lodged themselves deep, at the back of your brain. But they didn't all stay with you. That was important. Over the years, Peter had tried assiduously to leave his work at work and keep his homelife separate. You needed room to …heal? Was that the right word? He'd not tried to articulate it before, he didn't think that was what he meant; it made the homeless people he worked with sound like some kind of contaminant. Those unloved youngsters and troubled men. Those haunted women. Those weary street-sleepers, those confused first-time sofa-surfers. Those there-but-for-the-grace-of-God went so very, very many.

There was a statue up in Glasgow that struck him anew each time he passed it – it was near the train station, but hidden round the back of a church. Homeless Jesus – an actual sculpture of a sleeping man on a bench. From a distance, it could be any tattered person. And that was the point.

They had nothing like that down here. Often, he got the impression people thought there was no such thing as homelessness in Dumfries and Galloway; as if it was a 'big city problem'. Tell that to the lonely and the forgotten who spent their days in the region's shopping centres and libraries, trying to keep warm. To the drifters, the evicted, the runaways, the beaten-ups. The lost-their-jobs and the lost-their-ways, the drug users, the

alcohol abusers.

Tell that to the kids who don't belong. He was looking at one right now.

Robyn Grey.

He scrolled down. *Eighteen*. Shit. An eighteen year old girl, sleeping rough. The email had come via on call at… 5.00 am this morning. Marked urgent. Peter had her name, her phone number and the message: *Refused temp accom. Family dispute. Says is staying with a friend, but sounded distressed. Possibly under the influence? Caller was adamant that we rehouse asap. Speech a little incoherent at times. Refused to give exact whereabouts. Notified Police Scotland too. No MisPers listed under that name.*

What a tangle to be unpicked. He checked his watch. 9.30 already. He shouldn't have taken so long this morning. He'd been getting up and going for runs, to replace the morning commute. But then there'd be the long shower, the nice posh coffee - he'd dug out the filter machine, so he could have it on a drip all day. Get the kids up. (Maya would already have gone to work by then. She was a nurse, so it was non-negotiable.) Potter about, maybe a wee sausage sandwich. Let the dog out for a pee (Sam's running days were over).

Right. He'd better ring. All Peter could do was offer telephone appointments. He worried, constantly about the multitude of things he was missing, every time a referral came in. On the phone you had to accept what was said at face value, when what you really needed was to see folk face to face. You had to look a person in the eye to know they were telling the truth - and he didn't mean just to sift out the scammers. See when the voice at the end of the line went 'I'm fine'? Well, that was all you had – their word for it. But what about all the words left unsaid? What about noting the downcast eyes or shaking hands? The sixth sense that told you they were hurting sore, were on the verge, were heading out of reach?

The back window was slightly ajar. Peter could hear the kids, arguing over who could jump the highest. Heard Gemma say she was going to put the dog up on the trampoline too. He reached down, to tousle Sam's ears. The dog gave a whiskery sigh.

'Don't you worry, old buddy. I won't let them.'

Surrounded by the bustle of his own life - why did he feel so alone? When a referral like this came in at work, there'd always be someone to run

things by. They'd set up a Facebook page, where he and his colleagues could banter and swap contacts, swap advice. But it wasn't the same. You had to pose and frame a specific question, you had to publicly display your weaknesses and doubts, commit them to posterity on the world wide spiderweb where they might come back to bite you. He yearned for the casual chats across the desk, the silent solidarity that came from just knowing your mates were at your back. Here, at home, Peter had atrophied; lost the ability to make his own judgements. He'd find himself spending hours, analysing simple emails before he sent them. But youngsters…homeless youngsters were the ones that scared him the most. Holding their futures like brittle glass, knowing one clumsy move might break them.

There was a boy Peter had never forgotten. He couldn't. Edward. A shambling, glazed-eyed fidgety soul. Peter still dealt with him occasionally, whenever he got out of jail, or periodically when he'd lost another tenancy, and was looking to be rehoused. At every meeting, they'd go through the same rigmarole. Peter would offer the list of options. 'Let's go for the full boonah, eh?' he'd say. Trying to make it easier for them both. 'So,' he'd say. 'We can provide you with a support worker?' Eddie would shake his head. Just the one, firm refusal each time. 'Help you manage your tenancy? Provide debt and benefit advice? Welfare support?' Eddie might shrug at this suggestion, acknowledge it with: 'If you can fire any more dosh my way, chief, wire in.'

'What about links to education and employment opportunities?' Sometimes, Eddie would smile here. 'And don't forget,' Peter would conclude. 'We can provide links to other agencies, such as drug or alcohol misuse.' Neither of them ever smiled at that one. Eddie's reply would always be the same.

Too late for all that, pal.

Peter had first met Edward when Edward was seventeen. He had been in foster care, was back living with mum and her new boyfriend. Smart, nervous lad. He'd been doing ok at school. Possibility of sitting some exams, with extra literacy support. Social Work hoped that being in his own home environment again would provide Edward with some stability. Mum was delighted. She'd had some difficulties, but was doing well. Really well. Edward was tentative. Hopeful to start again. Things were fine for the first

month. And the second. Boyfriend beat up mum on the third. Edward intervened. Boyfriend beat Edward up. Mum chucked him out.

That was when Eddie and Peter's paths first crossed. Peter had read the file note several times, before it had sunk in. It was *Edward* the mum had thrown out, not the boyfriend. *Outrageous. You're well rid of her*, Peter had comforted the boy, with all the assurance of his university degree and his six months in a new job. They'd found Edward a place in a hostel. Job done. Peter didn't see Edward again, not for another year. When he did, he didn't recognise him. The shy, biddable boy had gone. It was a much harder, more distant youth Peter encountered, with nicotined, bitten nails. And the wide pupils and restive demeanour Peter had learned to associate with drug use.

Peter had dealt with many Eddies since then, many names he couldn't remember. But he would always remember Edward. As Peter's life expanded – promotion, marriage, kids, Eddie's kept on shrinking. Eddie was a sore that never healed.

That word again. Heal. *Come on, Peter, get over yourself. Screw the nut and get to work.*

He dialled Robyn's number. She answered on the second ring. A deep, hesitant 'Yes?'

He introduced himself, explained his job was to assess her housing needs. Could they arrange a time to talk?

'Now's fine,' she replied, so quiet he could barely hear. Peter was about to tell her there was a system, that this call was just to set a time. Did she know there was an eighteen page Homeless Application document they'd need to complete, and that he would get to her after lunch? But he hesitated, and as he did, he caught his children's voices rising on the air. The girl sounded so barely-there he was afraid he might lose her; that Robyn and her story would simply dissolve, would drift into the air if he didn't try to catch her now.

'Ok, Robyn,' he began. 'Tell me a little about yourself. Where did you stay last night?'

Sleeping in cars, staying with pals – all of these got people off the streets, but they were only emergency solutions. Before he could begin to look for temporary accommodation, he had to establish homelessness. Not just homelessness – but was it intentional? Had someone simply refused to pay

their rent and walked away, or had they fled shoeless into the night, rushing their children from violence? Or was it somewhere in between? In meting out finite resources, it was Peter's job to sit in judgement of another human being's needs.

'Nowhere,' she said.

'I thought…your notes say you were at a friend's?'

'I lied. I was just walking around.'

'So where are you now? Are you alright?'

'Not really.'

This was always the toughest part, made a hundred times worse by not sitting with the stranger while they spoke. Never knowing where the crucial startpoint was, Peter had to let a person's backstory unfold. To pace out a delicate dance where the client would open up their life to him, but a conversation too in which Peter would have to push and prompt, asking the kind of questions no one wants to share, even with their best friends. *So. Tell me about: your mental health, past traumas, any history of offending.*

Go too fast, and the dance would invariably end with: *None of your fucking business.*

However frustrated he got, Peter would always try to think: What if this was me? He would picture himself and his client, sitting on a set of scales, the old fashioned, see-saw kind. Peter might be 'higher', because Peter held all the keys. But that didn't make him better – he knew nothing about what had brought the person opposite to this place. He might have to judge, but he didn't have to prejudge. Balancing the scales: what was the best way to do that, if it was on the other side? What would you want most?

Not to be humiliated.

'Robyn, are you safe to talk?' Perhaps there was a reason her voice was so low. Lockdown brought many problems, not least domestic violence. Women trapped in unsafe homes, having to whisper down a phone. How much guts did that take? How many hadn't found the courage to speak? Asking for help was never easy, but at least nipping into a Council office while you were out at the shops held less risk.

'Yes, I'm fine,' Robyn said. 'I'm just sitting in a park.'

'Can you tell me – is it your parents' house or your partner's you've left?'

'Parents.'

'And would you mind telling me why? Is it something we could maybe sort out?'

She sniffed sharply. That's what Peter meant – it was impossible on the phone. Was she crying, or snorting in derision?

'Robyn? Could you give me their number? What if I give them a call?'

She muttered; her face turned away, perhaps, from the phone? He thought she said *For fucksake.*

'I'm sorry. I have to do all these checks. We need to look at every option before we decide where you're going to stay.'

'They'll not talk to you.'

'They might.'

'They're arseholes.'

'Most parents are.'

That was a definite laughing-sniff that time. He waited. Letting the pause between them grow. Resisting the urge to fill it.

'They've just no idea.' She was speaking faster now. Louder too. 'How long it took, to talk to them. Night after night, up in my room. Feeling my head was gonny burst. It's like…it's like I've been carrying this bag of rocks with me. Forever. Not just carrying it – like they were inside me, the rocks. Everything, inside of me. Holding it in. Always hiding it and hiding it until my skin was crawling and tearing and I had to. I had to rip my skin off.'

'Robyn? Have you been self-harming?' He began searching through his contact list. Who first - Social Work? CALMS?

'What? Oh man, aye, but that's not important. D'you not hear what I'm saying?'

'Did you have a fight with your parents?'

'A fight? No, I wouldn't call it… Can you have 'a disgust'? Can you have… I dunno, what's the right word – is there even a word - for when you pluck up the courage to finally show the people you love most in the world who you really are, the person you've been fighting off and moving towards your whole, entire life? Then, just at the moment you do it, you see yourself dying. Right in front of their fucking eyes.'

'I don't understand.'

'Look, I'm gonny go. Just find me a house, right?'

'Robyn, I can tell you're hurting. That's because this really matters, yes?

So, please let me speak to your mum and dad, eh? Let's see if we can find a way through this?'

A long sigh. 'Right. Fine. I'm texting you their number. But then I want you to find me a flat, OK? I need a place just for me.' That sharp inhalation of breath again. 'Somewhere to be me. Just listen to all the crap they spout at you, then you'll understand.'

'OK Robyn. I appreciate that. Thank you. I'll call you back as soon as I've spoken to them and we'll take it from there, alright?'

'Sure, whatever. Oh and by the way, you better not call me Robyn. Specially not if you get my dad.'

'How?'

'Aye. Best just to call me Robert. Because…' She assumed a booming, older tone. '*That's the name you were bloody well christened with*.'

She hung up.

Peter held the phone to his lips. Thinking. Feeling stupid. Lost. He'd blundered through that call like a baby elephant. This was a whole can of…it was above his paygrade. Not Peter's job to interfere. The Temporary Accommodation team were still working out of the office. They had a reasonable stock of housing association flats - and some private ones too. No shared accommodation anymore, not unless folk needed extra support. It would be fine. He could just hand it over to the Temp team. They would glove-up, don their masks and meet Robyn in some lonely street. Slide the keys over in an envelope. No human contact whatsoever.

Everyone happy.

Except.

Except.

Not Peter's job.

Forever Peter's job. To care. To care, and blunder, and mess up and start again.

'Hello? Mrs Grey? This is Peter Marchmont here, from the Homeless team at the Council. I'm calling about …I'm calling about…' He wanted to say Robyn. But he also wanted this woman to stay on the line. 'Um… Robert?' His stomach clenched. It felt like a betrayal. 'Your…'

This was painful.

'Your child.'

'Is he alright? Where is he?'

'She's fine.'

The woman made the same sharp, nasal sound Robyn had. 'Oh aye, that's right. Excuse me. Apparently I don't have a son anymore.'

Peter could almost taste the pain emanating from this faceless mother, grieving for a child he would never meet. And then, from nowhere, from a place in the furrows of Peter's memory, a face did appear. Eddie's face. Not bitter, beaten Eddie, but that young, bruised, hopeful boy who'd loved his mum. Peter moistened his lips. His throat was so dry.

'That's right,' he said. 'You have a daughter. A daughter who's been walking the streets all night. A daughter who is scared and vulnerable and who needs her mum.'

Too far. He'd gone too far. He thought he could hear a sob.

'Mrs Grey? Please listen to me. We can find Robyn accommodation. If you really don't want her home, we can do that. But she's …Look I've been doing this job for years. With the best will in the world, we can't protect them. Do you have any idea of the sort of people she might end up mixing with?'

'Do you have any idea of the sort of people he's mixing with now?' the woman cried out. 'Do you? Because I don't? Turns out I don't know the first thing about him. My own flesh and blood. You seem to know more about him than I do.' She was properly weeping. Peter pressed two fingers to his forehead.

'Who's that?' A man shouted in the background. 'Who's is it, Moira? Is that him? Her?'

'I have to go. My husband…he's not coping very well with this.'

'Mrs Grey, please. I know it's none of my business, but the door isn't shut. Not yet. You can still reach out.'

'I can't think straight. I need time…'

'Mrs Grey, this is the time. What if this is the time and you'll never get it back? What if it turns out it's too late, if you don't?'

'Alright, alright. Tell him he can phone me. Later, when his father's at work.'

Her. He willed her to say her. And still, that wouldn't be enough.

'Why don't you phone her?'

He waited. He waited for the *Why don't you piss off and mind your own business?*

'Was he…' She cleared her throat. 'Was she on her own?'

'I think so, Mrs Gray. If a person can sound utterly alone from just a phone call, then I think she was.'

'Right.'

' Look, I said I'd call her back, once we'd spoken. So…What shall I say?'

'Don't.' Her breath quavered. 'Give us half an hour, Mr – what did you say your name was?'

'I'm Peter.'

'Leave it a wee while before you phone, alright? I'll talk to my husband. Then we'll phone.'

'You'll phone me?'

'No. I'll phone…I'll try to phone Robyn – Oh, this is so hard. I love him so much I can't bear this'

'I know Mrs Grey. I understand. But just take some time to talk, yes?'

'Aye.'

'Good luck.'

Peter put down his phone. Stared out his picture window, at the lilac hydrangeas. The dog stretched and shifted across his feet. There was a clatter as the living room door bounced open, and first Gemma, then Charlie bounded in.

'We're hungry Dad!' they chorused. They'd left the back door wide too.

'Is it lunchtime, Daddy?'

'Can we get a playpiece? What can we have?'

He scooped his children onto his lap, inhaling the bright freshness of outside.

'Anything you want,' he said.

Thanks a Bunch

You shouldn't be doing this. You wipe down the basket with the scoosh and the paper towel. Squirt gel on your hands, then agonise about the dispenser you've just touched, so squirt again, with your elbow this time, send the whole lot flying; the makeshift 'cleaning station' is now scattered, dirty, on the ground.

'It's fine,' says the assistant, ushering you inside the store.

You fling messages in your basket, barely touching the cellophane, as if the length of time your fingers are contaminated will make a difference. You hide behind your mask, scanning other shoppers, making assessments all the while: at the old lady who has her mask below her nose, at the mum with children, fizzing-with-energy children, who are fondling the produce because this is their big day out. You dart quickly, furtively, wishing you were not alive to all this risk.

But you can no longer shield yourself from this awareness - precisely because you work on shielding. Your job is to phone the lonely and the old, the ill, the isolated. All the scattered people who've been told to shield, and have no one else to turn to. Your job is to punctuate their long-stretching day. To make their day. Yours may be the only voice they hear that week, so what if calls take a little longer than they should? It's not your proper job. It's no one's 'proper job', this brand new Shielding Team created from scratch but, suddenly, it is the most crucial job in all the jobs there ever were. *We're looking for people who are calm, and patient*, you were told. *Good listeners – quick thinkers too. There might be times when…you know. Folk will be struggling, stuck inside for weeks. Struggling practically, yes – but with their mental health too. You really need to listen.*

You'd nodded, not quite… not excited, no, but a small thrill had gone through you there, at the thought they were talking about you. You were part of the frontline. You were the mesh in the net through which no vulnerable soul would drop. It made you feel a little brave.

You sweep through the checkout, one eye on the clock. You only get forty five minutes for lunch, and you feel guilty taking that. 12 to 12.45 exactly – you try not to deviate. What if one of your regulars calls when you're not

there, gets rerouted to someone else? But what if they needed *you*? Yes, you can agree to phone clients once a week, at pre-agreed times, but that's not much use if a body just finds it's all too much; that the quiet dark of their front room has suddenly switched from cosy to foreboding, is it? You're not meant to do it, probably. But still, you tell some of them your shift patterns, tell them the best times to get you on the line. At least some of the time, it works. And you get another wee thrill - of solidarity – when that happens. Och, not just with your client, but with the universe. This lovely, struggling world.

It's hard, yet it lifts your heart, this job. You're like a pivot, or a bridge, swinging from one side to the other, linking good folk to good folk. There's a lot of them about. All the foodbanks and the Food Train drivers, the people making pies and scones, the prescription collectors and dog walkers, the bletherers, the distant relatives, needing to…know. Just to know that their loved one is doing alright. That someone is nearer to them than they can be, even though they're sending all that love from far away. You'd helped one man from Canada, worried about his mum not eating, what with her dementia. You'd got her swapped from food parcels to regular hot meals. It made you feel warm, her being warmed inside her belly.

You're allowed some leeway – they want you to be innovative. You've even designed a card that can be personalised and sent to clients to cheer up their day. *It's a just for nothing card. A just because card*, you'd said to your supervisor when you showed her. Quietly delighted when she got some printed for the whole team to share.

Still, you probably shouldn't be doing this. It's not your job – you're sure it won't be allowed; there'll be a rule somewhere about maintaining a professional distance – but if there is, you haven't seen it. And out of sight is out of mind, your granny always said, and you've enough to be getting on with, you all have, we all have, and if a job needs doing well, just get on and do it.

'Tis better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

You can't remember who said that, but good on them. And you're not doing this for thanks either, nor to see the look on her face.

Not in the slightest.

Well, maybe just a wee bit, but what's wrong with that? Taking pleasure in a gift, freely given. Is that a selfish thing?

You hope not. You hurry down the road, away from the supermarket, past the closed-up pub, over the road to where the railway line once ran, jook left, with the boats and the water behind, to the stone terrace which used to house fishermen and thriving families, and are now holiday lets. At the end is a smaller, low-roofed cottage. You chap the door. Step back.

You wonder what she'll look like. She's Bessie to you, now, although it took a fair while. It was Miss MacGill for several calls, until she got the measure of you. Those are the very words she used! It made your husband laugh, when you told him. You know she walks slowly – she has arthritis as well as 'her wheezy chest' (which you're aware is really COPD. Your systems are fine-tuned, there are excellent links between the Shielding Helpline, the NHS, third sector, community groups and local GPs. In fact, Age Scotland thinks you are part of one of 'the most comprehensive services in Scotland' - your supervisor sent a very chuffed email round to say so).

At last, Bessie comes to the door. You hear the key turning, the chain slipping on. You stand ramrod straight, like you're come to see the teacher she was. In your hand you clutch your offerings. She's kept you awake at night, has Bessie. This proud old lady who asks for little, wants no fuss.

I have a mind to make soup, she told you, the first time you spoke. *Some good Scotch broth*. Week after week, you say you'll see what you can do, but that you don't make the food parcels. Week after week, you send an email, put in a request reminding them for soup ingredients, and they do try, the food folk. They really do. She's had lentils one week. A fat turnip the next, and she's kept a scrag end of lamb in the freezer compartment of her fridge for over a month.

How was your soup? you will ask, as you're chatting. You are allowed to chat – that is part of your job, now that the initial frenzy of scouring the region for forgotten shielders has passed. *A little thin dear*, she might say. Or *Hmm – unusual. I did it this time with a stock cube and frozen peas.*

You each know what is missing, for you've discussed it many times. How you need their sweet, earthy tangle to make the soup sing. How frustrating it is that they're never in the box.

Bessie opens the front door, as far as the security chain will allow. You keep two meters back, pull your mask up high.

'It's me,' you say. 'It's Margaret from the Shielding Line!' You sound so

excited with yourself.

'Hello?' There is puzzlement in her voice. You can only see the edge of her cheek, one pale blue eye, grey curls.

'I've brought you these,' you say with a flourish. 'I'll leave them on your step, alright? Just wait till I've gone to lift them, yes?'

You present your bouquet, of bright green leeks.

You'd picked the fattest, most fleshy ones in the shop, but here, in the fresh air, they seem to wilt. She looks utterly confused. You cover your disappointment. 'You'll need to close your door Bessie.'

You lay the vegetables on her doorstep, retreat.

'Ok, that's me,' you shout.

The door opens again, chain-wide. You feel daft, bawling in the street. Gesticulating at some flaccid leeks. A 'nice surprise'; what were you thinking – you've completely flummoxed her. Scared her even. You should have said you were coming.

'You can tell me next week how it turns out. The soup,' you add lamely. 'They're for the soup.'

'Well, I didn't think they were for putting in a vase, dear.' Bessie smiles. Sharp as a tack. Blows you a kiss through the crack in the door.

You catch it, and nod.

Go on your way. Grinning fit to burst.

In the Loop

The woman polishes the circle, running the colours through her hand. There is a red one, a green one, a blue and an orange. A purple striped one, and one glorious, glittery pink. She wipes each hula hoop down with a sterile cloth, wondering if she needs to, as they'll all be on the ground. No one but her will be touching them.

Still, you can't be too careful. She takes them outside, three hoops jiggling on each arm, to the mown field beside the caravan park, with the beautiful view of the sea. She stands a moment, letting the breeze catch her breath and carry it out, out, beyond the horizon. To her right, the village straggles towards the harbour, stretching all along the seafront, under panoramic skies.

Their village at the edge of the world. She's always felt protective of it, this fragile, exposed, doughty wee place. This place that keeps them safe. It is rooted to the searock, withstanding wind and wave, the salt scour. The threat of what lies beyond. She lays the hula hoops on the grass, pacing out a two metre distance between each one. Smooths the white cloth that flutters on the trestle table. Wipes it, then wipes the pale blue glass ornaments that sit on top. Six of them. One for each hoop. It was demanding, picking the right design. They'd spent ages, her and the others in the Community Association, trying to get it right. For how do you mark something like this? These aren't prizes. Not bombastic trophies, nor silver cups for derring-do. She cleans a smudge from an undulation of sea-spray glass. Mindings, she thinks. Wee mindings is what they are. Quiet thank yous, here, now in the lull of the eye of the storm.

She rubs her eyes. She is tired, been up past one, doing her reports. Ach, that's been hard. It's always hard, her job. To hold folk's lives – their liberty sometimes – in your hands. But now – doing it all by phone? Not to see their body language, their knotted hands, their faces. To speak to doctors remotely, and seldom the patients themselves. To deal only in emergencies rather than careful, planned preparation. So many links in the chain have been broken: psychiatrists unable to make face to face assessments. Courts

closed, so guardianships put on hold. Residential homes: out of bounds. Still, there have been times when only being there will do, when she's had to don her PPE and leave this haven and go forth into troubled waters. Her trade is in tending troubles.

She's definitely been more productive though, working from home. No fifty mile round trips each day, no trekking across the region. But she misses her colleagues, misses the chats in corridors with staff from other teams. Often, it is in those brief interactions that opinion is sought, advice given. Unscheduled moments when folk just engage, and are human and kind and share. Threads to weave them tighter. Sometimes that's all you need. She's read about ladies over in New Abbey, who've been stitching quilted hugs; small patchwork shawls to give to the lonely and the old. And she's read that folk are already buying their Christmas decorations, for something to look forward to. And for this year to be over, although it's only June.

She lines the glass awards up in two rows, but it looks wrong, so she rearranges, moving them out and round until they are in a neat ring. Wipes them all down again. Steps back. The sealight chinks and sparkles on their facets and planes. They are long, elegant shards of glass, but not sharp. Their corners have been smoothed and stretched. Glass melted and re-formed. Yes, she thinks. They'll do.

Each award has been inscribed. Just the name of their village, the name of each recipient, and this:

We are only as strong as our weakest link. Thank you for keeping us safe.

It was the young lad who cleans the caravan site who suggested that. On the spot, just made it up himself when they were discussing suitable 'quotes'. They'd been having a meeting in the log cabin the Association commandeered for resilience meetings, and the lad – Grant – was just finishing up. He's been great, has Grant. Volunteered to take on two streets, plus some of the outlying farms, when they were divvying up areas of responsibility. Should Grant have got an award too? No, that's daft. They have thirty resilience volunteers, each responsible for an area or a street. Every week, they've been delivering boxes. Basic groceries at the start, then, as word spread – well, there's been all sorts. Trays of home baking. Crates of soft fruit. Jars of jam, made from the excess fruit. Dried pulses and beans. Vats of minestrone soup, made from the pulses and beans, then frozen in

handy cartons. Birthday boxes. Boxes for the elderly, the vulnerable, the furloughed, the unemployed. Just-because boxes. Kiddies' boxes, with crayons, and sweeties, fishfingers and beans. Notepads, papers, books and puzzles. The most beautiful eggs from a local farm. Free pet food from the vet. Bits and pieces that might be useful – a refurbished radio here, a footstool for tired legs there. GPs making prescription lists and pick-up lists, so that some days she might find herself delivering a newspaper and uplifting a box of used sharps at the same time.

Two and a half thousand boxes, distributed by thirty volunteers. And they've all been marvellous.

So have the council actually. Yes, folk may say she's biased, but she's not. She's just seasoned – and pragmatic. Those shielding teams that sprang up overnight? Well, they didn't. They were forged by clever bosses who knew just where to reach out, and who to pull in – find old hands, for example, that had worked in the old resilience teams. Making new links from old.

The woman shakes out her cloth, then immediately worries about germ spores flying through the air. Flying out, flying in. Simple as breathing. It will be worse when the tourists come. The caravan site opens next month, and they're fully booked till autumn. The Association runs the site, for the good of the community. And it *is* good that tourists come, and if they don't open this year, then most likely no one will visit next year, and tourists bring trade and life and…

Twenty six mobile homes. That's how many she counted, parked along the shore road last week, even with the caravan park shut. She challenged one, asked them to leave. 'But we've come all the way from London,' said the man at the wheel. 'To escape the pandemic.' They did all go, eventually, when the police called round. Left twenty six black bin bags full of rubbish, all neatly piled in the layby.

She checks her watch. It's that time already. She sees the others start to arrive. Coming in clusters, in household bubbles and ones and twos. Soon, it seems as if most of the village is in this field, spread out in wide, wobbly rings. The guests of honour are here too – Grant gives her the signal, and she takes to the podium (which is really a wooden box, topped by the lectern from the library). She looks out over all the bobbing heads, to the bobbing sea beyond. It feels like she's on the prow of a ship. This, all this, is not her

job. Her job is fine and difficult and so rewarding and it makes her very proud. But she fits it around her other job. *This.* Tending her community. She breathes deeply, feels her breast swell. Thinks, suddenly of a doughty, small woman who's stood at her podium almost every day, guiding and cajoling the country, promising and delivering. A woman who appears genuine in her grief. A woman she'd no time for before, but who has gained her respect. It's funny, the people she thinks differently about now. This field is full of people she knew to see. But that's not knowing at all. The knowing is in the loops and whorls, the knitting and the stitching. It's in the baking and the packing, the giving and receiving. It's why they are here today.

'Thank you, everyone. Thank you.' The woman waits for the crowd to fall silent. 'Thank you. As you know, we're here today to show our appreciation for some very special people. So, if we could begin?'

One by one, the guests of honour take their place. The GP who never said no. The farmer who, unasked, and every day, gave all those eggs. The recycling shop who delivered and donated, darned and daubed. The vet who left no pet unfed. The café who batch-cooked the meals, the local storekeeper whose light never went out. Each one of them steps forward, into their allotted, socially-distant hula-hooped space, at the centre of the circle, at the centre of the field. On the edge of a village, at the edge of the world.

What You Do

Performance, pro formas. Perform.

I do try.

Management, manage, man. Aged. (And oh, I have this last week, believe me.)

Excuse me, munching on my croissant. Shouldn't speak with my mouth full.

But then, we've all gone a bit feral, haven't we?

I am a man who likes rules. Likes order. Would you look at the state of me though? Crumbs all down my shirt front. Pink today. Pink with a navy blue tie. I am the only one in here who wears a tie. In the olden days, I would have had an abacus, sat at a high desk, sent gold coins down chutes and wielded an exquisitely sharp quill. I am an unassuming man. I keep regular hours, and keep the coffers of the Council.

My job is to measure and gauge, to collect and count and assess. Ultimately, my job is to sit at the centre of the spider's web, and tell others they're not working diligently enough.

And yet. And yet, now – when the world has gone awry and we're all turned inside out - that no longer seems enough.

I have become untethered. I'm not quite me at all.

I surprised myself. *Eric*, I said. *You're going to volunteer*. Oh, I didn't mean to be outlandish about it, not to go outwith the Council or anything like that. I'm not much of a risk-taker. Still had to be something to do with money of course –I mean, I'm not the sort of chap to go delivering meals on wheels – all those awkward silences at the door, me more embarrassed than them. I get on well with numbers, not people. Always been that way.

-*Such a* quiet *boy, Maud.*

-*Yes, but he's awfully good with numbers*, my mother would say.

No, I just intimated that I could maybe do something a little less…back-roomy? Perhaps? If it helped? Then, whoosh, before you know it, they've stuck me in here. Business Support Grants. After a lifetime of trying to save the Council money, they've got me giving it away. Not quite sure I've got the

hang of it yet…I've had a few days to shadow, but Alison's been called to a meeting, there's only us two in today (twelve feet apart at all times), and it's a bit hectic. Phone's ringing off the hook, deadlines shifting –

Hello? Business Support. Yes, yes. That's correct I'm afraid. The scheme is now closing in July. Yes, that's right, this month, that's correct. Sorry? Why? Um…I don't know. It's not us, it's the Scottish Government – Excuse me? Now, there's no need for-

Goodbye to you too, Mrs 'Oh for Godsake Nevermind'. So. Where was I-

Hello. Business Support. No. Yes. Still £10,000. No, you could only apply once, but now you can apply for your other premises too. Yes, no. Only 75 per cent if it's a second – why? Why that percentage or why did they – I'm sorry, but why are you shouting at me?

He's hung up. Honestly, that's another thing. They keep changing the bloody rules. It washes you out, just trying to keep up. Forgive me for swearing, but trust me, that's quite mild compared to some of them in here. There's times when the air is positively blue. Always after a call, mind – they're very professional to the public. And kind. I've noticed that. The people who work here are terribly kind.

Be honest. That's not a trait you were expecting me to highlight, is it? Kindness? From staff who'd normally be dealing with your Housing Benefit, your Council Tax. Your non-domestic rates.

All that giving.

Except you can't always give. Oh, I hope he doesn't call again today. If it's bad news. I'll hollowed out. Harrowed. I'll just not answer. I'll pretend I'm not me.

I came in early yesterday. Much earlier, actually. You know, *that* aspect has been so refreshing – a lovely, brisk twenty minute drive each day instead of the usual hour-long commute. And they're being so flexible about it too. If you come in early, you can leave early. Or work from home. Work from 6 am until 2pm, if you like. No sense of time and motion, no accountability, no regulation. They are just trusting us to do the work. Imagine if all this *largesse* was permanent.

Apologies. I digress. I came in early yesterday, and found Alison hunched over the photocopier. She was scanning the pages of a small blue book.

'Hope that's not state secrets you're stealing.'

She frowned at me.

I've been trying to be more jocular with my new colleagues. I'm not sure they always get my sense of humour. I'm not sure *I* always do.

'The book,' I nodded, trying vainly to think of a witty one-liner – though what possible state secrets would we be holding here, in a dusty local authority office, in the middle of Dumfries? And who would we be selling them to if we did? The East Ayrshire Secret Service? Borders Mafia?

'It's that lady from the B&B in Annan,' she said, turning another page. I watched her replace it face down on the scanner. 'Mind the one, when I said she'd need to prove her amount of bed bookings in a year?'

Oh yes, I thought. She was a crier, that one. Big fuss.

'So she sent me this.' Alison showed me the book. It was a desk diary.

'You're joking?' I said. 'You're actually copying every page?'

She shrugged. 'Well, if I don't scan it all into the system, there's no other way of showing she meets the 140 days.'

'But that'll take you ages.' I tried to act shocked, but to be truthful, I was more panicking I'd be left to cover the phones.

'I know,' she said. 'But I'll do it in chunks.' And then she popped off, and made me a cup of tea.

Like I say, terribly kind.

Hello, Business Support. No, Alison's not here at the moment. Can I help? Mm, uh-huh. I see. And you'll have to remortgage? Not your business, your house? Goodness…Let me just check…Oh. OK. I think Alison's told you that already, no? That you're definitely not eligible? Then, I'm sorry but…There's nothing I can do.

Dialling tones are terribly bleak, aren't they? After someone's rung off?

I find I'm doing this quite a bit. Holding the phone to my ear for a little longer after they've gone. Partly, I'm afraid to put it down, because it will only start ringing again. But also because it feels…I don't know. I just need a pause, a space between that caller's desperation and the next one's angst to come. Oh, my glasses are fair nipping my nose.

Hello, Business Support. Yes, you'll need to send us a bank statement. You don't have internet banking? Um…can you scan…you don't have a scanner. Right, I see – or an email? …OK. Can you take a photo on your phone…you don't have a…no, no…let me think. You live in the town? Well, I don't really know if I'm allowed….No. No, you can't come in here. Look, it's fine. I'll meet you in the car park. In half an hour.

I hope there's no CCTV there. It'll look like I'm being bribed. Right,

quick swig of coffee. I've not dared look at the emails yet. But they'll all be there, piling up. Retail. Small businesses. Hospitality, leisure. Charities, sports clubs, village halls. People's hopes and dreams, their livelihoods, homes. All the unseen fabric that binds our communities, fraying.

Oh, I hope he doesn't phone again. I mean, either way, I've done my best. *Leave it*, Alison told me. *See the ones who argue to and fro, who won't listen to what you say, when you've done everything you possibly can? Just leave it a day, then get back to them. If you tell them the exact same thing, they seem to listen. It's like…as if they realise you've not made a knee-jerk decision. Like it's, och I don't know…more fair, somehow?*

None of this is fair.

I'm looking at my in-tray. Seeing tear-stained pages and bitten nails.

Another batch of new guidelines we'll need to learn. Yes, I understand why they're doing it, the government – they keep shifting to expand and encompass as many applicants as they can.

That's to be our benchmark too, Alison said. If in doubt, ask yourself: Am I being too mean? Can I find a way to make this work; to give this business some money?

It's a wonderful feeling when you can. Don't get me wrong - mostly, we can. We – me, us, this tiny team - paid out one million pounds in one day alone. Of 4,829 applications received to date, we have awarded 4,142.

But still.

It feels like we're on a stormy sea. And the sea is full of drowning folk, and we're throwing lifejackets out to them, scooping them up and chucking them out as fast - yet as carefully - as we can, except the sea keeps filling up; every time you look, there are more folk in there, spluttering and waving, shouting and screaming, and we just can't save them all.

And then you go home at night, and turn on your telly and see it repeated there. For real.

Oh, the world can be an ugly place.

I am a man who likes rules.

I spent thirty five minutes this morning, going through an application on the phone. (That's why I'm so late with my breakfast.) It was a builders' yard. Builders' yards are problematic. A builders' merchant, I've learned, is recorded on the Valuation Roll as a warehouse. Warehouses are not eligible.

But I refused to be daunted. I've discovered, if you're patient and methodical, then a Eureka moment might come. And come it did, when the fellow on the phone just casually broke off to deal with a plumber at the counter, and I said – *counter? Wait, you have a counter? Tradesmen coming to the door? Well then – you are retail! Retail can apply*.

The wee pop of delight I got when he went *Jesus, you're joking mate? God, you've just saved my life*, was rather satisfying. It's made me hungry for more.

I thought about him last night. The chef. Four times in four days we have spoken on the telephone. He sends me a daily email too – just the one brief round-up, usually after our fruitless calls. Each day it's worse. He tells me how he's had to lay off staff. I tell him about the furlough scheme. He says the staff are self employed. I say, *oh dear*. I tell him the criteria. He tells me how he just started up in January. I say *ah, well*. I tell him about rates liabilities, rates relief. He tells me the premises are leased.

Next day, I call all excited, to tell him they've altered the rules! Now tenants can apply too. Together, we read the small print. See that any existing staff must be on the payroll…

Ah well, he says.

I'm sorry, say I.

He tells me they're running a pop-up burger bar (takeaway only). I jump – retail! Read more small print. But he's been self-employed for less than a year. This will not count. This will not do.

Christ, he says.

I'm sorry, I repeat.

He tells me how he's already sold his car. He tells me that his mother's ill and his girlfriend's pregnant. How worried he is because it's a dry cough she's got, his mum, and his mum's in a home. And I listen, and I keep listening while the other phones ring out, and I feel my heart quicken. I get anxious when the phones ring out. I don't tell him my mother's in a home too, only she's up north, so I can't even see her at the window. I want to, but I don't. It wouldn't be professional.

He tells me how he's bought in new stock, loads of food and drink, for the grand outdoors re-opening they've been promising. How he thinks they might just make it if…oh no. Please no. Even as we're speaking, the radio is saying all outdoor reopenings are cancelled. *You'll've had your hospitality*. Too

soon, say the government. Too risky.

He tells me he's been struggling, really struggling, and I don't know what to say. I pray these calls are not recorded.

Right, that's me finished my croissant. Deep breath, click on my emails. Forty two, unread. And yes, there he is again today. I'm not opening his email. I will, of course I will, but…

I can see the subject line already, in bold black slant.

Refused.

I have run out of give.

OK, let's look at the next pile of new guidelines, new information. I can flick through them as I tackle these emails. It is gone eleven. Sally, who's working from home, should be picking up the office calls for the next hour. We've got a good system here. We are organised and supportive. We have to be.

I really thought this time, this last, take-it-to-the-wire time, we had a hope. *Eric*, I thought, *You're a genius!* I'd found it in the last slew of Scot-Gov announcements. *Bingo*, said I. Our lifeline. The 'Creative, Tourism and Hospitality Hardship Fund'. For businesses providing a vital service to the local community. Well, a pop-up burger bar is perfect. What community does not need a pop-up burger bar in times like these? So I directed the chef straight to South of Scotland Enterprise. 'Mark it urgent!' I told him. 'Because this isn't a grant we administer, so I can't really help you there. So-See, they're called, yes. By the way - how's your mother?'

But he'd said the tests weren't back yet.

Right. I can't put this off any longer. I don't want to open his most recent email. He sounded so low, the last time we spoke. I'm afraid of what I might find.

Oh, Eric. C'mon. Let's do this. And…click.

Simply a few words: 'Application refused. They say we've received other grants. Ha bloody ha. I'm done. Give up.'

Well, I've heard of all sorts of reasons, but that's just a nonsense. Preposterous. The chef has had no grants at all; I know that for a fact. I'm not having this. Where's his fight?

Where's his number? You'd think I'd know it off by heart.

Ah, here it is… It's ringing…ringing…

'Hello? We can appeal! - Oh, yes. Sorry. It's Eric at the Council. Och damn…I've spilled my coffee - Look can I put you on speakerphone? I've got my hands a bit full here.'

'Forget it, pal. But thank you anyway. Thanks for all your help.'

'I'm sorry.' Must be the millionth time I've said that.

'I'm still a chef, you know? They can't take that away from me. My granda always said: Work is the thing you do, not the place you go.'

'That's very true.'

'Though it was a good place, my restaurant. The Market Plaice. Good name, eh? Thing is, fish is the worst thing to try and keep fresh -'

'Are you alright? I thought I heard clanging?'

'Aye. I'm just packing everything up now, actually. Don't know anyone who needs ten steel oven trays do you?'

'Sorry. No, 'fraid not.'

As he's talking and clanging, I'm noticing he's attached the rejection email below his own. *Regret to inform you…blah blah…The Market Inn is already in receipt…blah blah*

I look at it again. See silver in the cloud.

'Wait! Your restaurant? It's called Place you said, not Inn?

'That's right. Plaice – as in the fish.'

'So what's the Market Inn?

'Oh that's the name of the hotel. We lease the space from them – it was their dining room basically, but we run it as a restaurant now.'

'As a separate business?'

'Well, yes. That's been the whole problem.'

'I know, I know! Don't you see? They've got your name wrong. Read your email again. They think you're the hotel. Maybe the hotel's already received other funding, but you – the Market Plaice – has not!'

'Does that mean…'

'You're still entitled? I think so. I really do.'

There is a long silence at the other end.

I'm picturing him, standing in his empty kitchen. With his career in boxes and his life on hold. I'm picturing his pregnant girlfriend, holding her belly and worrying about what's to come. I'm picturing his mother, waiting for her results, picturing my own mother, waiting for a son that cannot reach

her any time soon. I realise I'm holding my breath.

'Ach, I canny. I just…can't face it all again. It's too late.'

'It is not. Oh, for goodness sake, I'll phone them myself.'

'Really? But that's not your job, is it?'

Indeed it is not, young man, I think. *It is me, entirely overstepping the mark.*

'Just give me five minutes. I'll call you back.'

I put the phone down.

I am a man who likes rules.

Who likes procedure. We need procedure, to be accountable.

I am a man who balances the books.

But you know, more and more, I'm beginning to wonder. What is balance? Is it order? Or simple fairness? And what are books, really, but the stories we tell ourselves to make the world feel alright?

This tie's too tight…in fact…there. I'm taking it off. Ah. Feels so much better. Wee crack of my knuckles. Pick up my phone. Get SOSE's number…*Right Eric*. Oh - I feel quite giddy.

I am a man who likes rules. But sometimes, rules are made to be broken.

And if that isn't performance management, then I don't know what is.

Marking Time

She hadn't slept last night, not really. Not after that awful, lurching jolt, sitting upright, aghast, seeing her own outline reflected in the mirror in the half-light from the curtained moon. Hand at her mouth.

Instantly, she had felt sick. Dry-mouth disorientated, that moment of coming-to, dread inching up her spine at the nightmare, the nightmare which had chased through the drowsy fading of her head on her pillow, of the light going off.

And then, in the darkness, her sleepy brain switching on. Screaming at her:

What have you done?

No, Morag hadn't slept at all after that. She did try, because she knew she would feel worse this morning if she didn't. First, though, she had paced the hall. Went to the kitchen, made a cup of tea. All the while racking her wrecked head.

Think Morag, think. Are you sure? How could you have been so stupid?

After, she had lain back down, in the darkness. Listening as the clock ticked into the beating night. Feeling the pressure in her sinuses, feeling the tears come, wetting her pillow. Feeling them trickle into her ears.

*

Morag let herself into the office. First here – she'd been up and dressed since six. It was a hushed, old building. The key gave a satisfying click in the glazed oak door. She had always liked the sensation of the heavy brass door-knob turning in her hand, imagining all the other hands that had clasped it over the years. All the keepers and the bringers of the names. Now handles were hotspots; potential virus incubators, to be navigated with elbows and sleeves. Today it didn't matter. Defiantly, she let her palm smooth round the cool of the metal, and took a tiny comfort from it.

Once inside, another cup of tea. Even the kettle was a harbinger of harm, to be wiped clean after every use. The conviviality of tea breaks gone, made sterile and somehow unpleasant, forbye all that cleaning. She stirred

the teaspoon in her mug, the clink loud in the silence. In any case, there were rarely more than three staff at a time in the entire building.

Morag switched on the computer. It too was getting on, emanating a series of whirrs and groans before it kicked into life. There was a mantelpiece on the wall behind her; a relic of the olden days. No fires were lit there; the hearth boarded to keep the draughts out, but it was a handsome fireplace all the same, with an elegant clock on the mantelshelf. The clock had belonged to Morag's granddad. One of those sinuous, wooden-cased timepieces, shaped like a curvy hill. She'd no mantelpiece at home to put it on, and the steady tick seemed to suit this place. The office was spacious, with one tall sash window, set below an ornate plaster cornice, which bloomed with patches of damp. The glass was begrimed, the window box outside empty. She missed the Council's flower boxes and hanging baskets, missed the riot of breeze-blown pinks and blues brightening her day. But the poor chaps were mostly hosing down benches instead of planting flowers. Little time for beauty in the world, nor for books or bowling or singing in the choir. It was all boiled down to bare essentials.

To bones.

Morag sighed. Clicked on, to see her allocations. Emails were also slow, you'd think you had nothing, and then they'd judder in, thick and fast.

She would need to phone her supervisor.

The dread hadn't left her, it had moved from her spine, lay, coiled now, in her stomach. Futile, she knew, but maybe she should check the cupboard, check the files where the envelopes were? What was she looking for, though? Did she want them to be muddled up, or in the right place? What would that prove anyway? Did she think counting them would help, when she didn't even know how many of each envelope were there in the first place?

Morag wished she had stayed at home. Morag wished, last week, when the tiredness overwhelmed her, when she'd sat in her porch on Sunday afternoon, looking at the birds on the feeder and the gentle fall of light on the sundial, longing beyond measure that she could stay there all week, that she had listened to herself. That she had taken care of herself, instead of others. But that would have been selfish. There was work to be done, and only her to do it.

That wasn't strictly true.

She pulled out her chair. Her screen beetled black as the emails arrived.

Remote Registration. One big team from Gretna to Stranraer. She thought she'd like being part of a team, and it was nice, at the outset, the phone calls, the video meetings - but it had become an onslaught. So many things to remember. So many things kept changing, forever changing: numbers, procedures, forms, rules - and spreadsheets galore. So much duplication. So gruelling to keep up, when she was meant to be winding down. Last wee while before retirement, last few months of a job she'd always loved.

Morag, the local Registrar.

She relished the dignity of it, and the care. The meticulous detail of recording and recognising the value of each human life. All the births and deaths and marriages that had passed through Morag's hands; she carried them with her, still. It was an honour to have held them, each and every one. There was something reverent about marking people's lives in a book. It mattered. The permanence of pen to paper mattered. Even though it was all online now, Morag still posted out the certificates.

The dread in her stomach shifted. Her fingers were pale with the effort of clenching round her empty tea mug.

She would have to phone her supervisor.

She shivered. Chilly place, this office. Already, they were past midsummer. Days shortening again. The walls closing in. Hard to believe, only last year, that Morag had stood on a rocky headland at the Mull of Galloway, to marry two handsome young men. Hard to believe, as recently as February, she had registered the birth of her own great niece. Yet all she dealt in now was death.

Part of the privilege of Morag's job had been in that glorious variety: to witness the passing of the old, and welcome the making of the new. New marriages, new families. Over the years she had absorbed those ebbs and flows, like a village elder. She was the Cailleach, tending the collective memory of the whole community. *Her* community.

Morag sniffed. Fanciful nonsense. Morag was a Band 4 Customer Service adviser. Overworked and underpaid. And death was her lot, her allocation. They were operating a pool system, so that every day you'd be sent your quota. Nothing but deaths, from every part of the region; deaths of people she would never know, from places she'd never heard of. *Name of the*

deceased. Details of informant. Every morning, the dead marched through, and it was Morag's duty to phone their loved ones, to introduce herself and intrude upon their grief and make appointments, take details. Ask questions that might hurt.

-What do you mean, was he married before?

But there were good questions too.

-Would you like to use 'Tell Us Once'?

People were so pleased, so grateful when they heard about that. They didn't know the Council did it – well why would you? Until you needed it. So Morag would come off the phone, input all the information and begin to untangle bureaucracy, notifying local government departments, the Department of Work and Pensions, the passport and the benefits offices, so that those left behind didn't need to repeat themselves each time.

It was a small kindness to do, in the scheme of things. To rub out a person's life.

Morag prided herself on being diligent. But registering a death by phone was punishing. Where to find space for the pleasantries and respectful words, if you were not ushering loved ones into a room? When they couldn't *see* that you knew what they were going through? Couldn't recognise that you would treat them as if they were one of your own?

Parents' details. Spouse's details. Cause of death. Morag's job was to repeat it all back to them, even if it was a word like *suicide* or *hanging* or *asphyxiation* or *Covid-19*.

She might be the first voice a bereaved person had talked to. A disembodied voice, with nothing to offer but words. How can you comfort an aching heart, without a human touch? How can you reconcile registering the birth of a child alongside the death of its mother, without a cuddle for the broken dad?

Try as she might, Morag could not stop thinking of all the loss that would come after this first phone call, too. Not merely the gaping love-shaped hole folk would have to rebuild their lives around. That was a given. But there was another, particular pain this pandemic had wrought. The loss of a goodbye. The loss of grief itself, of the right to grieve. Families unable to carry coffins or sprinkle earth. No cords to hold, no hands to shake. No proud farewells and recollections. No singing up of spirits or sending off in

style. A loss of loss itself. What must that do to the people left behind?

But it was not Morag's job to think that. It was not helpful, not to her, nor to the people in her care. So, she pushed it deep inside; concentrated on the tasks before her. Once she had gathered all the information, Morag would prepare the registration page, then email it back to the family for approval. Or post it out, or read it over the phone. It took time, so much time, to get it right, daily, taking all the measurements of death, surrounded by death, hearing the toll of your own mortality, and all the while there'd be people wanting bus passes and blue badges too, and she'd still to send out birth certificates, although she didn't get the joy of registering them anymore, and that was how it happened, how the stupid, awful terrible thing had happened.

Her fist was trembling. Morag set down her mug. She would have to phone her supervisor. Try to explain. She'd been up to her eyes, if she'd had admin support, it would never have happened …

But that was no excuse.

How could she ever trust herself again? How could she keep doing this job?

Just…how *could* she?

Unforgiveable.

Morag had spent yesterday producing birth certificates and death certificates, as well as registering the deaths. Side by side, she'd been compiling them, tucking all the relevant documents and the accompanying notes, into the relevant folders. A sombre, plain one for deaths, a lovely bright one for births, emblazoned with *Welcome to the World*. She had a method, a tick list. She had professional standards, so professional was Morag that sometimes, she did things by rote. The stamping, the collating, so swift, so self-assured.

But last night, when the dread rose up, it came with a clanging certainty. Last task of the day: that gentle old soul who had spoken to her of ballroom dancing, and how his late wife had grown roses. His wife's forms were the last envelope of the day, and Morag had stuffed all the death documents in a birth folder. She was sure of it.

She couldn't bear to think of him, receiving that garish parcel. Believing that she was mocking him, or that he was just a number, and she didn't care.

She would have to phone her supervisor.

Morag held her hands to her face, cupping her fingers over her nose.

She closed her eyes. Imagining it was her, opening the post. No. She would have to phone the old gentleman herself. Quickly, before she lost courage, she found his details on the system. Punched the numbers into the phone. He took a while to answer, and then she spoke, all in a rush.

'Good morning Mr Duncan. It's Morag, the Registrar. I just wanted to check you'd received all your documentation?'

'Aye, I did dear, yes.' He sounded like he'd been sleeping,

'And…' She was going to say *Is everything in order?*, which might have been the most officious thing to ever have come out her mouth, but that's what you did when you were an official, and it was difficult, and official. You hid behind official words.

Unforgiveable.

Again, she closed her eyes. 'Mr Duncan. I'm so terribly sorry to bother you, but I think I might have put your wife's documents in the wrong folder? I can't tell you how sorry I am…'

'I'm sorry dear - what do you mean?'

'The folder – do you have it?'

'I do. I have it right here. I put it on the sideboard.'

'And is it…did I put it in…? What colour is it?'

'Em…it's a kind of grungy grey.'

'Oh, Mr Duncan. Thank you.'

'For what?'

It was too late, not to say it, and she had to say it anyway. 'I thought I'd put them in a birth folder. Mr Duncan, I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am.'

'For what, lass?'

'For this. For this phone call, for bothering you.'

There was a pause, when neither of them spoke. She opened her eyes, because their conversation had been holding her steady, and now, she felt she might fall over.

'Now listen - Morag, did you say?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Well, Morag. My Evelyn is gone. And I'll tell you this. It wouldn't make a damn bit of difference if her death certificate had come in a pink folder wi' purple spots. It wouldn't bring her back.'

'I know, I know. But-'

'But nothing. Evelyn and I were together sixty six years - did I tell you that?'

'You did. You told me how you'd met her at the dancing.'

'That I did. And I wish I had her to waltz with for sixty six years more. But I don't. One thing I'll tell you's this. Life is precious, my dear. Too precious to fret about the stuff that doesn't matter.'

'But it does, Mr Duncan. This *does* matter.'

'I know it does. And that's why you phoned me. Cos see if it didn't matter, then you wouldn't have picked up the phone. So let's hear no more about it, eh? You were very gentle with me the other day, and I'll never forget that. But you away and forget this, will you? Because, I promise you, there's no harm done at all.'

'Bless you, Mr Duncan. I'm so sorry for your loss.'

'You take care of yourself now, Morag.'

'Goodbye, Mr Duncan.'

'Goodbye, lass.'

For a long time, Morag sat there. At her desk in front of the boarded up fireplace; her granddad's old clock, ticking out the seconds. Feeling the pressure in her sinuses, feeling the tears come. Tasting them running into her mouth.

The Constant Gardener

Forty four year he's been there. Plenty of time to watch the grass grow. To plant and plan ahead: paths and low brick walls and great swathes of shrubs, to be spiked at regular intervals with sweetie-bright bedding. Time enough to see the trees unfurl; wee saplings that he planted as a young man, mature into fruit-bearing shadegivers. He saw a thing on Twitter yesterday (aye Twitter. He's even mastered that, him with his arthritic fingers. But then, social media is mostly thumbs. And Joe has marvellous thumbs – true grubby, gnarly, dextrous workhorses.) Aye, someone tweeted how pleased they were to see the Council were growing leeks in their planters as well as pansies. All the hashtags after, saying phrases like 'Grow Your Own', 'Community Food Share' – and Joe's particular favourite: 'Dig In'. As if it were a new thing, this notion of planting food amongst the flowers. Joe has been doing it for years. Quietly, steadily, putting blackberries by the *Ribes Sanguineum,* chives and oregano in with the *nepeta* and lavender. Two *malus domestica* for every crab apple or flowering cherry. No one asked him to do it, but then nobody told him not to either. Dumfries and Galloway is full of Joe's trees. Full of the fruits of his labour.

He looks down at his hands, nursing the remote control. He's had it on mute all morning, the telly. But he likes to keep it on, in the background, for the flicker of movement and colour it brings. For the company.

Forty four years. His hands are engrained with four decades of dirt. Torn, begrimed nails, no matter how often he scrubs. Whorls on his fingertips permanently marked in black. His bulbous knuckles are scratched and healed, scratched and healed forever. Joe thinks that if someone cut him through they could count the rings of him. Chart his life by saps and surges. *There's the great drought of '76. Mind Joe, when you'd not long started with the Parks and the fierce sun was splitting the sky every day, withering all the plants, and you'd to save wastewater for the sprinklers, and that lassie who worked in the office ditched you after one date for Sandy the janitor? Or what about that dark ring there, the autumn when your mammy died and you planted a floribunda for her. Rhapsody in Blue. Purple-blue, big, blousy rose heads –and the scent from it? Oh, the scent, just like her perfume. And look*

at that bold ridge: that's the halcyon summer of Tatton Park. D&G winning silver. Silver medal, out of twenty two councils! For a display you'd built by hand. Rabbie Burns in flower-form – well, why not indeed?!

Joe glances out the window, at the mess of builder's yard beyond. Turns his head back to the telly, because he just can't thole it. What is it they say about cobbler's children? That they are the last to be shod?

Forty four years and he's barely had a day away from work. To take a week off, at this time of year, when the earth is warmed and greedy to be fed, is unthinkable. To take…he counts it in his head…sixteen weeks. Sixteen God-forsaken weeks. To be stuck at home for all this time. It's unbearable. But they told him he had to shield. At first, he took no notice. Joe was too busy to be bothered with nonsense like that. In those panicked, early days, when the suppliers were beginning to dry up and he was fretting about getting the deliveries in, because if the young plugs didn't arrive in time to grow them on, then what would happen to the hanging baskets? Three hundred hanging baskets – Dumfries, Stranraer, Gretna – they'd all be bare. Stripped of their summer finery – and what about the tourists? Joe thought how disappointed they would be…tourists! Ha. He didn't know then, that there'd be no tourists coming to see his baskets this year. No shopkeepers happy to sponsor a windowbox. No pedestrians daunering by, taking a moment to smell his roses. No, he'd still thought, in those first weeks, that the ebb and flow of life would prevail and that, just as night follows day, summer would follow spring. It was Joe's job to map the seasons.

But how can you garden when the seasons stop?

They sent him home. *Time to go, auld yin*, they said. *Away out the road and gie's peace.* Ach, they didn't say that, of course they didn't. But that's what it felt like.

What it feels like.

Day after day, sitting in the half-dark of his living room, with summer going on outside. Him, a man for all weathers. Joe, who will die with his (mud-encrusted) boots on and a trowel in both hands, wasting away the hours watching Bargain Hunt – because the thought of watching Gardener's World hurts too much. His veins are itchy with the need to be in soil. Delving into leaf mulch and good earthy loam – it is an ache inside, a hunger that no amount of chocolate digestives will assuage.

He had great plans for his garden. He thinks of the whole region as his garden. It begins at Garroch, with its glasshouses and stores, and lengthens out, out, following the roots and fibres of every plant, spreading through the ground, pushing vital into life, connecting and twining, thrusting, insisting. Joe's garden lies on the breeze, as the clever-quick air catches seeds and spores, and lifts and carries them on. Joe's garden is in the bees and the insects who guzzle and drip as they pollinate their way across the south west corner of the most beautiful country in the world.

Joe thought, when he retired, he might travel. But he is not retired, and you are not allowed to travel. So Joe shrunk his plans. Joe still has great plans for his garden. His own. He ordered in sand and paviours. Promised his wife he would finally landscape the bit beyond the lawn – properly design it, the way he'd always said, with a rockery, a veg bed. Maybe a wee pond. Two days in, and his back goes.

Iron-man Joe, who has barely had a day sick in his life. Auld-man Joe, who is surplus to requirements. Who is weak, apparently, and must be shielded. Whose stupid, splintery spine after forty years of vigorous graft decides that he cannot even tend his own patch now.

Funny that. How you think you have all the time in the world. Then, suddenly, time stops, and you stop with it. It's only once you're standing still you feel it. The wear and tear of all that toil. Joe feels so old. He feels useless. He still rises at 6.45 am, for a day with no beginning. *Up with the lark. The early bird catches the worm.* Joe follows the patterns his grandpa wrought in him, from a wee lad, out in the early morning as the mist rose, helping Grandpa check for slugs. That's who told him he was green-fingered. Who instilled in Joe his love for the land, and showed him wonders in a single raindrop, in a single, germinating seed. Now Joe's a grandpa. Neither of his two were interested much in gardening, but maybe this tiny new life will one day slip her hand in his, and ask him how you make a sunflower. He hopes so. He's barely held his granddaughter. Born a month before lockdown; they have a few pictures of her on his lap, his big mucky hands touching her rosebud fists, but since then, he's been locked away. Shielding. Joe stands up, sharply, and his back pings in pain. Shielding means protecting, and how can they call it that, how the hell can they call it that when it is Joe's job to protect his whole family and now he's not even trusted to carry this newest, most

precious bloom?

He returns to the window. Straight in front of his eyeline, there's a big bag of sand, split and spilling. A pile of earth, some scattered bricks. It is ugly, ugly, ugly. There's too much that is ugly right now. Ugly and bare. No window boxes on the Council buildings. Empty beds, uncut grass – although he *does* like the idea of letting verges grow full and tangled with wildflowers. More nectar for his bees. Saving money and going green – a tick in all the Council's boxes. They were in the process of changing things even before they sent him home. Taking away the annuals and putting in perennials instead. Less work, but less colour too. Maybe next year they'll just make them stick in plastic flowers and be done with it. Or concrete the lot over.

Inside his arid living room, with the curtains part-drawn, Joe shudders. Imagine that. Imagine if the cutbacks mean gardening is a goner? If building back and being green means that men get sacked and weeds prevail? It's not as if there's many of them left as it is. Joe can count on one hand the number of proper gardeners the Council now employs. One hand – minus his pinkie and thumb. Joe is the last of the old school. Most of the younger ones are fine as it goes, but they've no sense of the traditions. He's not sure they *feel* the earth the way Joe does. Actually feel it as a living, breathing entity, a presence which responds to love and care.

He goes through to the kitchen, opens the back door, ignoring the mess of his failed endeavours. Careful not to make his lungs crackle, Joe inhales the sharp green tang that lies outside these four walls. It is the tang of life. He longs to be in amongst it once more. Telling jokes, fielding banter. Gently correcting the bend of a stalk, or the cack-handed efforts of an apprentice. All the young yins, they just Google stuff, so how will they pass on that root-deep knowledge to the new-starts, about what to prune, and when? How you cut a tree branch so the amputation doesn't hurt. How you graft a rose and give birth to something new.

Joe likes it when the work phones him. Initially, it was just for a chat, to see how Joe was doing. He appreciated the effort, of course he did, but it felt a wee bit like charity. There was little in the way of actual gardening going on then – most of the boys were spraying disinfectant on bollards and lampposts, sweeping the streets rather than mowing grass. But just because you're not planting doesn't mean there's no jobs to be done. If bulbs don't

go in in autumn, daffodils won't appear in spring. There's carpet bedding to be ordered, polyanthus for the poly tunnels, begonias (a standing entry, because you can never have too many begonias – such a versatile flower), new planters to be bought (he's thinking of long, elegant troughs he's seen, made from recycled tyres), displays to be planned – the list, like his plants, keeps growing. So he's taken to reminding them at work – ending every call with a 'mind and do the…'

Some days, Joe would be the one to phone first. It might be a turn in the air, the temperature cooling or warming just enough that it felt right, and some vital job sprang to mind. Sometimes, it would be a new supplier he'd tracked down– he knew they were having an awful time finding crocuses and tulips, so he used his new phone to 'go online' and source options. Ah yes – his new phone. His son insisted, what with Joe shielding. Went out and bought him this slim, daft gadget which has become Joe's lifeline to the world. On his new phone, Joe can receive pictures of his granddaughter. He can text lists for shopping, which his son or daughter-in-law drops outside. And he can explore the internet. Discover Twitter. (@gardeninggrandpa. Thirty eight followers, if you don't mind.) He doesn't know if it's him, or the ease of using this new phone – he can be in the bath or out in the garden and still talk to folk – but, whatever it is, the calls from work have become more frequent. It seems like the longer he's away the more they miss him. So now these calls are a regular feature. Part of a new routine.

Joe ventures down the path, treading slowly. His back is tight, tender, but it holds out. He places one hand, there, at the base of his spine, just in case. It needs a stake or a cane wedged in, the way you'd straighten a wayward softwood. He checks the time on his new phone. One o'clock. If Alison fae the office's not phoned by five past, he'll call her. Och, he doesn't like to be a pest, but she did say she'd ring…

Right on time, his phone goes. It's the What'sApp they're using now. A video call, no less! It was Alison's idea – Joe didn't think he could manage it, but it's surprisingly easy. Just another button to press, with his big mucky thumbs.

'Alright Joe?' Alison's face fills the screen. 'How's things?'

'Aye, no bad.'

'Hey - I can see daylight! Is that you out and about now?'

'Just in my garden – although the wife and I did go for a run yesterday. Stayed in the car like, but still. It was nice to be out.'

'Where did you go?'

'Eh…we took a wee drive to see The Bridge.'

'The roundabout?'

'Aye. I wanted to check on what you'd done with the new plantings.'

'Oh Joe! You're something else, so you are. And was it acceptable to sir?'

'Aye, aye. No bad. Decent design – I liked the fiery orange theme.'

'Get you, Monty Don.'

'More of a Percy Thrower, me.'

'Who?'

'Never mind. That display though - could've done with a bit more height in the middle – maybe a nice dwarf conifer? Or a cordyline?'

'Ok boss. I'll report that back.'

'And can you get someone to do something about the litter, eh? Terrible, so it was. Rubbish blowing about, bag and scrunched up paper cups folk must've chucked out their cars. l made Margaret run across and pull an old face mask off a rose bush. It'd got caught up in the thorns.'

'You made her run across a roundabout?'

'Aye, well, it wisna that busy. And I didn't want the plant throttled.'

'What are you like?'

'Folk are right manky bastards though, aren't they?'

'Joe!'

'Well it's true. Place was a damn sight mair tidy during lockdown. Anyway. To business, eh?'

'Right,' says Alison. 'You ready?'

'Aye. Stand by-'

'-your floo-er beds!' They chant it together, both laughing. She's humouring him, but that's alright. They've been doing this a few weeks now. Alison calls it the Tuesday Chat, but Joe calls it the Tuesday Inspection. He narrows his eyes, to concentrate, as Alison holds her phone wide, panning it round so Joe can see his beloved Garroch. His breath quickens. He can see the pointed glass spire of a greenhouse, then the opaque hooped dome of a polytunnel beyond. He can see Big Gerry in the background, hosing down wheelbarrows.

'Gerry, say hello to Joe!' shouts Alison.

'Hallo Joe!' yells Gerry, swinging the hose in a big loop round his head, like he is trying to lasso the sky. 'When you getting your butt back to work?'

'Soon, I hope,' Joe shouts back. 'Soon. Canny trust you lot to run a ménage!'

He thinks Gerry is making a rude sign, but then the video phone jigs onwards, Alison leading him into a greenhouse. Joe finds he is walking too, trying to keep up with her, and then it dawns on him it's just him, in his own garden. By himself. He stops, clears his throat. 'That you got the dahlias in now?'

'Yes Joe.'

'And the gladioli?'

'Yup.'

'Did you have that meeting on Monday? With the big bosses? Have they said about next year? Have we to plan as usual or what?'

'They didn't say. Just that it's a 'fluid situation.'

'But did you ask about the trees?'

'It didn't feel the right time…'

'Alison. What've I telt you? There's a right time for everything. And nature won't wait. So we'll do it anyway.'

'We will?'

'Aye. I want to start in the autumn. And we'll do it in Castledykes.'

'Where's that?'

'Dock Park.'

It is Joe's favourite of all the green spaces he cares for. He went there with his grandpa, and he'll go there with his granddaughter too. Folk don't know their own history – that great ships once sailed up the channel of the Nith. That the red stone wall rising from the river used to be the walls of the quay itself. You can still see traces of the iron bollards where they'd tie up their craft. Neither do folk know they owe their very country to Dock Park. That it's the place where Dumfries Castle stood. The place where The Bruce raised his royal standard, and claimed Scotland for itself. There are murals and mosaics to tell the story, if you know where to look. Joe knows, because he helped to build them, but he doesn't mind that others don't. When the dogwalkers, or the cyclists, or the mums and bairns pass the sunk-

en garden without a second glance, it doesn't matter. Because the murals, the mosaics and the stories are all still there. Just like Joe's trees will be.

He doesn't care if they give him the budget or not. Joe will do it anyway. Shimmering acers or mighty oaks – he's not decided yet. But there will be a tree for every person in the region who has died because of Covid. Whether it's a copse or a forest he's going to grow, he doesn't know. How can he? Nor whether the gardeners that come after him will need to carry on the job. Joe hopes with all his heart they won't. He's read on Twitter about an artist who's making Zen gardens - small places of graceful contemplation, and he thinks he'll get in touch with him too, see if they can incorporate a swoosh of shingle and local sandstone into Joe's memorial grove.

But right now, just as surely as summer follows spring, and spring will follow winter, Joe has more pressing work in hand. A gardener always does.

'Right, Alison. Autumn bedding first. Let me see the primulas. I'm thinking primulas and wallflowers, in your russets, mustards, purples. But I'm also thinking ornamental cabbages. Did you order them? I told you to try Farquharson's.'

'You did, and I did.'

'Good. Aye, fine. Can you move the camera a wee bittie, eh? I want to check on the heathers.'

Every week, she does this for him. And every week, Joe gets to plant his garden.

First Day Back

Sharpened pencils. A pristine rubber, with neat, square edges. One cheese and pickle sandwich in new, unsticky Tupperware, and a playpiece – two buttered digestives, wrapped in foil. That was what she used to pack, on her first day back at school. Getting organised the night before, her dad polishing her shoes, and her, worrying about who she'd be friends with this year, and would she get top marks?

Isn't it ironic?

This first day back was a day like no other.

As Kate reached for a folder, the pile of polypockets she'd counted out slid to the floor. She knelt to retrieve them. It was like that song. Just as she'd decided to move to a new job – after a traumatic, challenging year which she really didn't want to revisit – but, just as she'd mustered the courage to make that leap and embrace the new –

Whump.

Everything shut down. All of it – schools, economy. The ability to move freely and make choices and answer to no one but yourself.

Gone.

Some of the polypockets now had carpet fluff attached. She tried to brush them clean, but the strands bristled and clung. She shook the thin plastic sheets, then blew on them, shifting the worst of it. Kate had thought this new job would bring a new lease of life. Battered by the awfulness of last year. That sense of dread on returning to her old job and thinking *No. I just can't do this anymore, and support my family and give it all one hundred percent.*

She'd thought she was taking back control.

Life has a funny way…

This new job was to be such a godsend. She'd taught children with special needs in the past, in her classroom. Now, her full-time role would be to work with children who were visually impaired. She was to be their advocate and their guide, working with schools, parents and pupils across the region. Advising classroom teachers on teaching methods and adaptations, liaising with other agencies: orthoptics at the hospital, physios, paediatri-

cians, ophthalmology, speech and language. Quarriers. CALMS. Accompanying parents to medical appointments, if that's what they needed. Working with children from babes in arms to age eighteen.

She'd had so many plans. None of those plans involved sitting at home for months. Trying to learn the ropes and help children whose worlds were already clouded and unsure, move from nursery to primary, from primary to secondary, when they'd never set foot in their new schools. Let alone had the benefits of an enhanced transition. Careful, planned transitions where, quietly and alone, they could take their time, ask questions. Visit more than once, exploring their parameters. When their mums could meet the jannie. Ask about using digital cameras and dictaphones. It was Kate's job to make it all go smoothly, all these things she'd never done before, and would not happen this year anyway. But the moves to a new school – even virtually - would – were – still happening, and so she had to try. With nothing to hold on to. The guide with no guide.

Feeling her way. They were all feeling their way.

Kate should have been walking pupils through their new environment. Helping devise mental maps and routes. Working with Mobility – does this child need a cane? Does the school fully understand their specific eye condition? Many of her charges had other needs too– kids with cerebral palsy say, or ADHD.

Kate had thirty two children under her wing. Only four of whom she'd met. Within two weeks of taking up her new job, the pandemic had struck and she'd passed through the looking glass. There was Kate, stuck on the wrong side, her old world gone fuzzy. Distant. Instantly, she'd been overwhelmed by the responsibility of the task ahead. Overwhelmed too, by isolation. By her fear of working in the dark.

Schools went into survival mode when lockdown started. So fast, so chaotic – how could she make sure her children did not get lost? *What about my kids!* she'd wanted to scream. But she didn't. She took all her fears and lack of knowledge. Looked them in the eye. Turned disadvantage to advantage, and did what she first did when she became a teacher. She learned as she taught.

In the last frantic week before the schools shut, Kate drafted a plan. If she was a teacher, unsure of what a visually impaired child might need –

what would she need to know? She worked flat out to prepare it. *Advice for Teachers if you Have a Pupil with Visual Impairment.* Not a snappy title, but it did what it said on the tin. The document became Kate's calling card, allowing her to introduce herself with confidence to all the schools, all the teachers she was meant to be working with.

Floors. Stairs. Trip hazards. Buddies. Clutter. Coatpegs. Colour coding. Tactile timetables. Access to Braillers. RNIB videos and advice. Talking Books. She tried to think of everything.

By the end of writing the paper, she'd felt drained. Protecting and predicting. Fighting fires that had not yet been ignited. *Please let me have got it right.* Her youngest son would bring her cups of tea, which she'd only notice once they'd gone cold.

The plan was comprehensive. It covered every eventuality Kate could think of, until it didn't, and she had to update it some more. Remote learning – fine if you have the kit. So she had headteachers driving about, dropping off iPads for kids. She managed to get some electronic Braillers distributed too. She tried to be proactive. To project, arms feeling out into the future. What might she need to be aware of? What were the obstacles that would trip her up?

Nobody knows you, Kate. There's barely been time to say hello.

So she updated all her contact information. Made sure she contacted every family on her caseload too, so they knew who she was, and how to get in touch. If they didn't get back, she'd contact the class teacher instead. Ask them to pass on her details. As information came into Kate, she pinged it straight back out. Giving constant updates to parents, forwarding emails about the Audio Service. Highlighting that Library Services were reading bedtime stories aloud. She worked like there were two of her – sometimes it seemed there was. Sometimes she felt she was hovering above herself, watching this frenetic woman who was juggling and spinning, swivelling and catching. It made her dizzy.

But still, she worked on. It was as if she was scared to stop. What if the spinning slowed, and she fell off? As one issue got dealt with, another would rear its head. Parents began to call with problems. They couldn't work the technology. Who to contact? How to resolve? Sometimes the solution was in Kate's hands – they might have been given a new iPad, but no one had

explained how it worked. It daunted Kate too. So she put herself in the family's shoes. Once more, she learned as she taught. Got to grips with iPad Access Plus. Voice Over. Display Accommodations. She used it as a mum would, learning to understand the device's shortcuts and its worth. Then she wrote another leaflet, smaller, more concise. Telling teachers and parents how to bring up magnifiers and enlarge screens. She made friends with CALL Scotland – added their contacts to the mix, so arrangements could be made for specialist technicians to come out, and do assessments in a child's home. But still, the problems poured in. She had parents shouting down the phone, about lack of direction, lack of contact from the school. She had worried teachers calling, stressed and asking – *Is this work I'm providing ok*? And Kate, barely knowing her pupils, nor their home environment, or how their parents were coping.

She felt so lost. Under house arrest, shackled to her laptop and stuck in a groundhog day. Her anxiety went through the roof. Kate was doling out all this information, but where was the information for her? Where was the counselling, the help for staff struggling to cope? Someone should write an advice leaflet for that. She'd barely been in the office, but she was already missing conversations with colleagues. Desperately. There were still calls and emails, but it all seemed too formal. It was all the incidental questions she yearned for, the spontaneity, the silly, reassuring jokes. Just the chat. But if she told the others that, what would they say? They'd think she was unprofessional.

There were three of them in the team. Kate was the new girl. She didn't want to let them down. At the end of each day, Kate would lie awake, falling off imagined cliff-edges. Fearful of the day to come. Then, one long night, she had watched the light change through the curtains as it elongated into dawn. Her husband slept beside her. Her kids were safe. She was warm, drowsy. Floating, her mind transparent and loose, and it came to her.

Learn as you teach.

Maybe her workmates could teach her, if she let them. But first, she had to open up.

It was tough, that first time she spoke out. Tough, being small, and vulnerable. It came at the end of a virtual meeting, in that awkward space where the business has been discussed and nobody quite knew who should

press the Leave button first. She almost didn't say it.

'I'm finding this really hard.'

First one face, then another, breaking into smiles.

'Kate. You're doing great.'

Her colleagues became her rocks. Once she let them. She treasured each wee nugget of advice they offered, because she knew it came from a good place. They'd all stood in her shoes.

If you can support the parents, the kids will be alright.

Don't forget – these parents have really had to fight for their children. They can be angry because they're scared.

Remember, Steph who you replaced – she'd been with some of these kids since they were a baby. That's no reflection on you. You just need to build trust with them. Keep building those relationships. And listen. Really listen to what they're saying.

Kate did. Beneath all the many words, she could hear the same refrain. Over and over again:

My child shouldn't adapt to suit the world – the world needs to adapt to my child.

How could Kate make that happen? Her supervisor gave her permission not to worry. 'Be proactive, yes. But just stay in the moment, Kate. Stop catastrophising. Stop trying to solve something that might not happen. And keep telling yourself : *I'm doing ok.*'

She started her Braille training during lockdown. The Brailler was like an old typewriter, each key representing a dot. The way you pressed gave combinations of dots. Patterns of dots. Signs for punctuation. Contractions. Maths signs, chemistry symbols. It was fascinating. But it was important her children could share the same books as their classmates too. The RNIB ran a Book Share Programme, where the filter colour or font size of a book could be changed, making it readable for some visual impairments. But it needed the publisher to agree. Before lockdown, she'd already encountered one wee boy struggling, because permission had yet to be granted. She kept thinking of that child, sitting in the classroom. What if that was her son? Trailing behind as his class advanced? What could Kate do, here in the moment? *Don't give up*. So she hunted down the publisher's CEO on Facebook. Harangued him until he gave in.

With no pupils to meet, she volunteered for some shifts at the Hub, helping to look after the children of keyworkers. Mixing with other folk felt

so good. Over the summer, as the new normal was planned, Kate focused, and worked, and projected like before. But this time, she felt in control. No longer juggling and spinning, watching for the crash. This time, she was listening. She was conducting, instinctively. What difficulties might blended learning throw up? Would hand sanitising stations just be one more thing to bang into? Covid safety notices and one way systems - how could her children understand them?

She found she was feeling happy. Now she was in her stride, having all that time at home was nice. The stress of her last job had sucked out her joy, but Kate was learning to love life again. Focus on her family as well as work. Learning how to say *No* and *Not now* along with *Yes*.

Before she knew it, the summer had passed. Tomorrow was the first day of the new autumn term – a term that would take place in real buildings, in real time! She had never felt so excited. A quiet delight ran through her as she packed her bag. She could not wait to get out there and speak to people again. There were still worries yes, but she could handle them. The lack of guidance was a problem - did she need a mask and PPE in the school corridor? What about using a pool car; a vehicle that might have had multiple people touching the wheel? She didn't want to risk infecting an already vulnerable child. It would probably be easier to just drive her own car and not claim the petrol. Yes, pay for the privilege to do her job.

It would be worth it.

Kate's first task tomorrow was to support a girl called Jenny. Her day would involve giving advice to learning support staff. But, more importantly it would be about helping Jenny find her way. They'd been working together on a PowerPoint presentation, about Jenny's story and what her visual impairment was. Why she might bump into stuff. Kate had printed out the presentations, slipped them into polypockets, one for each child in Jenny's class. She hoped that, by presenting them in shiny covers, the kids would see the information as something important. Keep it safe, so they could remind themselves what Jenny saw, when she looked at the world. Kate had a few pairs of plastic glasses too, adapted to simulate various eye conditions, for Jenny's classmates to try. Should she let the kids touch them, though? Pass them around? Probably not. Would it work if she wore them instead, then recorded what she saw through her phone? She donned a pair, focused

on her garden outside. Watched the edges of the lawn blur and disappear. Changed the lens so that her central vision became a black hole, the periphery mere shadows. The trill of excitement she'd been feeling started to speed into anxiety. She had to get this right.

'What you doing, Mum? You look mental!'

Her son had come in, was laughing at her. Kate explained about Jenny, showed her son one of the print-outs. 'I need to let them see, how it is for her. How she sees the world all cloudy.'

'Like this do you mean?' He held one of the spare polypockets in front of his face. Kate followed suit. Immediately, her sight went blurry.

'Yes, pet. Exactly like that.'

It was perfect. And she'd enough polypockets counted for each child already. 'Thank you!' She kissed her son. 'What gave you that idea, you brilliant boy?'

He shrugged. 'Got a good teacher, I suppose.'

Kate didn't ask if he meant her. And her son didn't offer. But they stood there together, by the window for a while, until she remarked that he really could do with another haircut, and her boy said, 'No way. You're not touching it again! Crazy Ma Scissor-Wumman!' and ducked out of the room.

The Staffroom

Nobody goes in there anymore. Not since we weren't allowed to share the kettle. So the staffroom sits empty, same way it does throughout the summer, I suppose. But we're not here to see it then. I don't know for sure - but I like to imagine – that there is an air of expectancy to Summer Holiday Staffroom. I imagine it thus: End of June, a miasma of stunned exhaustion. July, a slow, delicious *stretching* out to encompass all of that peace. Early August, a few grumblings and stirrings as plans (and appeals) get made, then, come start of term proper, a quiet thump of purposeful excitement, like a dog's tail wagging as it hears the car in the drive.

Covid Staffroom is very different. Covid Staffroom is a forlorn, *verboten* place. It is an empty example of what we have lost. An apostrophe in the life of our school, denoting only lack.

Yes, I'd probably mark that '*purple prose?*' if it appeared in an essay. But a good idea for a poetry workshop perhaps?

'*Write about what is not here*.'

At least we are. I may have a sore throat from yelling *Masks please* in the corridor. I may have chapped hands from astringent sanitisers, my classroom may stink of industrial cleaner, and there are copious piles of paper towels and wipes threatening to burst from the secure bin each day, but at least

we
are
here.

Note how the author places three single world on three separate lines for emphasis. Discuss.

I sit at my desk, marking jotters and listening for the bell. Pour my sad wee coffee for one from my battered Thermos. Used to be I'd pack it when I was off on some adventure. Coming to work is what constitutes adventure nowadays. If I feel really intrepid, I might hang about the foyer, catch snatches of chat from colleagues at a distance. On crazy-I-am-invincible days, you'll find me popping my head round the door of Mr Heaney next

class but one's, chewing the fat about the fitba'. Pretending that the beautiful game too, is back to normal. Vacant stadiums and pre-recorded roars.

Another apostrophe.

To sum up, I think to make Shakespeer relevant to us then they should just put it in language we can understand. Because it would of been in language they could of understood then.

Actually…I check the name on the front…Derek Grierson, you make a valid – if slightly ungrammatical - point. I give his observation a big tick. Old school, me. It is strange, but good, to be back. Yes, I think it is good. To hold homework in my hands, instead of reading it virtually from emails, or from photographs of jotters snapped on phones. Not every house has a multitude of laptops – and when you might have two or three kids, a mum and a dad all trying to work and play from home, we've had to be innovative in how we do things. I'd rather read a photo than not have kids send me anything at all. That old excuse. *Oh, did we have a close reading to do? Sorry sir, I didn't know. The dog must've ate my email…*

I've found that difficult, if I'm honest. Sustaining motivation when only half the pupils bother to respond. Half! Aye, if I'm lucky – and only my Higher class at that. The further down the school you went, the less the pupils engaged. At the start of lockdown, we were supposed to keep records of homework hand-ins, send them in to management, who'd chase up the miscreants. I could point them out myself, mind: the scuffing groups of third years hanging round Spar at lunchtime; the first years at the swingpark during fifth period, determined to rattle the locked-up swings until they broke free. And what were you meant to do? Challenge them, or ignore them? I perfected a wry smile. That and some gentle chivvying – *nice to see you, guys. Any chance of you logging in tomorrow? I'm doing a really good lesson on similes and metaphor.*

Some parents at least let you know: *Jamie won't be coming to (online) school, since he's working on the farm.*

And d'you know what? That didn't actually bother me. One: I knew where they were, and two: why not? At least they were doing something productive. Helping their families, developing a trade, gaining practical skills. Doing some proper learning too. Maths, science, environment – it's all out there, in the field. It was the not-knowing that was so draining. Waiting for

the pupils that never came. Sitting in front of my artfully-arranged bookshelves (yes, I know we've all been acutely sensitive to the deeper meanings of displaying reading matter during the pandemic, but the pressure of being an English teacher and flaunting your shelves is really quite intense). Ready to broadcast one hour on 'The Crucible', second period sharp (as per the timetable). Watching as the names logged on…five, ten, fifteen maybe. Do you start on time? Wait five more minutes? There's my pupils, watching me, watching me in my own house, but me, not able to see them, so I'd launch in, try to engage – then you ask a question to a name that's on your screen, who's showing as present, and the wee b** - the *student* – isn't even there. Logged in for registration, then buggered off.

'Twas ever thus.

Some of our more rural pupils had real problems with their internet too, so even if they did turn up for class, they'd only manage ten minutes before their signal dropped and we got cut off. I'm not the greatest with technology either, but I did my best. So many platforms – Teams and Zoom and Google Classroom. It seemed sometimes – every time it crashed actually - that everyone in Scotland was on Microsoft Teams. Some of the younger teachers had their completed lessons up online already, for reference and revision. Meant for the kids of course, but I don't mind saying I cribbed a little from them too. My daughter helped me with all the webcam and earphones and gizmos. I even experimented with the odd video and spoken word piece, making the most of all eyes being on a screen instead of a page. But it was…

It was scary.

All my authority, stripped away. I felt vulnerable, in my lounge. In front of my aging bookshelves. Thinking the kids might laugh at my wife's choice of curtains. Isn't that stupid? Our broadband isn't that good either, and there were times when I was just spinning, spinning in time with that wee round Google icon as the screen buffered and I froze.

Listen to me – 'the younger teachers'. I'm not that old! Fifty five isn't old. But God, I feel it. My world is a tactile one. I love books and hiking and art and conversation. I love to savour fine wine; swill ruby burgundy, taste good food in my mouth. Prod and excite the crackle of a living fire. Virtual reality is just not…real.

No, this here - holding real books, feeling real skelfs in my desk, seeing real children frown and hesitate and then light up as something dawns within them- this is where I am home. But it's a brave new world in which we are living, a shifting, sanitised, fearful place where our human need to cling together is intensified by the fact we cannot.

I worry about my children. They're all my children. I worry about their resilience, about the burning, arid, brutal, infected world we're giving them to inherit.

I worry about the fact I let them down, when they needed me. Other teachers have been heroes – the Tech Department were making visors for PPE. Home Ec were sewing scrubs. Me? I limped my way through 'Bold Girls' by Rona Munro – playing the parts of both Deirdre *and* Marie to a virtual, unmuted audience. I'm sure the kids did it deliberately, so I could hear the sniggers of every child who'd been silent when I asked for volunteers. If my lessons had been more dynamic, would more of them have tuned in? How did others fare? It's the sort of thing that might come up in the staffroom, but it's embarrassing to ask my workmates outright, in the truncated, fleeting minutes of exchange we have.

Tell me Garry – how's your morale?

Fair to pish actually. Thanks for asking.

I exaggerate. There's a good spirit in the school, considering. Not gung-ho or rash, but a cautious optimism that we are present, that our classrooms are solid, tangible spaces again, that we have sight of our charges and that by and large, we are all obeying the rules. Teachers like rules. It gives us hope, and structure. Our students may have largely treated us with disdain during lockdown, they may mill about outside less than two centimetres apart, all that hinging on arms, heads touching above the glow of their phones, but tell them its mandatory to put on a face mask in school and they generally comply. In times of crisis, folk like rules.

It's strange, but true. The government should have got some teachers on board, onto one of their advisory panels, along with the doctors and public health experts. Seriously – it would have been a good placatory move at least.

Teachers have not been well-served during this pandemic.

I have another idea, which I jot down quickly.

In writing, nuance is important. Is there a difference between morale and confidence? Discuss.

It might be a way of helping the kids to open up. I could set a variation of this for every year group, get them to explore ideas around resilience, encouragement? It's worth putting in my wee blue book of bright ideas.

Every year since I graduated, I've had a book of bright ideas. The colours vary, but the purpose is constant. It's where I keep my lesson plans, future possibilities, new authors I've discovered. I have a whole page on a creative writing project yet to commence, based solely on a newspaper clipping about the Rood Fair and the travelling showmen who still come to Dumfries to ply their trade. I had this mad idea me and S4 could have a day out at the shows, followed by a day of descriptive writing, with a chunk of local history research thrown in. I've circled the word 'Archives?' three times. Yeah – no, I'm not sure where I was going with that one either. But that is my book of bright ideas. A mind-map really, of snippets of inspiration.

Is the SQA a snippet of inspiration? *Discuss*.

It's just as well the staffroom is out of bounds, because the talk of the steamie would be nothing but. You will hear it anyway, when there are two or more teachers in close proximity.

Bloody debacle.

Bloody teacher judgment? Bloody SQA?

Spent all those bloody hours…

Bloody Exam v Teacher Judgment Debate Staffroom - oh, that would be a roiling, boiling place to be. A hubble bubble toil and trouble kind of place, where one by one we would whip ourselves to an ecstasy of outrage.

But we did spend hours. Marking, assessing. Comparing and projecting. When they told us there'd be no exams, we read our pupils' runes. Maybe a few colleagues bumped up some marks, but in the main, I think we offered considered, diligent judgements. AS WE WERE ASKED TO DO.

(*Why does the author use capitals here? What is the SUBTLE effect?)*

We submitted our assessments to our Heads of Departments, who submitted them to School Management, who submitted them to the SQA.

Who took one look and said: *Cheers very much for all your efforts, but actually – we don't believe you.*

How is that meant to make you feel? Valued? Respected?

Untrusted.

All year long, we teachers robustly judge our pupils' work. Prelims, unit tests, ongoing assessments. For goodness sake, all the Nat 5 assessments were already done before lockdown even hit. They were bagged up and off to the SQA – why couldn't they have been used as evidence? They were 25% of every kid's mark.

But no, we get told there's nothing for it, coursework won't count - we must make our own judgments. It will be a new way of working, where our professionalism, our expertise will be paramount. I could almost feel my chest swell with the *honour* of it all. Better than any caffeine to keep me going through those long hours of marking. I was carrying my pupils' futures before me.

I started to remember that teaching was a vocation.

Then the good old SQA promptly 'readjusted' every carefully worked submission. Based on a school's previous performance! (Sorry – can you hear the rant? I can't abide exclamation marks normally. Lazy, lazy. *Show*, don't tell). But honestly!!!) Not on the basis of the pupils or this year's work. I'll give you one example - we've got a brilliant new teacher in the department – yet her results get marked down because of the (let's be honest, Jim was not the brightest, nor the best) teacher she replaced. The whole point of ongoing assessments is that some kids don't perform well in an exam. So in undermining us, the powers that be undermined their own ethos too.

Aaaand

Rest.

What is the point? Tell me, all that effort? What was the chuffing point?

Break is almost over. I drain my coffee. Seek out my mask, for the rigmarole to come. Rule of thumb is: I don't wear a mask at the front of class, but I'll put it on if I go forward for a one to one. (Though that will change if we move to level 3). Daud of hand gel for everyone as they come in, each student wipes down their own desk and chair, pack 'em in and off we go. Talk, talk, learn, learn, bell rings, kids rush out, the next herd appears and we repeat. I thought there'd be more procedures.

I am not sure I feel protected.

Though, it's up to me to protect myself. Isn't it? To say 'wear a mask please' or 'keep your distance.' To be that fun guy nobody wants to know.

You're such a little ray of sunshine. That's what my wife says, the mornings I drag my feet.

But I don't wannna to go to school!

Yes you do, she says. *You love it.*

Do I? Sometimes. Sometimes I feel like my old self. Happy Mr Slessor. You can have a laugh with Mr Slessor (not my words, but the opinion of one second year lad, overheard as I was passing the gymnasium last term). And sometimes I am Munch's Scream. Only I am behind dense glass, and nobody can hear me.

In terms of deaths, this pandemic has killed more people than…God, we talk enough of the Blitz Spirit, so yes then, the Blitz.

It has
killed
more people
than the Blitz.

That should have an impact on us, yet we gripe and moan about not going down the pub, not getting to Majorca. We are blasé and we shouldn't be.

I lie awake some nights, counting. Counting faces instead of sheep, trying to imagine the unfathomable. I see my pupils brush and barge, breenge heedless, and it makes me want to rush out and separate them. Yet it makes my heart glad too. And I see others, the quieter, thoughtful ones, more withdrawn than ever. See them shrink and edge along the perimeters of the playground.

Ying and yang.

Careful and carefree.

Hopefulness and despair.

It is a fine line, and I'm not sure I walk it well.

I have a plus and minus column most days, playing in my head. Do I shape minds, or am I a glorified childminder? You'd be amazed at the parents who were angry at us:

'*It's not my job to educate my child!*'

They thought we had forsaken them. I imagine some of my children would never before have had the chance to be with their parents for such a sustained period of time. I think it was Anne Frank's father who said 'I thought I knew my child really well', until he read her diary. Lockdown was

the opportunity to get close, to bake, or build an ant hotel. There are so many different ways of learning. We could have made so much more of this time. Forgot the maths class and built dens and domino runs instead. We could have thought outside the box – turned the box inside out and made it an open book. Perhaps we still can? Experimental, experiential learning, so we can all find the child inside.

Maybe my Rood Fair-history-descriptive day out is not such a silly idea.

Maybe some families don't want to be forced together. Don't, or can't, deal with the intensity of being made to see what they are not. Ach, I don't know. I don't know what way's up anymore, if I can even trust myself to teach. I feel my Scream head swelling.

I need the pressure valve of the staffroom. I worry about my school. What does it do to our long-term cohesion, if we're all in little silos? Share the laughs, share the load – that is what I'll carve over the entrance to the staffroom, when we can finally throw open the doors and throw ourselves into those squishy, stained chairs.

The bell, which is more of a siren really, begins. I prepare myself for battle. In they come in threes and fours. Automatically, I open my mouth to tell them to use the sanitiser, but they know the drill. There is a world-weariness to their actions that pierces me. Leaves me feeling raw.

'Sir.' Angus, a small, terrier-like thirteen year old, who spends most of my lessons staring out the window, is upon me. I scooch my chair into retreat. 'Distance, Angus.'

'Gonny show it again? That bam?'

'I'm sorry?'

'The poem thing you done on the computer? Callum never seen it.'

Callum crowds the other side of me, nodding his agreement.

I frown. 'When did we do this 'bam' poem?'

'Canny mind. The one about the sunshine?' He turns to Callum. 'It's got Methadone Mick. It's brilliant.'

There is a tiny tingle, rising in my belly. 'Do you mean 'Permanent Sunshine', Angus?' I am typing in my laptop as I'm speaking, my fingers over-eager. Thick. I think he means 'Permanent Sunshine'. One of my favourite authors wrote it – AL Kennedy. It is a wonderful piece, about poverty and rage and aspiration. About justice. Compassion. Love. There! It pops

up. I press play. 'You mean this one?'

'Aye, that's it.'

The sneering face of the actor who plays Methadone Mick in a sit-com appears. I press pause. I remember now – I used it with my Higher class. It was the line about making you a refugee where you were born – so powerful.

'Wait,' I say to Angus. 'How did you see this?'

'Ma big sister.'

'Claire? Claire showed you this?'

Claire is a sulky sixteen year old who tosses her perfectly straightened hair with what I always thought was derision, whenever I speak.

'Aye. She said it was magic and I should watch it.'

'Wow.' I think I say this aloud. The world, my world, this classroom, shifts slightly.

'Well, she'd be right. It is magic.' I connect my laptop so it will cast on the main singing-dancing interactive screen. (I miss chalkboards). 'OK class,' I say, in my big teacher voice. Mentally reciting the piece in my head as I'm speaking, but no, I don't think there are any swearie words in it. At that moment, I don't very much care. I don't want to lose this, don't want to waste it in risk-assessing. A child stands before me, demanding a poem.

'Right folks. Finish all your cleaning and take a seat. Now, before we start, I've got a –' I stop myself just in time. Saying 'poem' to this lot will break the spell. 'A wee five minute film to show you. By special request of Angus here.'

His face breaks into a conspiratorial grin. I press play.

There is an ache. My chest burns with unexpected pride. For Claire. For Angus. How I wish I could share this in the staffroom. But here, this now, as I watch these children's faces. This will do.

Winter is Coming

That first weekend was the worst. You set up shop at your kitchen table, thinking it would be for one week, maybe two. Two weeks of chaos, but you could cope with that, you sitting in your kitchen, with the kids fighting over Frosties, your wife leaning across to reach the kettle. Your phone, your tablet and your laptop, taking up too much space.

Oh, your phone. Your perpetually beeping phone, anchored to your hand; you couldn't even take a bath and there'd be someone ringing, day and night. Day turned into night, and you, at your kitchen table, trying to work out where to start, because this wasn't your job; none of this was your job.

Can we just rebuild the Cooncil?

Aye sure, no bother.

Spring outside, buds bursting, and the birds, the birds were so loud as the traffic began to hush. Week before, and you'd all been laughing in the office, at the absurdity of words like 'lockdown' and 'quarantine', mocking the hand sanitiser some smartass stuck on the meeting room table, laughing that wee bit longer than you had to, to prove none of this was real.

But it was. Wolf's at your door; it is literally in your kitchen, and even though your door is barred, the big bad world keeps pouring in. Through your laptop, your tablet. Through your ever-ringing phone. Businesses, community councils, health, third sector partners; all needing decisions, needing guidance.

– well, we have no guidance

– well, make some. Quick. Yes, and what about the schools?

-what about the schools?

-well, they're closing.

-but…they can't?

-well, they have. And we need to tell the parents. Over to you

You're good with words, so you got to draft communications, och, not just some memos, but an entire Council Emergencies Pandemic Communications Plan, you sitting in your boxers, four in the morning, mainlining peanuts and high on coffee: Facebook, graphics, hashtags, Twitter, media,

you name it, like a manic puppet master pulling too many strings, but somehow, the strings held. Got tighter, tauter. Did their job.

All around you, the organisation was metamorphosing. People picked for what they *could* do, not for who they were or what they did. Splitting the Council into cells. Oh, the irony, and the rightness of it: cells, in a viral pandemic. Cells were the new normal, cells and bubbles and you, not asking, just doing. Doing, and doing – the speed of all that 'doing' was frightening, and exhilarating: in your life, you have never been so responsive, nor productive - and it's a speed you can't sustain. No one can. For what if speed leads to panic, and to tumbling and falls?

The frenzy is still present, the wolf still at the door, but practice makes perfect and you can – you must- slow down. Take a breath to build new structures, in your new, community support cell. You plug the gaps in resilience plans, the names who are no longer there, the jobs you find no longer done.

Outside your window, spring eased into summer. The cheerful sun trying as hard as it can, glowing like a beacon, and you inside, face red, your oxters sweaty, stuck in the spare 'room' which is really a large cupboard, but your wife's working too, and she needs the kitchen table, and it's a trade-off, for whoever gets the kitchen table also does the day's home-schooling. Seeing shapes swim before your eyes as you take off your glasses, and rub, rub, rub to keep them working. You keep working, and you keep working, and there's more morphing, from cells to hubs – locality hubs, where you're all in this together, all the services, the agencies, the people who make a place work. How well you get to know all those long, criss-crossing spokes, each one supporting the wheel, the mighty, small wheels that keep a community turning.

Those communities. Those, magnificent, thrawn, generous communities. You did not realise it would be so humbling, that these, long, difficult days would also be a privilege. The surge in donations and volunteers: both a blessing and curse, for what to do, where to send them? More morphing, into clumsy, guddled, glorious gloops of giving, until you create a clever map, an interactive, online map where folk can go and click and organise themselves – another structure built - and you are realising all the time that this will happen, with or without you, that communities will grow and protect and shelter and provide. Hunched in the alienation of your spare room

and your virtual screens, it dawns on you that it is their turn to matter, and it is your job to hold hands and steer and shepherd, to gather and steward and open up the box, to burst the bubbles and unlock doors and let folk soar, if they want to.

Suddenly, you understand. Why we call them Services, and what it is to serve.

Yes, there is privilege, but there is poverty too. You thought you knew poverty, understood the face of it, how sharp it bites. But poverty secretes itself so much more deeply in the creases of the countryside, in the underlands and the out of reach. You saw it laid bare, down rutted tracks and forgotten roads, as you drove to deliver food parcels at nine pm on a Saturday night, when there was nobody else available. You saw it grafted permanently in the hunkered-down, gritted teeth of subsistence, and in the empty grate and single-bulb of the lonely old, so sorry to *cause any bother*. You saw it in the newly poor, shocked and shamed – the single mum on the casual contract, who'd just lost her job. Who didn't know how to claim free school meals and had nothing in the cupboards. You cannot forget the confused and vulnerable lady who didn't get her hot meal, because nobody knocked on her door. How was she to know the food parcel left outside was for her?

You ate too many biscuits. Obsessed about hunger. They say you feed a cold and starve a fever. So what's the drill for a pandemic?

You do both. You learn to starve it of opportunities. And you learn nothing is more basic than food.

You picked up where the shielding left off. In amongst the constant slew of emails about grants and businesses and proposals and plans, you learn to hone in on: *Where can my kid go to get fed?* You link with wonderful food providers, food banks and bakers, befrienders, soup makers, children's charities. You become adept at using what you've got – at celebrating what you've got, until it becomes so obvious that *of course* retained firefighters should be on call to deliver emergency parcels, as well as put out fires. Whoah - *you* are on fire! Hey, you're on call too, so really, you're a kind of retained hero-council officer yourself, you are –!

Your wife makes you switch off your tablet, in bed, at night. Tells you to *go to bloody sleep*. But you put your pillow over your phone, so she won't see its glow.

You help write quick-start Covid resilience plans, simple templates for community groups. You help them with budgets. You fill the cracks. You do Teams with workmates' kids in the background, get to know their wallpaper, their choice of books. You build buddy schemes to connect in your remoteness. You miss human contact more than you could ever say. You don't believe you would have coped without your colleagues. All of them – from the Council and beyond. You realise how those spokes have flexed and latticed, how they've woven organically, until, one day you think– actually, we're not a hub at all, we're a plant. Here. We're planted here. We're a tree with roots and branches, summer-full of leaves.

You make yourself go walking, every day, you get outside. And yes, your phone comes too.

The tumult starts to quieten, as the traffic starts to increase. The structures you've built, that you've grown and tended, seem to be holding firm.

But we are falling into autumn, and you don't know what will happen, when the wind blows harsh. When the trees shake, and branches drop.

Where there were lunch clubs once, you've made Fare Share spaces, with food referrals and benefits advice. Social Work Action teams. What happens though, when furlough ends? Will the town halls and the churches be big enough for all the folk who will need to cram inside? And what about the folk that won't come, who will be too ashamed to be seen? How will you reach them?

That's not my job. You will never say that phrase again.

You think of all those communities, who've done their best and weathered the storm.

But winter is coming. The wolf is back at the door; it never left – it wasn't even sleeping.

Let sleeping dogs lie.

Don't let poverty bite.

You think of all the new plans you'll need to write. The Winter Resilience and the Covid yet to come. You think of a hopeful Christmas. You think of cold. You go for your walk, and you think of snow.

That first weekend was the worst.

Did This Really Happen?

I think I've got this right. I had a fight with my boss today. Not a stand-up barney, but an… altercation?

An embarrassment, more like.

It's a bit confused, but I think it happened like this. I'd got in touch to sort out some data I needed. The data…well, what the data was, doesn't matter. No, what mattered was when she said she'd already given me that information, and I said 'No you haven't' and she said 'Yes I have' and then I said 'When?'

'At the meeting,' she replied.

'What meeting?'

'The meeting when you asked me for it. I did it right away.'

'But we haven't had a meeting.' I had my blouse on, for appearance's sake, but I was in my pyjamas underneath. I thought I was still asleep, and this was one of *those* nightmares, where you wind up naked on a stage or some other awful form of public humiliation. But then you wake, and breathe a sigh of relief, because you're fine, it was all in your imagination.

I breathed out, twice. No change.

'Yes we have! We did. It was on…' My boss looked away from the screen for a moment, to check an email or her diary, I suppose. 'Last Tuesday. Yup, last Tuesday. Ten am. We had a meeting.'

I had – I have - no recollection of this meeting. Not one shred nor whisper of this previous conversation could I call to mind. But I couldn't admit that, so I just went 'Oh yes. Sorry about that. My mistake.'

We left it at that. On the surface we did at least, but I could tell from her expression she wasn't happy. She'd that kind of frowning-concerned face on her which I just couldn't be dealing with, so I said someone was at the door and I had to go.

After I ended the video-call, I sat there. Staring into my reflection on the splashback tiles. I'm still here now.

Did we really have a meeting? And if we did, how can I not remember?

Am I merely careless? Incompetent? Am I going insane?

Is it because my life is in my kitchen? Surrounded by my microwave, my oven gloves, my pots and pans, I have no visual cues. My memory of a meeting is attached to a note of the meeting in my diary. My diary is in my desk and my desk is at my work. In my kitchen I have scraps of paper, no printer, and a calendar of cats doing funny things.

Did that meeting really happen? Did that video call just take place?

Did the word ARC used to mean more than a rainbow in the sky? Do I still remember the names of all those precious, fragile gems who used to light my day, or do I choose to forget that, as our staff were redeployed, so were our users? And do I forget because I just can't stand to think of them, stuck at home?

All of us, stuck at home.

Am I actually here at all? These last eight months; so surreal. So sore. Did I live or dream them? Did we really stand outside, clapping every Thursday for people doing their jobs? Did I conjure up that vision of my neighbour? The one who's a musician, and lost all his gigs because everything shut down. Did he really set up as a DJ in the back garden, and did we really all sit outside, shouting over our fences as the speakers boomed? Knocking back wine and crisps, raising money for charity as he played our special requests?

The memory is hazy, yet my chosen tune is clear; it is the Wonderland-esque siren-song: 'White Rabbit'.

My mind is moving low.

My tap drip-drips over the pile of dishes waiting to be washed. I close my eyes, to remember. Was it really real when I stood that day in town, clapping as a hearse drove by? All of us, apart together, bidding farewell to a girl who'd passed too young? They toured her up and down her childhood streets, as house by house we emerged to say goodbye. I'd sat beside her in school – we'd sulked together when Jenny Marr was chosen for the Lass, but here, there she was, my old friend. Queen of the World for a day. An hour. That couldn't have happened, could it? That a soldier boy who was doing the Covid tests put down his mask and picked up his bagpipes and played her off with a lament?

My head swims. And was it really me who volunteered? To be redeployed for a month; to work in that care home, fired by tales of sacrifice

and honour? I thought it was, but how can I be sure? I picture images, try to feel sensations. I definitely thought it hurt, when they made me go for a test myself. That bit must be real? That giant cotton bud, thrust up my nose. By folk dressed as spacemen, outside, in a carpark outside Castle Douglas. *Do Not Get Out of Your Vehicle!!* No. I mean, that's just ridiculous isn't it? How could anyone believe that might happen?

It is my mind, playing tricks.

But I can see myself, inside that care home. On reception. I can smell the meat and cabbage lunches. Smell the sadness. See only eyes. Only eyes above the masks of staff. Or above the blankets. Or looking, longing, through glassed-in doors. Closed, solitary doors and empty corridors. Occasional brisk clicks of feet as PPE-swaddled carers wheel trolleys and deliver meds. Sometimes oxygen tanks. Me, answering queries from worried kin. *She slept well. He is comfortable*. Me, spinning rotations of packaged, pat phrases because all the real staff are far too busy, and so I must do my best. I can see an old lady who wanders. Never speaks. Who is ushered back to her room each time, only to reappear before my desk. I see her play her fingers in the air to the tinny muzak that 'relaxes' us and I see her grown younger, wearing a white dress. An Alice band holds back her yellow hair as she plays piano in a concert.

I know I made that last bit up. I do it to fill the blanks.

This fight with my boss; it troubles me. This isn't the first time it's happened: a total absence where there should be detail. I'm not like this at work. My real work. Real work in a real place, with real people whom I help.

How do I pick up from the time before? My brain needs to regroup and get ready for the next day. I am a visual person. Seeing my colleagues' faces triggers memory. I have a roll of lining paper at work with lists, and a chalkboard painted on my door. The very act of writing down a fact or an action point makes a link from hand to brain. I thought I had no tools for my trade – yet I find I've left them all in the office.

My problem with home-working is not switching off, it's switching on. I need to make a different system for myself. I am living in a guddle. It is endless, perpetual. There is no punctuation to my day. When I travel to work -my real work- I wake up. The drive there is what flips me into work mode, I think. It is my transitional point. My office desk is disordered, but

those lists and doodles have purpose. Here, I live in fog. One thing blends into another, and I wade, leaden through mists and wrong turns. I am in an Elsewhere place. I saw a lightshow the other day – words projected onto buildings. Moving pictures dancing down lanes. Or maybe I imagined it. Just like I imagined how I felt. Being outside, enjoying this mysterious art – it felt sinful. But it also felt we were reclaiming the streets. Me and a bunch of strangers, wandering in the evening dark, looking for pinpoints of bright. And when we found them, we recognised one another in them, quietly. You know when you sit in the living room, with your family, not having to talk? It felt like that. It felt like solidarity.

And it maybe felt like grief.

Maybe today is yesterday, and this is tomorrow, and I've been here all along.

Maybe none of this happened at all.

Three Wishes

We grant wishes. We wish grants. We are the gatekeepers, and the givers too. In the before, when we were all who we used to be, there were two funds, two fonts from which the giving poured. The first were grants for Community Care, which stopped flowing as communities got frozen in time. People, unmoving, not because they didn't want to, but because they couldn't. Unable to move on from homeless accommodation, or to make a home when they came out of prison, so no need for the couches or carpets or white goods to fill their homes. Homes that existed, out there, over the rainbow. Just not for them and not for then.

The second grant was the Welfare Fund, which was as panicked and urgent as it is today, only it wasn't, quite. In the before, it was never so side-sweepingly relentless that it made out chests hurt. There were fewer voices asking for our help, and more of us to help them. Overnight, the voices doubled, trebled and tremulous with the asking – often an unknown, unused-to asking, voices not knowing where to begin with the embarrassment or the confusion of the asking and of needing. Only voices that we heard, and heard, and heard all day. No faces to the voices, no let up in the voices, all of them fielding or shielding, furloughed or forgotten.

We are ten, ten pairs of hands, ten pairs of eyes, scattered to the four winds: some sent home, some to empty offices, where we wander and rattle in eerie, vast emptiness, whole floors of emptiness that we cannot imagine being refilled. And the emptiness fits our mood sometimes, the vast expanse and the light leaving at the end of the day, for it's a waste, such a waste to have the big lights on for just one of us, and we must save, save, all of us must save what we can, when we can. For the future, what is future when we deal in the here and now. In crisis, we grant crisis cash when there is no time to waste, and so we do it in one day. Great seas of voices calling for us, voices for us to sift and sort. Give succour. We are exhausted, exhilarated. Cautious and brave. For every one of the voices who shouts or swears there are voices who are true and grateful, and often, even the shouting ones are calmer, kinder by the end.

You see, we have to bring an end. We have to decide, for the Welfare Fund is discretionary and is not finite and is for emergencies. For feeding the days between applying and receiving Universal Credit. For overspending on children's birthdays and running out of electricity, and we must decide if this is profligate or practical, if it is a mother comforting her son because the house is often cold and they are three floors up with no garden, or if it is a pattern that comes in cyclical, cynical loops, four, five times a year with the gap sufficiently wide to think we will not notice. And even if we do notice, if there are children hungry, then it is not their fault. It is never their fault and so, even if we refuse, we can still refer – for food parcels, for other funds from social housing landlords. To Social Work. To some wondrous stitcher who can sew up the hole that the voices may fall through if we do not take care.

We keep speeded-up and we keep up to speed, with the world tumbling on, and opening up and closing down. In the openings there is movement, so Community Care Grants start again, which is more work for us, but more help for the voices. We have moved into the after. It is the after before the next. Other voices are calling, another grant for giving. Self Isolation – a brand new grant for which we have two week's notice. We wish it were easy, but it is not, it's a complex, twisty-specific fund, for which there are copious checks. We have to tell the voices, desperate, weary voices, to be patient. Go through the steps, so many steps, for the voices must be working, and in receipt of Working Tax Credits or Universal Credit or Job Seeker's Allowance and be on the NHS list that our friends in Social Work have got, for the voices who've been told to isolate, and they need to have a code from Test and Protect, and they must not be on sick pay, must be suffering a loss to earnings.

They must be suffering. And we are the balm.

No. We are the administrators. We hold the keys to the cabinet containing the balm.

Three grants. Three wishes.

There is no wishing, really. There is simply want. The year is full of wishing and wanting, and we take what we are given, and get on with it and do our job. We are scattered, but close. We can speak through the air, in small screens and on phones. We are each other's safety net, for catching low and bouncing high. For dispensing the commonweal.

For trying to make welfare fair.

On Rescue

I wonder how history will reflect on this period. There's an old…is it a saying or a curse? I'm not sure, but I keep hearing the words, looping in my brain:

May you live in interesting times.

Interesting? Try troubling. Chaotic. Surreal. Constrained. Whatever we choose to call them, where – and how – will these times end? And what will be left, when we are saved?

Sometimes it takes a disaster to change society.

I do a lot of thinking, sitting in my spare room.

People think we're boring, us auditors, but we're not. We're not mere dusty ledger-keepers, you know. Far from it. Auditing is an ancient and venerable profession. It dates back to the civilisations of China, Egypt and Greece. You may think of us as silent backroom scribblers, or mirthless pedants come to check your workings and spoil your fun, but we are people-persons. Honestly. 'Auditor'. It is from the Latin 'audire'. To hear. You need to know the inner workings of a person, as well as their role, before you can even begin your task. When I started doing this job nearly thirty years ago, I spent my time travelling around, looking, listening, chatting. Then, as computers became king, my horizons diminished year by year, to the point I rarely left the office. Now my office is at home and I can access everything I could in Council HQ, with one click of my finger. I am a magician.

Auditors are not boring, but we may be a little…methodical? Fixed in our ways? Take all this technology - our IT guys had been trying for ages to get us to use their new gizmos and apps. Took just one week of lockdown to make us converts. Hindsight is a great thing; we should have embraced their ideas earlier. Practised what we preach. There is nothing dull about efficiency and effectiveness. The more we save in one area, the more there is to spend on another. On the frontline.

We are all on the frontline now. Because all the lines have shifted.

Gone is my daily commute - in my case, battling cars on my bike. Which gives me two more hours in the day. Plus I save at least a couple more hours

on ironing, now I no longer need that big pile of white shirts. Video calls, unheard of 20 years ago, have become normal, meaning I can glide seamlessly from one meeting to another, barely pausing for breath. I'm probably making health efficiencies too – I reckon I've reduced non-productive sick days by at least a fortnight since avoiding all the inevitable office colds and bugs.

What am I doing with those extra hours? Is there profit in them, or loss? That depends. Lockdown hasn't changed who I am. I am still part of the sandwich generation: a divorced dad old enough to look after my children, and young enough to care for my elderly father.

I spend a lot more time with Dad than I used to. We've got to know one another, obliquely. Sorting through old photos, hearing stories of when he was young. My gran was a Land Girl apparently – we found a picture of her in gaiters, wielding an axe! I think he's eating better. Some days we share a meal, me working from my laptop, him with the telly on low. Happy in our bubble.

It's been nice, actually.

Covid-19 is a horrible disease. My dad is frail. The consequences of Dad catching it are too awful to consider. I cancelled his carers way back in March. The thought of people who are essentially strangers – nice, kind, well-meaning women for whom nothing is too much trouble – but strangers nonetheless, whose motivations and movements beyond my father's front door I know nothing about – those strangers fetching his slippers, touching his mug, preparing his lunch…No. Call me paranoid, but whenever I go there, I wipe and spray every handle, every surface that I touch. I can't guarantee that others do the same. When you think about it, think about how many germs are on that lightswitch, that cupboard…

Nothing in life is truly safe, I understand that. But you have to reduce the risk.

I know all about risk. I'm in the Mountain Rescue.

You're in..?

Folk look askance when you say that. I imagine the unsaid words, in a speech bubble above their heads. *But you're an auditor*…

I'm also part of a team. Protecting ourselves from Covid-19 is more than following the rules, it's about attitude and respect. For each other. Members of Mountain Rescue are not brave, we're careful. We watch out

for each other on the hill. We discuss precautions at every training session and know the risks. And we do the same with Covid. It's not possible to keep your distance whilst carrying a stretcher over rough ground, but it's worth the danger, to get a casualty to an ambulance at speed. When we scale the highs and lows of the mountain, we navigate ourselves as well. The buzz of the rush into altitude, pushing yourself higher, faster. The panting of endeavour, the pause of listening. The held-breath of discovery, the exhaled relief of recovery, as you guide a lost sheep back to safety.

Rescue can be about reward too.

I love being on the hills. I'm lucky where I live, surrounded by the great outdoors. Hills and forest as far as the eye can see. At night, we have badgers and barn owls. Stars that scatter in great splashes and whorls. I can see foxes and deer from my upstairs window if I stand still and quiet. Patient. Once I saw a heron dip its beak in the Glenmidge Burn. Perhaps the ripples he made passed downstream and caused a fish to leap. Perhaps an angler caught the leaping fish.

This is a vast environment, but it's never empty. We impact on it, and it on us. Perhaps this pandemic is a symptom.

The soil I walk on is rich in history. Covenanters preached in the hidden dips and rises of this landscape. Five miles away, Kirkpatrick Macmillan invented the bike.

We are none of us remote. Not really.

It only feels that way.

Our roads are quieter. But into the empty spaces, cyclists and walkers have emerged. People are less frenetic. I understand my children better. We embraced home schooling: I've learned my limits, and their expansiveness. I've listened to them be themselves. I can't describe the pleasure of knowing they were upstairs, and that I was down here, if they needed me. Helping them with the occasional maths question, before we could all go out and enjoy the sunshine. We had a good summer, didn't we? We couldn't go sailing because the club was shut, but we went kayaking and paddle-boarding instead. Even socialising was sort of possible, if only through call-outs for Mountain Rescue.

I enjoy my life. Enjoy being active. Being strong. I don't want to lose that. Yet there are mornings I feel my joints stiffen as I rise. Days when I

am aware of my thinning hair, of the blurring of my jawline. I suppose I'm no longer young. You hear such terrible stories, people suffering for months with breathing difficulties and fatigue. Brain fog, organ damage.

I am scared of this disease. What if no one comes to rescue us?

What is it we tell hillwalkers?

Take all sensible precautions. I read legislation frequently for work, but I still find it confusing. What politicians say and what the law says is often different. So much doesn't make sense, to me at least. My children are back at school but they can't go to after-school clubs with their classmates. I met with friends for a walk on Hadrian's Wall because it was illegal to meet at Wanlockhead. Lines on a map, arms round a country. Splashing the cash and grasping the purse-strings. Doling out sweeties, but don't touch your loved ones – where does it lead?

If you run into difficulties on the hills, rule one is: remain calm, assess the situation, then decide what to do.

So I consider and I gauge. Weigh the world. We have more time for ourselves and our families. Hopefully, we're also slightly less destructive of our planet. Enforced at the moment yes, but wouldn't it be wonderful if those trail-less skies remained? If we shopped local and thought global and stopped ravaging the things that might sustain us? Tear down the wet markets, the mink farms, and regrow forests in their place? Around my house, the trees are turning russet. Reserving their energies until the spring.

There is talk of going back to the office and it worries me. I've known my colleagues a long time. Do I trust them to leave windows open, wear a face mask properly, wash their hands and socially distance? I don't know.

As time moves on though, so does acceptance. Who would have thought a year ago that we would all be wearing masks? That it would feel transgressive not to? Or that we'd be doing the dance of social distancing in shops? (A bonus actually – no more being trapped between trollies as folk have a gab.)

Time has rolled so very slowly across the face of this year. For ages it seems we've had nothing to gab about. Rote, routine, briefings and graphs. Then, this bonfire-crackling, memorial week, America elects a new president, and the news is full of victories and vaccines. A wonder vaccine, on which all our hopes are pinned. Will it save us? Where will we be in one

year, or two? Will we return to the old ways or grieve them, and move on? Will those of us who want to work at home continue to do so? I read we're working longer hours now than they did in the Iron Age. I'm not sure that's progress. Rescue will lead to a reckoning, as we begin to count the costs. There will be gains and losses. As the economy falters, maybe some of us fortunate enough to have jobs could share them? Take the opportunity to build a calmer, less busy society. A society that listens before it acts. A world that shares; a place in which we might all be saviours.

I watch the clouds pass in a low, gold sky. From my window, nothing's changed. Time will tell who our heroes truly are. A red kite wheels, and I strain to hear her cry.

Audire.

Never Too Old

I quite like change. It doesn't phase me. I enjoy working from home – I'm not nearly as tired, now I'm not driving across the region, yet I'm working way more hours than usual. People say -*oh, but don't you miss your clients*, but how can I, when I'm still seeing them as much? Even more, in some cases. We've moved all the lifelong learning online now. My office is my house, my classroom is on social media.

My grandkids are affronted I have Facebook – *don't you go poking my pals, Nana*, they said. I'm far too busy for that. I've been learning how to make videos instead. It started with Maths Week. I was racking my brains on how to approach it. All the freedom and scope these new ways of working might bring. It was fair exciting me. Still does. Everything feels more…immediate, somehow. More fresh. I think that living in a crisis can sharpen you. Make you be in the moment, be aware that every moment counts.

Life is precious. I've always believed that. It's a journey we're all on, with many twists and turns. Some of us go down dead ends, others climb high hills. But any one of us can turn around, if we want to. Retrace.

Reconsider. Regrow.

I like to think we plant seeds along the path.

Adult literacy and numeracy. Family learning. Peer mentoring in prison. Beginners' Computing. STEM. Adult Achievement Awards. Preparing to Volunteer. ESOL – learning English when it's not your mother tongue.

My learners are resilient. They were resilient before this pandemic began.

We have all learned to adapt. Technology is great – until it is a barrier. Microsoft Teams is no use if you've no laptop, and have to use your phone. So we've been using Google Meet for classes, seven or eight of us at a time. Smaller groups, more intimate. People can sometimes get lost in a crowd. We keep it nice and steady, folk going at their own pace. No one need put on their video if they'd rather not. Learner-centred as always.

That's why this job gives me so much joy. Every time someone I work with learns something new, I do too. Often, we learn together: me, trying to

see what they see. Seeing numbers not as useful things, for instance, but as little squiggles of nuisance, confusing, troublesome symbols, sequences with no point. Seeing that helps you to ask what they must be asking:

'Why is Maths Important?'

In my head, I began to list different examples, things I might have talked about in class. But, since we weren't 'in class' anymore, how to make them come alive? Once the idea bubbled and grew, the possibilities were endless - I had so much fun! Maths Week became documentary week. First, I did a video with a farmer, who spoke about acreages and mixing sheep dip. Then I recorded the local newsagent, and the lassie who delivered newspapers in an old fashioned pram. We talked about working out orders, and running a shop, about sorting and counting and how you need numbers for all these things. I recorded nursery staff, counting leaves with the children, and my friend's wee granddaughter, surrounded by her dollies, counting sweeties in a pot. I interviewed a fireman, explaining how he calculates the amount of water they need, how he works out the best length of hose to use.

It went down a treat online. Started some really good conversations amongst my learners; them chipping in with their own examples of when they might need maths. After that, folk were raring to learn. And I felt so energised – I had found a new way to teach.

I always try to examine a problem in the round. Take my time, as if I'm walking around it, whatever the problem is, shuddering there like some big Askit misery. Might be all it takes, is to see it from another angle. Or from someone else's angle. That's how I hit on the idea of Brew and Blether. It can be hard, really hard, for people to come forwards. To admit they're struggling with their reading, or finding homelife a slog. Takes such an act of faith. Folk have to trust they'll be heard. What better way to start than with a nice cup of tea? I was going into primary schools anyway, to deliver PEEP sessions. It's our Parents' Early Learning Programme – but I like saying PEEP. Makes me think of Little Bo Peep, and shepherding. So, I just started going to the schools a wee bit earlier. Chatting in the playground to young parents. Asking them into the staffroom for tea and biscuits. Giving them the chance to talk – about them, their kids. Money worries, healthy eating, you name it. Might be months before adult learning got mentioned at all. And in the meantime, we'd learned to bake scones.

We're still doing Brew and Blether, only virtually now.

I don't mean to make it all sound easy – it's not. We've had to work non-stop to make this happen. Trying to second guess what's coming. What we need and what we lack. Sourcing pockets of money from various funds. We managed to secure £7000 from Foundation Scotland, to get laptops to learners who had nothing. People with no books, no champions. No confidence. £7000 is a marvellous sum. But it's never enough. I've even enjoyed doing the funding bids, mind. I've never done anything like that before; it's the sort of thing that might have daunted me in the past, but everything moves so fast right now, you just don't have time to bother. And when you see the practical results of what your efforts might bring, landing in your lap a few weeks later, well – it's like Christmas! We got money in the summer to deliver isolation packs to some of our learners: books, pens, colouring activities – even Ikea tents for families to play in. Crafts, jigsaws, pots to grow plants. Cards, envelopes and six stamps per pack, so folk could write to a loved one they couldn't see. We're doing it all again this month.

It's just small things. Just tiny pebbles in a big wide sea. But see the ripples those tiny pebbles can make? The families who might learn to cook together because we put the ingredients for Mars Bar cakes in their pack? The letter sent back home, and the letter it brings in return? Learners who are quiet in class, but who call me late in the day to talk, simply because I gave them my mobile number?

I never thought that being distant would bring you closer, but it does. In big groups, there's no opportunity for one-to-ones. But now, we've set up Messenger groups. Learners text me all the time. Like I say, some phone me, out of the blue.

People I have known for ages, yet never known - not until they open up. They mostly call in the evening. That twilight time, when the lamps are lit, and you've had your tea. And the long night yawns ahead.

For the first time, I feel I'm truly there for my learners. Every week, another person will come out and tell me their troubles – family illness. Loneliness. Fear. Poverty – so many I've had to point towards crisis grants. People struggling with their mental health. Talk of suicide. Some I put in touch with CALMS, or counselling. Others only want me to listen. By unburdening themselves, the next day doesn't seem so dark. I'm lucky I've got

a great boss, with a Social Work background. Our team is tight – we keep in touch, support each other.

Don't you mind? said my friend, when I told her. *Them calling so late? Getting bothered out of hours?*

I'd not thought about it, until she said that. *No*, I'd replied, without thinking. But I did keep thinking, afterwards. Kept circling the question, trying to see all sides. Should I be annoyed? Was it an imposition? Was I daft to give out my number? And the answer kept coming: No.

I have thought about it now for days. But I can't see it the way my friend does. It genuinely isn't a problem. The fact my learners are seeing me differently, feels like a blessing instead. Despite all the heartache of this pandemic, all the upsets and extra hours, the extra miles, our shuttered lives, I don't think I've ever been more alive.

I switch on the overhead light. I need to match up photos with recipes. We're doing a book for charity, and it's to be at the printer's first thing tomorrow. Five of my literacy learners have created poems about lockdown life, while five of my PEEPs have written out their favourite lockdown dishes. A lady from my confidence building class - who it turns out is an excellent photographer - has been tasked with snapping photos of food to illustrate the recipes. *It doesn't need to be exact*, I promised her. *Maybe just a packet of pasta to go with mac and cheese*?

But she's surpassed herself. These pictures are really lovely – molten chocolate dripping from a spoon for Krispie Cakes. The gleam of egg-burnished batter for Toad in the Hole. Only problem is – I don't know how to merge the photos with the text. This is my third attempt, and the words just won't wrap round the images the way they're supposed to.

Maybe I'll phone Brian, our team's tecchie guru. He'll know what to do. I check the clock. 9.30 pm. He'll not mind, I'm sure. Because it's never too late to call a friend. And it's never too late to learn.

A Good Different

They hang, ghost-like, in their polythene shrouds.
All the suits you wear to work.

You sent them to the dry cleaners last week, that day when you opened the curtains and opened the wardrobe and realised, with a start, as the wintery morning sun speared unforgiving spotlights along the shoulders of your suits, that all your work clothes needed dusted.

It is a fact worth repeating:

All your suits need dusted. And you an asthmatic, too.

It has been so long since you wore them. Late November now, and you've not been at work since March. You've not stopped working – that is another fact – but – save for a fortnightly visit to pick up the mail - you've not been in work since spring.

You didn't know that, then. When you packed up your stuff and high-tailed it home. Actually – that bit there is not a fact; there was no sense of panic; your office does not do panic. No, it was a controlled and deliberate exit. You were already set up for homeworking, were working from there one day a week. You had your two screens and your scanner, plugged in and raring to go. You had your laptop, your printer and a much better coffee machine than in Council HQ.

But if you'd known, back in March, that you wouldn't be coming in again this year, would you have done anything different?

This *year*. This whole, almost-year.

You would probably have taken that apple out your drawer. But other than that? You try to recall the remaining contents of your desk. Try to remember what your desk looked like. How you sat by the window, facing a wall overlooking the car park. Here, at home, in your snug, you are bolstered by a wall of books. Your books are bright, friendly markers of your history: children's books, university books, favourite novels, prizes at school. Those shiny, sleek or tattered covers tell the story of your life. If you need to concentrate on some report, there is a comfy couch to rest on. You can snuggle in and focus here. Work deeply, work uninterrupted – no colleagues

popping by, no impromptu meetings.

Work really works for you. Here.

Be honest – you were ready to chuck the whole thing.

All that fragile juggling of work and home. The scales had tipped, you know they had, and you were ready just to stop. Those years of learning and effort and worth. You would have shelved them all, to regain your equilibrium.

Then Covid came.

In one fell swoop, you found you could balance again.

Family life and work. Stimulation and relaxation. Work-you, and just – you.

Working from home suits you so much better. Where once you were coming in well after six, to two almost-teenagers who'd barely grunt, now you can down tools when they get home from school. Have hot chocolate and toasted teacakes, talk about their day. And it is in those spaces, in the comfortable gaps when you're eating biscuits or asking what they'd like for dinner that your children might also share their worries or their triumphs. Other days, there is no pause. As they smash in from school, they blurt and burst to tell you their day. Either way, it is *you* who is first to know. You, their mother, who once knew them as intimately as your own self, are always first to hear their news. Rather than having to prise it grudgingly out of them later, when you are all tired and the day's moved on and there are so many other tasks to do.

This, above all else, has become the highlight of your day. Your time with your boys.

Summer was harder. When the kids weren't at school, you were rising at dawn and going to bed at two. Cramming your working hours as bookends to the school day – with you, the struggling teacher. But wasn't the time before that harder still? Shuttling them off to granny's still half asleep, so you could be bright and early to the office? Pretending they – and your poor mum - were having a bright start too?

Being here has removed all that hassle. Did you think you could get away with it, though? An entire, extended summer, with the Council supporting you to work from home? Be honest, if you'd gone to your boss in normal times, and asked for this 'indulgence', what d'you think they'd have said?

Away and… Well. There may have been some eye-rolling at least.

But between you both, you've proved it possible. You and your employer. You've facilitated one another. At home, you are just as productive. More so perhaps. You keep regular hours, hours in which you are fully immersed, when your eye is never on the clock. Maybe it's because you've worked like this before. For six years you were self-employed. Self-motivation is second nature. So it's easy to be at your laptop, fully clad (albeit in jumper and jeans), coffee in hand by 8.30 am. In summer, instead of the long commute, you found yourself watering can in hand, wandering your garden before you hit your desk.

You just needed that balance. You don't need the buzz. You don't feel isolated. You have the space and time to plan. To give yourself over to doing good and vital work. A job that you believe in, take succour from. You have your husband at work, your kids at school, and then they come home and the balance tips towards them. To spending time with the people that truly count. In some ways you have the ideal job. Did you ever think it would be a global pandemic, which would give you your ideal job?

Is that crass?

It's another fact, that's all. Your job is to deal in both fact and nuance.

And what about in future? Can you keep your balance steady?

You think you can. From compromise comes choice. When it's safe, you're happy to return to the office, yes – but for one or two days a week. You'll still have your Teams chat every day – and it won't matter that you're wearing your slippers beneath the desk.

In fact, here, in your snug, you've never felt more present, nor connected. It's been so much easier to attend meetings, courses too. Being so far from the centre, a three hour seminar in Glasgow used to mean miles of travel, a whole day away from home. As the world has condensed, your opportunities have expanded. Now you meet professionals from across the country at the stroke of a single key. Only yesterday, you did a webinar where, rather than being in a classroom and seeing the backs of folks' heads, there they all were, looking you. Level and egalitarian. In these new interactions, you have got to know their faces. Got glimpses of who they really are, all these sharp-suited guys and gals who are just like you. Because you're all at home. All interrupting what you're saying to go and answer the door bell.

Or shouting over the puppy, because he won't stop barking. Or – embarrassingly (but oddly, proudly too) in your case – straining to be heard above the sound of your son practising his tuba.

Although you are not together, you feel closer to your team. Where you used to go for a lunchtime walk, once a week with a colleague, now you meet once a month, have a longer walk instead. You hold formal monthly meetings online, and frequent informal ones too. You took time to share on Remembrance Day; you have your staff Christmas Jumper Day already planned.

In many ways, life has become more simple. Surely we can't go back to the way we were? You have no desire to, anyway. Life is different. A good different.

You have spun a silken cocoon.

Work fits into your real life now, as opposed to your life being your work. Your boys prefer it too. They've told you that much. They know where you are – and who you are.

You are so much more than your job.

You get to kiss the ones you love goodbye, and you get to welcome them home. You live in a kinder world.

You don't know when you'll wear your suits again. But maybe that's for the best.

Open Book

Kelsey never got tired of sliding back the bolts. Nor unsnibbing the latch and throwing the storm doors wide. Seeing the glorious light flow from the stained glass windows above the sweeping stair. That light had been shining throughout – but Kelsey had not been there to feel its colours fall on her. Every day of lockdown, when she'd passed those doors, it felt as if the library had been muzzled. Rendered silent, all that knowledge locked away. Yes, yes, she knew there was a Google answer for everything. But the taking down of a leather-bound tome, the smoothing of the crisp white page, that musty-clever paper smell she wished you could bottle…

It was like drinking from a well. Libraries were a fount of wisdom; there should be a fountain outside each one. To most folk they were a beacon. The symbol for Carnegie's libraries was a torch, but people forgot it was a Dumfries man – William Ewart, for whom this place was named - who first brought the idea of public libraries into law. And that the Ewart Library itself was built over the very source of the Loreburn. They had an actual wellspring at the heart of this library (which is why they'd so much trouble with the damp).

'Kelsey!' Her supervisor shouted her over. 'Remember what I said?'

Kelsey held the sigh, pressed it down inside her. Pretended she'd forgot. 'Sorry Joan.'

She returned to the outer storm doors. Closed one of them partially over. They were open, and they were not. No more popping in on the off-chance. If you wanted a Blue Badge or a bus pass, you'd to book an appointment. Same if you wanted to use a PC. Appointments came in neat 45 minute slots, which you'd to reserve via the call centre – and only on non-library days. How could a library have non-library days? And even when it was a library day, there were strict limits on the numbers. No more than five at a time. Joan thought if the storm doors were left half-ajar, it would send just the right message.

Kelsey disagreed. They needed to let the public know they were open for business. Open to all, accessible to everyone. For education. Enlight-

enment. Enrichment. Entertainment. Self Improvement. Libraries were doing lifelong learning way before they'd ever invented that phrase. Fair enough, people might come now to use the internet, or pick up dog-poo bags, but so what? The point was, they had come inside. Into this treasure trove of books and archives. Who knew- they might pass before the winged figure of St Michael, shining from his window on the stair. See the town motto *A' Loreburn* below and…And…

She didn't know. Go look it up? Learn that Michael was their patron saint and that the Lore Burn really had been here, that the motto was an ancient rallying cry, for defenders to gather by the Lore stream if the town was being attacked?

To know that their town had a history?

Or to know none of these things. Just to see the window, see how grand it was, and be proud.

Her boyfriend thought she was daft. *'You sound like an old woman, Kels. Nobody cares about stuff like that. You dinny need libraries now. Not when you get everything on your phone.'*

He didn't understand that it wasn't the same. Kelsey had tried; she'd taken him to a second-hand bookshop down in Wigtown. Made him browse and breathe it in, but he'd started moaning after five minutes because there was nothing there about football, so they'd left. Her, smiling apologetically at the owner.

Kelsey went to sort the table by the library's front door. Hand sanitiser. *Check.* Forms for Test and Protect. *Check.* Lots of pens. Wee bottle of scoosh to clean the pens. *Check.* Joan had disappeared from her vantage point behind the counter. Hopefully she was making them both tea. Kelsey opened the Returns box. Empty. Good. When people returned their books, you weren't allowed to touch them anymore. Customers put them straight in the box, and closed the lid. At the end of every day, Kelsey's job was to take the box through to the back office, where it got left for 72 hours. They had several Returns boxes on the go, and a wee routine. If you were in on a Monday, you'd scan in the Friday before's books, then put them back on the shelves. She'd thought they might have to wash them too, but Joan said that would damage the paper, and Kelsey had agreed.

Today was a library day. If it was quiet, she could get on with some

registration work. Doing registrations had been a revelation. She'd kind of been chucked in at the deep end, but it was brilliant. She liked registering births the most. Maybe she should focus on that, think about training up to do weddings and the like. But then, she loved working with the kids here too. Bookbug was the best fun ever. Parents and babies used to come in and sit for ages, reading books together. Now part of Kelsey's job was to shoo them out after 15 minutes. It went against the grain, going up to a mum and her toddler, telling them they should take their books to a café instead. Saying it with half your face covered too. Kelsey had developed ways of softening the blow. '*We'd love you to sit down and read, but you can only be in for a wee while. Just so someone else can get a shot.*' She'd always smile when she spoke to customers. You could tell if someone's eyes were smiling.

During lockdown, she'd tried to keep a Bookbug Group Chat going, but it was tricky. Folk couldn't interact the way they did before. So she and Joan decided to put it online instead. It was more of a performance than an interaction, but it was better than not having anything. Every Thursday, Kelsey would go live, and do Bookbug via the Libraries' Facebook page. It was terrifying, being in front of a camera, reading stories or singing a song. She'd far rather have the toddlers and babies there in front of her.

Joan was delighted though - she'd made her record some song videos for the Bookbug App too. '*Why not? You're really good.*'

Aye, so she was. "Beamed across Scotland: Kelsey Grant belts out 'Coulter's Candy' to the nation!"

Poor Book Nook. The corner over by the far wall was forlorn, with its empty red and blue, dumpy stools and its unsquashed yellow cushions. All the toys had been removed, to discourage unnecessary touching. This place needed children to keep it alive. When they were allowed, Kelsey would do a Read-Around Safari – a real-life treasure hunt, with clues and prizes. She'd been putting out posts to all the local schools since they'd returned, and they'd responded magnificently. Nearly every day, they were sending in videos of the pupils reading books. Maybe that was her vocation – maybe she should be a teacher?

For now, she'd just go with the flow. Behind her, she felt a burst of cold, as the inner door creaked open and the first customer of the day appeared. Blue tweed coat, purple paisley-pattern face mask. It was Mrs Oliphant, a

sweet old soul with a passion for murder. (Mysteries, that was. The bloodier the better).

'Is that you open, dear?'

'Come away in Mrs O. How are you keeping?'

The old lady had her back to her, was squirting her hands liberally from the bottle of Carex. 'Not so bad.' Mrs Oliphant stopped dead in her tracks. Staring she was, staring at Kelsey like she had committed some foul deed.

'Is everything ok?'

Mrs Oliphant pointed at her own mask. 'Your face.'

'Oh God!' Kelsey's hand flew up to her mouth. 'I've not got my mask on, have I?'

'What kind of example's that to set your elders?' Mrs Oliphant wagged a chiding finger. 'You're aye banging on about how we've to wear these horrible things.'

'I know, I know. I'm sorry.' She fished around in her pocket. 'Here! Look, I'm putting it on immediately.'

'Hmm,' said Mrs Oliphant.

Kelly looped the elastic round her ears. 'Don't tell Joan,' she said in a stage-whisper.

'As long as you set that new Val McDermid aside when it comes in.' Mrs Oliphant winked at her.

She winked back. 'Done.'

You could have a laugh with Mrs Oliphant. So many of the customers were made anxious by the restrictions. Scuttling in, not speaking. Not looking anyone in the eye. It didn't help that staff were not supposed to be on the floor anymore. If you weren't checking folk in at the door, you'd to be behind the barricades. That's what they were calling the front desk. A Perspex screen had been fitted round the counter, and Joan had also strategically placed three tables right in front, so customers couldn't get too close.

Kelsey left Mrs Oliphant to her browsing. There was no point sitting by the door all morning. Joan emerged from the back, carrying two mugs.

'You're a star, Mrs Grant.'

'Why, thank you, Miss Miller.'

Joan was alright, really.

'Is it ok if I get on with a wee bit of registration work? There's a real

backlog.'

'You're meant to be on the door.'

They both looked round the echoing library.

'It's not exactly jumping, is it?' said Kelsey.

Mrs Oliphant interrupted, to tell them she was off already. 'That's me, dear. ' She brandished a book in each hand. Both covers were black – one with a blood-spurting, splayed open hand, the other with a smoking gun. 'Just got to work the doo-dah.'

The scanners had been put outside the Perspex screen, so customers could scan their own books out. Mrs Oliphant often had trouble seeing the red flashing light. Kelsey knew how much it frustrated her, but she wasn't meant to intervene.

'Remember, take your time, Mrs O. It's just like the supermarket.'

One swipe. Two swipes. She got it on the third.

'Oh look at you scan. You're a real pro now! Queen of the doo-dah.'

Mrs Oliphant shook her head, but her eyes were twinkly. 'Away you go. See you next week, Kelsey.'

'Mind how you go, Mrs O.'

It was their regular, rhyming goodbye.

Joan waited until Mrs Oliphant had left. 'I don't think you should be quite so flippant with the general public. Customer Service is more important than ever, you know.'

'Yes Joan.'

Joan sniffed. 'But you did handle her very well.

'Look,' said Kelsey. 'There's nobody else in. What if I stay behind the counter, keep an eye on the door? I could work away while I'm sitting here. Means you could get on with more important jobs.'

Joan considered this. 'I do have a lot of cataloguing to do. And I was meaning to have a scout down in the basement. See if I could find last year's Christmas decorations.'

'Well then.'

'If you're sure.'

Kelsey spent a happy half hour in the company of some online forms, only pausing when she heard a polite cough.

'That's what I like to see – someone engrossed in their work.' A tall man

stood there, neatly attired in pullover, checked shirt and tie.

'Oh, Duncan! You gave me a fright!'

Duncan was the library's driver. Before Kelsey had started, there used to be a mobile library which toured the region, bringing books to coast and countryside. Cutbacks saw an end to that, but they still made sure books got out to the housebound. People got in touch, told them what kind of books they enjoyed, then the drivers made up packs from library stock, and delivered them to the door. It was really popular, if you were elderly, vulnerable, in an outlying area - they'd over eighty registered for Duncan's route alone. He covered everywhere from Gatehouse to Canonbie. The man was a walking encyclopaedia of literary likes and dislikes.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I was lost in registration.'

'Excellent, because that's exactly what I'm here for: your registration papers. There's a right backlog, you know.'

'Tell me about it. But is this not a book day?' Kelsey pushed her chair back, stretched her neck. 'Ooh, I've got a crick. It must be a book day. We haven't seen you for ages. I thought you did the run every three weeks?'

'Keep up, young lady. It's only been every six weeks. Right since lockdown began.'

'Sorry,' she said again. 'Some days I feel I've got rocks in my head.'

Duncan nodded. 'Me too. Time's gone a' agley, hasn't it? There's days I feel this whole year's just disappeared, yet other times it's like the clock's stood still. For months and months and months.' He fiddled with his face mask. One of the ties was coming loose. Briefly, as he adjusted it, it slipped, and Kelsey caught sight of his expression. He had such an open, honest face, she could read the gist, at least, of what he was thinking. His mouth drooped; all tight and sooked-in. It was the opposite of when you try not to smile.

'What's up?'

'Och, nothing. I'm just thinking how it must be for some of my wee band.' He finished securing his mask. 'Billy's Bookworms.'

'Is that your readers? Why d'you call them that?'

'That's what they call me.' His brow unfurrowed as he spoke. 'Because of my surname?'

Kelsey felt her cheeks go warm. Should she nod sagely and go *Oh yeah.*?

'It's Williams,' he said.

All this time and she'd never known Duncan's second name. 'Would you like a cup of tea, Duncan? Or some shortbread? Joan's auntie made it…' she was fiddling under the counter, looking for the tartan tin. Patching over the fluster of embarrassment with a fluster of words instead. She reached past the side of the screen, over the counter to where Duncan stood. 'Here – would you like a bit?'

Duncan was a gentleman, as always. 'I would indeed. That looks very nice, thank you. I'm just after a cup of tea in the van though, so I'll skip the drink.'

The registration updates could wait. 'Tell me about your bookworms, Duncan.'

'Ach, no. You've your work to be getting on with.'

'No, please. I'd like to know more about them.'

'Well,' he poked a bit of shortbread in at the side of his mask. 'Oh, *my*. That is good shortbread.'

'Take more. Honestly, I'll put on a stone if I keep eating it all myself.'

'Thank you.'

'So. Your bookworms? How are they all doing?'

'Och, it's been miserable. Not being able to go into folks' houses anymore. Having to change over bags on the doorstep. You feel awfy distant, you know? Wearing a mask and gloves. Not being able to go in and have a proper chat. Folk are very happy to see you all the same, but...' He tailed off.

'You feel you're not doing your job right, don't you?' said Kelsey.

'Aye. Exactly that.' He swallowed another bite. 'But they're so grateful, you know? It's quite…humbling. I've one old lady who's in her nineties. Lives all alone, and the first thing she welcomes me with, every time I go is '*Ah, my most favourite visitor.'* I'm only allowed to spend fifteen minutes with each person. It's terrible, having to get back in the van and drive away. Yet she stands there, waving and smiling till I've gone.' He shook his head. 'I just wish things would go back to normal. See the great good spirit some folk show, when you bear in mind they're housebound? If anyone should have a gripe against life it's them, but they're so kind and grateful. And all I can do for her is to swap bags, and ask if she enjoyed such and such a writer.'

'Do they always like what you choose for them?' said Kelsey.

'Oh God no! Sharp as a tack, most of my regulars. Very quick to tell me if they don't rate a particular writer! You get to know all their likes and dislikes soon enough. Well, I did. Don't know if I'm so up to date now.'

'How d'you mean?'

'Six weeks between visits, and I only see half my regulars as it is. I've no idea how the others are getting on. We're on reduced hours, you see.'

'Are you? Sorry, Duncan, I didn't know.'

'Ach don't you worry – I'm just fortunate to have a job. But it means the route's split between me and another driver, so I only get to visit half my regulars. Been like that since lockdown. I'm sure they're all fine, but you can't help worrying about them.'

'Does the other driver not tell you?'

'Well, I don't really see him.'

'But, like in Teams meetings or that? Do you not all get updates then?'

'It doesn't really work like that.'

There was a silence.

'What d'you read yourself, Kelsey?'

'Um…I like poetry, actually. Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie. John Glenday. People like that.'

'Poetry?' He sounded delighted. 'Well, good for you. Aye I like a bit of poetry too. MacCaig's my favourite. And Burns, of course. I read all sorts, mind. Modern fiction, thrillers. I do like Robert Harris.' He finished his shortbread. 'I always have a book on the go. Can't get to sleep if I don't have something good to read.'

'I can't get to sleep until I've thought of one good thing that's happened that day.'

Kelsey didn't know why she'd blurted it out loud. She'd not even told her boyfriend that before. It was private, and daft. But Duncan didn't make fun of her.

'Do you? I might try that,' he said. 'That's a lovely thing to do.'

'Yeah. Even if it was just someone smiling at me today. You've got to keep a wee glimmer of hope, haven't you? Especially now.'

'It really is the strangest time, isn't it? You're right. You just have to try and get through it. Oh – here's one. A good thing: I've another old gent who told me there was a food hamper left on his doorstep. Delivered anon-

ymously, just as a gift. He never found out who. I mean, that's the kind of story that'd never make the news – but it deserves to. It's cheering to know there's such kindness in the world.'

They both looked up as the front door banged open. A grey-haired man hurried in, straight past the cleaning station.

'Sorry!' Kelsey called to him. 'Could you sanitise your hands, please?'

'Oh sorry, sorry, yes.' The man seemed flustered, was holding something in his fist, which dropped to the floor as he retreated his steps, to fumble with the bottle of Carex. He wiped his hands on a paper towel, bent to retrieve the fallen object. Made his way to the counter. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry, sorry.'

Kelsey thought she recognised him - from his tartan mask, but also by his eyes. They were a deep, piercing blue. She was sure she'd seen those eyes before. Recently too, flickering out that same panic.

'Geordie, it's yourself!' said Duncan.

Geordie – that was it! He'd been one of the computer bookings last week. Poor man had been struggling for ages at the PC, trying to do a Universal Credit application. He'd looked so lost. Kelsey had made a point of (illegally) sorting the stacks near to where he'd been sitting, just so she could smile over encouragingly. She'd seen the open webpage. In normal times, she might have leaned in, offered to help if he'd asked, but she couldn't. And he didn't. Though, if she remembered correctly, he did ask her what a 'government gateway' was.

'Geordie and I were at school together,' Duncan was saying. 'Good to see you, my man. Not seen you in ages. How's things? How's business?'

Kelsey stared at Duncan, willing him to stop. Heedless, he carried on. 'I'll have you know, this boy here has the best wee travel agent in town. Built it up from scratch, didn't you, Geordie? Bet things are tough the now, mind.'

The man – Geordie – spoke very quietly. 'What things? Things are gone. It's all gone. Kaput. Nobody wants to travel in a pandemic, do they?'

'Oh Geordie, man. I'm so sorry.'

Geordie shrugged. 'Nothing for it but to get on. In fact, that's why I'm here.' He turned to Kelsey. 'Could I use the computer again, please? I need to print out my CV.' He held up his hand; he was clutching a memory stick.

Voices floated in, as two women entered the library, chatting.

'I'm really sorry,' said Kelsey. The women busied themselves at the

cleaning station. 'But you need to book the computers. And it's a library day today, so you wouldn't be able to get on anyway.'

For a moment, the man slumped. Then he braced himself, gave a brief nod.

'Is it urgent, Geordie?' asked Duncan.

'Aye.' Geordie's eyes closed. Kelsey could see a muscle in his face clench slightly, above his tartan mask. 'Aye, Duncan. There's a wee job going – part time, but it would see us through Christmas. Only thing is, I need to get my CV in the day. We've no printer now…' He opened his eyes again. Facing Kelsey.

It would only take a minute to switch a PC on. Another few minutes for the thing to warm up. But Joan could be back any second. If she did come in, and those two women were here, as well as this man – that would be them at five already. But did Duncan count? Did staff count or was it only customers?

Duncan cleared his throat. 'Miss Miller. Were you not going to print out those registration forms for me? What if I away over to one of the PCs and print them out myself? Let you get on with serving your customers?'

Kelsey hesitated. The forms Duncan wanted were already boxed up. 'Don't worry,' he continued. 'I'll do all the cleaning rigmarole before and after. Wipe the mouse, mat, the works. Just give me a wee bittie of your spray and some tissue.'

'Em…there's some over by the computers.'

'Right you are. Geordie, why don't you take a saunter round the block. Back in ten minutes, say?'

A tongue of air kissed Kelsey's neck. The front door again; a dad with a buggy, battering his way inside. He'd had to push the storm doors fully open to get in. Automatically, she began to say 'Can you shut-'

Then Kelsey stopped. At some point in the future, things would go back to the way they were. Until then, they had to keep showing they were open. Waiting for the time when they could throw those sheltering doors, gloriously and truly and forever wide. To let all that light pour in. Pour out.

She went out to help her customer, skirting the two older men by her counter. Saw movement as she passed. Wordlessly, Duncan was holding out his hand for the memory stick. Wordlessly, Geordie passed it over. Anyone watching would think these two old pals were (illegally) shaking hands.

The World, Turning

Winter Solstice. He remembers last year. Grey dawn bleeding into rose-spun gold as the sun kissed the standing stones on Cairn Holy, and light turned on scurrying dark. Heralding the shortest day. Why he'd cycled there, he did not know, but he'd woken when the sky was full of diamond-studded stars – thinking about work - forever work. He'd made some tea. Tried to stop the fretting in his heart. Caffeine, the distant owl calling – whatever, but before he knew it, he'd put on his gear, crept to the garage, slow-creaking it open so as not to wake the whole house, got on his bike, and gone. Pushing and pushing, driving the ice-air deep in his lungs, muscles ablaze as he climbed, climbed the twisting wooded track, until the stones loomed from shadow and he could go no further.

This year's Winter Solstice finds him indoors, at his desk. Looking through the window at a murky sky. Still thinking about work. He is nursing a coffee in the mug his wife made. She's a potter, an artist. He is a philistine who doesn't know his Monet from his Mondrian. They shouldn't work together, but they do. The mug is glazed an iridescent azure blue. There are clever swirls of violet running through. The generous bowl of it bulges, sits, comfortable in his hand. Holding it helps him think. It is possibly his favourite thing she's ever crafted. One of the few items he'd taken from the office, since the office became his home. Grabbed only this mug, his PC and all his computer kit – which was a source of much amusement. Everyone at work knew he was a technophobe. *Good luck setting that up, boss!* Business Support had kindly given him a tutorial before they all left.

He shivers, but not from cold. It is the adrenaline that fires him. Adrenaline and coffee have kept him going all this long year, when reality birled to beyond incredible, and so many eyes turned to him. To where the buck stopped. The hand who held the power. And holds the coffee mug. Which is twitching because of the shivering inside him. Something melting, all that control he has been mastering, as he urges his people forwards, encouraging them to go further than they ever thought possible, but as far as he knows they can. Muscles ablaze, everyone working beyond effort, heads

down, forging on and on. Catching problems, batting solutions at a pace you cannot possibly maintain. Yet they do, striving towards a diamond-studded moment so remote, so clear that you cannot believe it. Until you cup it in your hand. This moment. As real and round as this mug.

This moment when they are discussing vaccines. The actual roll-out. He has just finished a crack-of-dawn conference call. They've been discussing the practicalities of where the super-freezer is held, and how the delicate transportation of these hope-filled vials will be managed. Fine-tuning all the detail: the high risk categories, wider community coverage, large rural area. What venues will they use? Questions about the elderly in care homes who cannot give consent, about powers of attorney. About protection.

About being able, perhaps, one day to relax.

He thinks this is what the shivering is. It's a thawing. And it is joy.

'You're up early.'

Only a whisper behind him, but he jumps, curses, his hand throwing out an arc, a blue-brown comet, which peels apart as it soars. The ribbon of coffee is spilling on the papers littering his desk, but it is the mug, his mug, he is watching, as it crashes to the wooden floor. Bounces once, and breaks.

'Oh darling, I'm sorry.' His wife is leaning over him, kissing the top of his head. 'Did I give you a fright?'

'My mug,' is all he can say. He sounds like a little schoolboy.

'Oh no.' She crouches down, picks up the shards. Three neat pieces; its bulging belly burst.

'I love that mug.'

'I know you did.'

'That mug has kept me company.' His voice is flat. The fizz inside him dissipated.

'I'll make you another one.' She holds a fragment up to the light. 'I'm not quite sure what I did for the glaze, but I'll make you a new one, a nicer one. I promise.'

'It's fine,' he says dully, tugging some tissues from the box on his desk. Mopping up the mess. 'I'd better get on.'

She leaves as quietly as she came, and he feels bad. He didn't need to cause a drama. There's been too much drama since day one. Since the day the world inverted, and they moved from the known to the unknown. That

netherworld where day and night had disappeared. He casts his mind all the way back to March, which could be yesterday, and last century. One of the first things he'd to do that day was advise hundreds of staff to close all Council facilities – immediately. No lead-in time, nothing. An unprecedented action, evoking a million questions – *how long? What about our customers? How can I do my work?* Those early days were hazy with lack of sleep and a sense of disbelief, folk not grasping the gravity of it, then.

The world inverted, and then it polarised. Two contrasting situations, where he was telling great swathes of the workforce to go home, to stay out of harm's way, while telling others to stay at their posts. To carry on as normal, in the midst of all that harm. Understandably, some folk bridled. *How is that fair? What about me?* But he tried to manage it the way he always did. Honestly. Cascading information down, getting supervisors to talk to their teams. Telling them why their work was so vital. Telling them what management would do to help keep them safe. It might be amending how they worked, so there were less people on the ground. Providing protective equipment. Listening to their sense of injustice, acknowledging the risk. Acknowledging them. He knew he was asking more and more of his people - literally. Some workforces were slashed by forty percent, folk vulnerable, shielding. Those that were left, having to spread themselves twice as wide. Huge logistical arrangements across the Council, each Directorate analysing all their services, deeming what was crucial, and if so, could it be done at home? Liaising with every manager, considering staff welfare. All of them, Social Work, Education, Communities, Economy and Resources, searching out their service users. Identifying who relied on them, where they were, and what they needed. How vulnerable they were. Even that – the Council's duty to protect the vulnerable spun to inconceivable dimensions, as the vulnerable quadrupled overnight.

He reaches for his coffee mug. Remembers it isn't there. Twiddles a pen instead, but it's not the same. He wonders if the public realise what a difference they made? How much they did to help? Another unprecedented action: the way communities had showed their support. Council staff being thanked, applauded. Given notes and gifts. Radio shows announcing the 'workers of the week.' As if the veil had been lifted, and people were seeing people, real people. Not jobsworths or dogsbodies, but folk just like them.

He wishes that feeling would remain. Not the clapping. The caring. Even within the Council. Sometimes he thinks they forget, some of his colleagues. Not every job can be done remotely. Try telling the guy who maintains the snowploughs to take his work home. So many staff, dispersed across the region. He's always liked to visit folk in their place of work. Pop in for a chat, bring some bacon rolls. Have a wee shot of what they're doing. It's not being soft – it's being decent. Being human. That is all he's ever wanted for the Council. To be human. They have reached out during lockdown like never before, because they had to. So much change, so few channels. People needed a constant they could rely on. So they'd created a bulletin that went daily in the beginning, then weekly to communities. Giving public health updates and advice, plus feelgood stories and local news. The strapline they'd come up with for the magazine was inspired:

Be Kind beside a shiny, fat heart.

Connect alongside an icon of a phone.

Take Notice illustrated by an old-fashioned telly with the set-top aerial he remembers as a boy.

Support silhouetted with the outline of a head and shoulders.

Give shown by just a pair of hands.

Simple, child-like in its directness. But it wasn't superficial. It wasn't corporate-speak, it was put there by ward workers, the footsoldiers on the ground, so pivotal to the early response. The message resonated because it was true. Words he'd always wanted out there, and now they were.

It's what Councils are for. To Be Kind. Connect. Take Notice. Support. Give.

But he couldn't deliver without his staff. And his staff couldn't deliver without their communities' support. Which was why, when the real world morphed, the council morphed too. Instead of directorates focused on service areas , they'd split into nineteen Community Cells. Rapid response teams; outward facing and community focused, with staff from across the council, from third sector partners as well, working together in the service of communities. Designated websites became one-stop shops for enquiries – with quick turnarounds because the folk doing the answering were also part of the team.

Everything became a team effort. All of them, working for the same goal.

Yes, the world had inverted. And it had polarised. And it had shaken them up like a snowglobe. Left them dancing on the ceiling. But the only way this high-wire, never-been-done-before walk across the rooftops would work is if they relied on existing structures.

Stress-test what they'd been building. Seeing if it stood up.

To the surprise of some, and the satisfaction of many, it had. It transpires that the Community Model he'd been banging on about all this time is efficient and effective after all. Even the cynics – they might not be evangelical, but no one could deny the theory has become practice. The evidence is there before their eyes. Working with Communities works.

It's worked for his people too. The one thing (apart from his mug) that's kept him focused throughout is knowing, genuinely knowing that, for his staff, somehow, this has been their moment. Despite all the darkness and the loss, everything they've been creating together has come to life. His people are out there, doing it, with only the lightest touch from him. He's had a few catch-up sessions online. Early morning, or late at night, staff can book a time that suits them. And what is coming out loud and clear, is that they like how they've been working. Yes, the people who get in touch might be self-selecting, or only telling him what he wants to hear. But he doesn't think so. He's too long in the tooth; he hopes he knows people. It's about knowing yourself.

What he is hearing are voices that are proud, and enthusiastic to work for the Council. Voices that don't just think about their own job, but of those they work with too. People who recognise they've changed, who want to change. Want to see their weaknesses, the gaps in the system, to break it, rebuild it. Respond to it. Keep changing.

Outside, the day is brightening. The shortest day. He rubs his eyes. Be good to get a bike ride in. Cycling is his stress buster. No longer head-down, he makes himself look upwards. Look around. For a long time, you couldn't go much beyond your home, so he's been forced to find new routes, new ways of doing the miles. Connecting with what's on his doorstep.

We need to keep cutting the grass. That's what a colleague said, as they were packing up. They both knew then, that everyone's lives would turn upside down. That they were going head first into a maelstrom. So there had to be some constants. Some wee things to hold on to, to help people cope.

Clean streets. A weeded graveyard. Parks with flowers and grass mown low enough to walk on. Prioritising beauty as much as safety, making public spaces which soothed and didn't jar. They needed to be out there, doing the planting. Tending folks' wellbeing as well as their environment. Seeding hope.

You did that, he'd tell his staff. Workers grow six inches taller when you tell them that.

To some extent, they have to return to normal; he recognises this. That early pace, that adrenaline will only take you so far, before you're running on empty. There's a risk of having emergency arrangements which go on too long. They stop being reassuring after a while. The Council, all its structures, the corporate governance, condensed to a nine-member Covid committee. Representative and brisk as that had been, it's served its purpose. All forty three elected members have a role to play in decision making. A good, blended balance for what is to come. Resources to be pitched for, and shaped and shared. Finding new routes and new ways of working. The Council works best when members and officers work together, he thinks. When there's mutual trust and respect.

Getting back to normal is another small seed of hope. But it will be a new normal.

'Me again.' His wife comes in. Arms behind her back. She is grinning; same grin he fell in love with.

'Yes?' he says, elongating the word. He raises one eyebrow, adopts a faux-formal tone. 'May I help you?'

She sidles up to him.

'What is it?' he laughs. 'What have you done?'

'You keep going on about 'Build Back Better', so here you go.' With a flourish, she hands him his mug. Whole again. Its shards have been reconnected. Iridescent blue and clever violet, and a new, stunning tracery of gold. His wife has painted along the faultlines, picking them out in gold.

He has no words.

'It's called kintsugi,' she says. 'The Japanese art of repair. By embracing an object's flaws and imperfections, you can make it even stronger.'

'It's beautiful.'

'Not sure it'll ever hold coffee again, but you could use it as a pen pot?

At least you get to keep it on your desk.'

He runs his finger over the cracks. Those lovely cracks.

'Was that the NHS meeting you had there? When I interrupted and made you throw a crockery tantrum?'

'Yeah.'

She nods. 'So it's really happening then? We're getting more vaccines? Brilliant. Especially now, with that new variant.'

'Yeah.' He reaches out, his arm around her waist. Pulling her close. It looks breezy outside. A leafless tree bends, making stark lines against the sky. The sky that is curved around this ball they all spin on. He thinks he'll leave the bike in the garage. 'Fancy a walk?' he asks his wife.

Here is My Story

'I'm not sure I'll ever say 'That's not my job' again.'

Of all the words I gathered during my residency, that sentence sticks. From August to December 2020, I was writer in residence at Dumfries and Galloway Council. Part of a regionwide arts project called Atlas Pandemica*, my role was to collect stories from Council staff about life during the initial response to COVID-19. I wanted to learn how the pandemic had affected staff personally, in their jobs, and in the communities they serve. Using a mix of video messaging, virtual meetings, staff blogs and phone conversations, I aimed to capture a wide range of experiences, from as broad a range of jobs as possible, then fictionalise them. Telling stories is what I do, but blending fact into fiction allowed me to stitch stories together, to take magpie bits of local history, news, views and themes and distil them into the essence - or the spirit, perhaps - of what life was like, both on the frontline and behind the scenes. It also meant staff could talk openly, without worrying about seeing their names in print. (But you know who you are..!)

Asking to hear these stories was a way of documenting them, yes, but I also wanted to give staff a space to pause for breath; to consider what they'd been working through, and how it was affecting them. The pace of change also had an impact - things were shifting so quickly during the term of my residency, that what we thought was the beginning of the end of this pandemic actually became a second wave, meaning any move into 'recovery' wasn't quite so clear cut.

Of course this is an artistic, not scientific, endeavour, so I could only write about the efforts and emotions of the staff who got in touch with me. Even so, common themes arose. Staff noted that, particularly in the early days, they were seen as ambassadors for the Council; the go-to contact for advice, irrespective of what Service they actually worked for, as well as sometimes becoming an unexpected symbol of the community's appreciation for efforts to keep key services running. And, in turn, staff reciprocated, often feeling that they had become advocates – both for the Council and for the communities in which they lived.

As well as barriers between 'Council' and 'Community' breaking down, I got a strong sense that boundaries were being blurred inside the Council too. Staff adapted and redeployed as required, sometimes working across various Service areas, working remotely, or even taking on entirely new roles. This seemed to increase that sense of being in a collective; a feeling that no matter where you worked in the Council, you were part of a bigger whole. And, while home working was a boon to some, and engendered a real sense of isolation in others, overall, it did seem to make people appreciate their workplace 'community' more.

The pandemic also caused staff to develop new, collaborative ways of working and responding across and outwith the Council. Often geographically based, new teams formed where Council Services, community groups, health and third sector partners worked together in local cells just 'to get the job done'. One officer commented that having everyone round the (virtual) table meant problems got solved almost as they arose - and that maintaining these new channels of communication would be crucial, going forwards.

I thought a lot about trees and seasons while writing this book. About roots that anchor and branches that twine. All my stories are held within the Atlas Pandemica website, but I'm delighted the Council have agreed to publish this anthology too. I hope it shows some of the personal stories behind professional decisions. That we truly are all in this together. And I hope that in keeping these new connections, indeed in keeping the edges between us blurred, we can continue that collective, grassroots-led way of working which COVID necessitated, well into the future.

Whatever that future might bring.

Karen Campbell February 2021

Karen Campbell *is a writer of contemporary fiction. Originally from Glasgow, she now lives in Galloway. She graduated with distinction from Glasgow University's Creative Writing Masters. Before turning to writing, she was a police officer in Glasgow, and then a press officer with Glasgow City Council. Her novels range from writing about the police, to refugees and asylum seekers, social issues, politics and Italy in World War Two.*

www.karencampbell.scot

'Here is Our Story' is one of 10 creatively-led projects that make up 'Atlas Pandemica: Maps to a Kinder World'; each investigates a different theme highlighted by life during the COVID pandemic. Projects worked directly with people in Dumfries and Galloway, focussing on the impacts and the learning from the community's experience of the evolving pandemic. Conceived and managed by community-led arts organisation The Stove Network, Atlas Pandemica explores local responses to the pandemic and how these might shape new approaches to our shared future. The project is supported by the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund.

www.atlaspandemica.org

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