

Letters from a shuttered country – Easter 2020

Chapter One In which the story ends

An unremarkable bungalow in an unremarkable street.

A key turns in the lock.

“Hey Dad!”

Nothing. She called again. The heavens were as brass.

The kitchen was smart, the lounge surprisingly shabby, the dining room functional.

This was home for a while as Kate Trimble hunkered down to isolate with her Dad as her own flat sale had to be put on ice. She wanders around wondering where he was.

Then she hears sounds from upstairs.

“I’m up here”, came a voice she knew and loved.

“You had me worried there for a minute” Kate exclaims. “Shall I come up?”

“I’ll be down”, Bill calls out. But his voice sounded like a muffled drum. “Give me a minute. And by the way put the kettle on if you would. There’s a love”

And when Bill comes down he wears the look of someone who hadn’t been weeping but you think there was enough feeling to warrant a box of tissues.

“Dad!” Kate catches his face. “Whatever is the matter?”

“I’ll be all right love”, comes the reply. But his voice is heavy with emotion.

“Now where’s that tea?”

“Thanks for bringing the shopping in”. Bill is really grateful. In Covid UK, the queue stretched to infinity and beyond. Well, not exactly but he had spent seventy minutes trying to get to the supermarket the other day. Standing two metres apart his fellow shoppers were compatriots in crisis before returning to their troglodyte world.

“How was school?” Bill asks.

“Not a single child we are concerned about attended school today”, said Katie pensively.

“I’m highly concerned about one particular child. Charlie has a couple of brothers and sisters. The Mum screams in their face for no reason. Her boyfriend screams at her all day long.”

“Bad business”, said Bill shaking his head. “If your family is struggling in the first place, things are going to snap with this virus.”

**“How do we make sure the children that should be at school are safe”, said Katie quizzically. They’ll be spending more time on-line and that’s a Wild West sometimes.”
But look, what’s up?”**

“Think you mean ‘What’s App’?” Bill smiles.

Two cups of tea teased. “Come on”, said Katie. “How about if we do our daily exercise?” “Aren’t you the lucky one living so close to the sea!”

What an extraordinary moment this was in our national life! The old time when you could do what you wanted without thinking twice seemed to be a receding memory. Destabilising, confusing – we didn’t know how to be or what to do. Normal sources of solace were severely restricted. But you could go for a daily exercise. More than ever they felt very laden with gifts that the Channel was within walking distance.

By now, the sun had more than halved the day. Small flaky mists crept along the edges of the surrounding hills. There was still hardly anyone about. Were they lone survivors and a flood had silently engulfed the old order of things? Everything lay bathed in eerie silence. Shutters had come down it seemed on everything you could access from home.

Life was lived invisibly. Yet behind shuttered doors lay a tardis of activity. The world outside was denied except for the brief foray into reality. Inside, at the click of a mouse, adventures were to be had; adventures without touch. But what was real – the shuttered life of physicality or the galaxy of the mouse? There was much to hold on to.

Twenty years had now passed. Bill was struggling to recollect things these days. Even the face of Ali seemed to slip away elusively in the corridors of memory.

“Found a whole load of letters today amidst dozens of documents” said Bill at last.

“And?” asked Katie. “You’ve got to tell me now Dad” she said, aware of his reticence. To his daughter’s loving concern, Bill succumbed. He gave her a one minute headline.

“Write to them again”, Katie urged. “Now we are in Covid lock-down”, get back in touch. It’s not as if you are busy with other things. I’m sure you’ve got their e-mails somewhere or could look them up on Zoom”. She touched him affectionately on the shoulder.

“I might just do that” Bill replied heavily. “I’d like to make contact again”.

Ten minutes later, they stood on a hillside on the south coast of England. Where the river carved its way into the sea, a town had once sprung up. Fishing had been the main means of support for many hundreds of years. Here, tourists came in thousands, attracted by the calm beauty of the bay and the water that sometimes lapped gently against the seashore, sometimes driven with ferocity and power.

Had they been allowed, the route to the sea lay nearly a mile along the footpath. Their footfall made a quiet echo on the hillside. Up a little, further along, past rows of hedges and the top of the sea, Bill and Katie paused to draw breath and take in the scenes that begged to be described. Painters and photographers had been drawn here, to capture the soft landscape and offer it to others. Splashes of brown and reds broke up the many greens that paraded on a Spring morning. How many types of green could there be?

But that was enough of the outdoors today. It was time to go back in doors, to retreat into the interior life. Katie managed to open her father up a little.

“You can read them if you want” volunteered Bill. “Wonder how you see it all? What with all this time on our hands, thought I would have a bit of a clear out. To be honest with you, I’d forgotten these old letters were there.”

But many other things had been sparked off and were jumping back into memory. He thought of another Easter or two. After Katie had settled down that eve, she wondered what this pile of papers would yield? Would she learn very much and make the jig-saw pattern of his mysterious past come at last to a picture that made sense?

Passover 1999. Israel. The land of the sherut, the shared taxi. At Ben Gurion airport, the four friends passed through immigration, collected their luggage and then piled into a taxi with two other men. At ten dollars per person, this was good value.

One of their companions, a bearded American, leaned forward in greeting.

"Hi, the name's Dave".

"Are you a pilgrim?" Steve asked him laconically.

"I'm an End Timer," replied the first fellow traveller.

"A what?" asked Steve.

"AIDS; natural disasters! There's a whirlwind of judgement visiting the Earth at this hour of history. Jerusalem is where the action is about to happen. It's time now for God to intervene".

The second fellow-traveller shook his head in disgust. "It's the Jerusalem syndrome" he said, "its bringing out all the crazies. Do you know what I've just been asked at immigration? 'Have you come to commit suicide?' If you are single, from a Christian country and not in a regular tour programme, they think you're a loony!"

After the 50 kilometre drive and an incessant blaring of horns they found themselves once more in the most fascinating city in the world. If it did not live up to it's Hebrew name, 'City of peace', the Arabic name for Jerusalem, El Khudx, 'the holy', seemed very apt. Much had changed since they were last there. Israel was suspended between high tension wires. The 4000 year struggle between Arab and Jew was still simmering.

It was mid afternoon when a weary group of men checked in at the Jerusalem Towers Hotel. Shabbat had two hours to run. After the fast moving events of the past 20 hours, sleep engulfed them all and the Shabbat was over before they re entered the world to stroll around the city.

Jerusalem had expanded in all directions. The New City was cleaner and more modern than back in 1971, with museums, the Knesset and many of Jerusalem's restaurants and nightlife. The Old City felt familiar to them although the restoration of the Jewish quarter had become the most successful building project in Israel.

They strolled in the Arab markets for a while looking at leather goods and clothes. Steve looked for a small rug for Amanda.

"I've got a feeling we're going to be exchanging presents again," he said simply. That was said with disarming frankness and his companions were warmed by it.

Seven gates were doors into fascinating narrow streets. Climbing the metal stair case on the corner of Habad St, they found themselves on the same level as the rooftops. Through the ventilation shafts, the markets could be seen as well as heard. History seeped into the four men. They could make out Mt Scopus, where the Romans had

camped during the siege of Jerusalem. To the east lay the Mount of Olives. The sun was going down. It was clear why Jerusalem was called the City of Gold.

In the Old City, they found a restaurant selling excellent Yemenite felafel. As they ate, little was spoken. They were busy re living the past. Only a vague itinerary was agreed. By then it was about nine and they agreed to wander towards the Temple Mount. It seemed the right direction to take.

"This is the fulcrum of history" Jack remarked. "Here is where nations have marched". So much had been prophesied, so much had come to its fulfilment. But as the final curtain was being called on the second millennium, Jerusalem was at fever pitch. Even at that time of night, the City was heaving with visitors, bracing itself for a stampede as four million people felt this was the place to be.

They passed by a number of street preachers warning of imminent judgement upon the world. One man was speaking in sober, reasonable tones. Steve and the others found themselves listening, interest aroused. But on the other side of the street, there was a rather more eccentric figure with flowing robes and flowing beard. Their taxi companion had wasted no time. They watched as Israeli police descended and took both away. The authorities were taking no chances. The Jerusalem syndrome was getting out of hand. Some people had only to touch down in Israel to become convinced they were biblical figures vital to world history.

But now the four stood for a while at the Western wall, remembering the Jewish men they had seen a few hours before, heads covered with cardboard yarmulkas. In the distance, a church chimed ten. At the Temple Mount, security was tighter than normal. Israel had embarked on a seven million pound project to protect the Temple Mount from groups plotting to bring about the end of the world.

Sunday morning dawned over Jerusalem. It was misty.

The four discussed how to connect with the past. They agreed they would walk to the very spot where the bus had been bombed and stand there for a while though they only had a vague idea of what would or should happen.

Steve meandered round ignoring the pressing invitation of numerous street traders.

"Have a looksie, have a butchers", some said in mocking sales English.

But Steve did not respond to their bantering tone. He couldn't get out of his mind the face of a wailing woman who stared back at him from the Sahara sands. Steve had always been a survivor, always landed on his feet, always conceived himself to be invincible, possessed of an indestructible quality that gave him mastery of life. Now it bore upon him that life hung by a slender thread. He had never really troubled himself with the lonely questions of existence. "Good grief. We'll be discussing the meaning of life in a minute" he would say disdainfully, if a conversation was going deep. "I leave all that to the religious crowd".

But here in this place the need to sort out his own mortality was urgent and pressing.

Their route led down Via Dolorosa, spanning both Muslim and Christian quarters.

They found themselves amidst a hubbub of priests and pilgrims holding high a crucifix.

It took a few minutes to realise the procession they had stumbled into was the traditional route retracing the footsteps of Jesus.

"We could find some other way" Jack called to Steve.

"No let's stay with this" said Steve with a quiet but emphatic voice.

"It does seem to be the most direct route," observed Jack.

"Maybe it'll make it that much more meaningful" Bill wondered.

"Carry on guys", said Liam.

The four men walked on in silence, glancing occasionally at the guide book so they could connect with what had happened long ago. Though the human presence in the hubbub around them was unmistakable, each man felt a silence in his soul as if time was standing still. Strangely, mysteriously, they began to grow unconscious of the crowd. It was becoming powerful, almost overwhelming as their immediate past, 1971 and the events of the crucifixion began to blend together.

One single event and one single moment.

On they walked, immersed in their thoughts, entering the world of lostness inside them that slowly rose up to crack the surface. The throng of people was a river carrying them inexorably into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Here was the site where traditionally it had all happened, where six hours of sorrow and pain beyond imagining had reversed

the mad course of the world and brought about a vast sweeping arc of redemption that would reconnect the heavens and the earth.

"I'm in darkness," whispered Steve and in that darkness he cried out.

But they all felt it, standing there for a while as their lostness rose up within them and their spirit fell and fell into the heavy darkness. Now it was as black as the silence of the empty night before the world began. They had returned to the beginning of all things.

Each of the men in that group was conscious of the pain and sorrow that had shaped their lives but each too became acutely conscious of their part in it all, the mad course of the world in which they were eager runners, not just spectators. The atmosphere held them all. A service was proceeding and the Church was filling up.

Without a word, the four withdrew from that place and walked the half mile or so to where a bus had been ripped apart all those years before.

"I think it was here," said Steve.

Bill and Jack remembered clearly enough. In stark colours, they saw three cowering boys, watching with uncomprehending horror as a voluntary man dissolved before their eyes. They watched as his blood fountained over them. They heard their own voices mingling their screams with those of the other passengers. They saw the gaping hole arrive unannounced in the back of the bus; they heard again the siren of police cars and the wail of women. What was there to do, what could they say?

Liam opened himself afresh to the love that had sought him through those years of pain, the compatriot of his sufferings, identifying with the essential solidarity of the world.

'Behold the Man'. How much it had affected him he could not say.

As they thought of the way that fateful day had altered the course of their lives, the men felt as if they entered into a cave where the dark pain of the world pressed in from every side. Liam did his best to reassure them it wasn't their fault and that they were not responsible. After a while, he gave up trying to assuage their guilt. There was more in the stakes than the incident they were reliving.

"It's the whole of my life that is coming before me," said Jack. His brother gripped his arm. He felt it too as together they returned to the emotions of the scene.

"It is done," Liam said, "We cannot re-write the past but we can be forgiven".

And each of them felt the guilt of their lives sweep over them. Slowly, they walked back but paused for a while in the Garden Tomb area. The crowd waters parted and a bench was vacated on which three of them sat. Steve stood to one side.

Now, Bill realised why he couldn't let himself off the hook. It would be tantamount to saying that yes Sarah had been reduced to a wreckage on the freeway but there was no further price to pay. It would seem to minimise the way his father had put him down most days. Though long since absent from him, he found himself thinking about old Harry and how things hadn't worked out; the hunter and the hunted. Maybe the old protest against himself could finally be laid to rest.

"I feel my life can start again," said Liam, filled with emotion. "

Something was happening. Steve suddenly glimpsed again that time when he had scraped the walls of his house and found old beams that had stood out in their antique wooden beauty. "They've been under your nose all along," said Liam gently.

Bill remembered once more those scenes from his childhood when he had seen that estuary dredged of its mud and muck. He felt clean water welling up inside.

"There's been a whispering in your spirit for a long time" Liam said tenderly. Bill knew that he would be taking care of Ali's child and bring a little life up as if his own. He didn't need to keep on paying the price. Sarah could be laid to rest and given a decent burial. He was let off the hook at last. And Bill broke down and wept as he had not done for a long time.

Jack felt an unaccountable sense of joy. He had the oddest sensation of holding an armchair to the sky to welcome his guest and of being dazzled by the air. He felt as though he was talking and that someone was listening. "It's time you went through the door and discovered all those rooms you didn't know were there," said Liam.

Then Jack had an awareness that he was loved wholly and completely. The world had been black and white but now bright colours adorned the sky. In that moment, Jack loved his dad and forgave him. He would try to find a way of bringing hope to Liz that

new beginnings could drown the wreckage of the old world that had past its sell-by date. Engulfed with emotion, Steve went to him; Joseph and his brothers reconciled.

A lump rose within everyone present and broke like a wave breaks upon a shore line. For an hour, the wetness of many tears swept over them and they talked and prayed and wept. All in some way felt that their lives had been redeemed. It was time to go.

The next few weeks were heavy with the sound of pages turning. Chapters yet to be written were invested with a new plot. That was a new beginning. But, like all new beginnings there was an original beginning- and a beginning beyond that.

Chapter Two

Tonight there was a pink moon