

Letters from a shuttered country

Chapter Five Getting creative

We're used to the idea that Monday to Friday, our time is not our own, but then suddenly it's Friday evening, and there's nothing to do and nowhere to go. Bill was therefore glad of Katie's company. She shows him her mobile phone.

"Look at this Dad", she said. "You might be interested to see this email from Maddy".

"Ok thanks", Bill replied. "Let me have a Zoom time with my old friends and I'll read it. In the meantime pour yourself this welcome home cuppa."

Zoom had gone from Conferencing App to Pandemic Social Network. And here they were....

Liam – evening everyone! Good to see you again! I'll just admit Jack in India.

Steve – I can see him but there's no sound. Ah there you are. Hi Jack.

Jack – Hi bruv!

Bill – Evening Jack, what's going on where you are this week?

Jack – well as you know the Prime Minister of India announced that the whole country would go into lockdown in four hours time. That announcement caused panic and utter chaos as millions of daily paid workers and others left mega cities like Mumbai to try and get back to their families in the rural areas. As trains and buses stopped many were left to find their way home on foot. Now millions of families are locked down in cramped conditions. Often as many as six people in one room. They are not allowed to work. It's pretty stark.

Bill – sounds like it. Is there nothing to cheer us up this evening?

Steve – well anyone getting creative? Mandy thinks the garden has never looked so good!

Liam – so if we're having a bad news moratorium, I can announce I am half way through the French cook book. Lots of new recipes I will insist on trying you on when we meet again.

Bill- in his great book about the positives of ageing, Cicero said we should learn something new every day. The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn. Or so I keep telling myself.....

Jack – Liz and I have been trying to paint. Haven't done any since we saw those pictures Timothy did in his bedroom. To this day, can't even draw the curtains. But Liz persuaded me.

Bill- I've been having a go at a story.

Liam, Jack, Steve – well share it! What's it about?

Bill –

Liam – you muted suddenly? I think you're saying something profound but get off 'mute'

Bill – I was saying we won't be returning to the old world we left two months ago so why not try new tricks?

Liam – guys I've got an idea. The number one topic of whoever we're with is the virus right? So why don't we get creative as a re-union group and do some creative writing?

Steve – never got into writing but good idea! What story could we tell?

Jack – Most painters have stressed the emotional importance of art. Art helps us through. Same principle I imagine. It keeps us connected to the radiant feeling of being alive.

Bill – we all need something that enables us to keep going that takes us out of ourselves.

Liam – the greats in their field have done what they've done because they did it with great intensity. The excitement and exhilaration and all that.

Steve – that's what they call 'flow'. I got to some of that with the start up in California.

Jack – I’ve got to go in a mo but let’s get creative in this way then. Try it.

Steve – guess it needn’t be about our own life-story. It’ll be an interesting change from gardening. Might involve Mandy, who sends her love by the way.

Bill – could be about anybody

Liam – I must go too but may I suggest we start scribbling and compare notes in a week or two? By the way Bill, from how you look now, think yours is going to be a shaggy dog story!

Steve recollected one such re-union about ten years ago – he couldn’t pin down exactly. The old friends had met in a country club hotel; a pressure- free zone, a four star hideaway that offered country pursuits for the initiated or complete indulgence to relieve the aching mind and tone up those muscles. From its terrace, an October evening sun daubed an entire landscape with a glow that was almost eerie. At times orange, at times green, the light had gently sought out the true nature of things, lending every image sharper focus.

On the green opposite, several people had walked their dogs, enjoying the enthusiasm with which they ran to fetch the sticks that were being thrown in teasing, repetitive action. A pair of bull terriers were in a state of over-excitement, their high spirits making them belt round the green. Like lovers, they could not bear to be parted. One of them howled like a mad thing when the owner got hold of its friend and insisted it was time to go.

They would meet again. ‘We’ll meet again’. And with that, they signed off. It was so decided. Each would now ponder what they could bring to the party and get scribbling.

Bill read the email from Katie’s friend Maddy; sombre yet hopeful in a chatty sort of way.

“Hi Katie,

This is tough; the toughest time I can remember. It’s a psychological and economic pandemic as well as public health emergency. People are being hit differently. We’re not in

the same boat but we are most definitely in the same storm. For my mates in the States, this is their 9/11 moment. We'll all talk about this when we're old; what it was like to live through a profound trauma shared by the community. So I've decided to join up you might say, just like my Great Granddad did in the war. Nurse training can continue afterwards but right now I'm working in a paramedic team on the front-line but absolutely no hero.

I'll send you a pic. My day starts at 4 in the morning and the shift doesn't end until 6 at night. Our unit is the first medical team seen by patients and possibly the last their families will see. I had to tell someone today they couldn't ride in the ambulance so that was a permanent goodbye. It has me in tears most days but wouldn't swap it with anyone.

For my younger sister Maryanne whom you remember, it's not exactly easy either what with her A-levels being cancelled this year. It's like she was preparing to run the marathon and had come to the start line. They were counting down, 3, 2, 1 - and suddenly they tell you they're not going to run the race. Feels like she can't close her school chapter properly but can't distract herself by going out. Should she spend her days doing revision or what? I think the loss of routine and uncertainty around grading have affected her. What she used to do to manage her anxiety following a strict routine that got her out of the house is not an option at the moment. This is having a big effect on anyone like Maryanne with an existing mental health condition. She's lost her coping mechanisms, contact with friends or routines that helped. But then anyone who was doing their coursework or end of year assignments is in the same boat. All those rites of passage graduations and proms – such a shame!

I guess handling loss of routine facing most of us. For me, it's not been hard to find new routines. Obviously I'm not allowed to see my boyfriend John. Sex aside, kissing's a riskier act in a pandemic where you have to have face masks! John had been working in a bar but that's now been shut down. Heard from Freddie? Talk soon. Maddy.

“Wow”, exclaimed Bill. “Thanks for sharing that!” “What a courageous young lady”.

“Pretty awesome”, agreed Katie. She cocks her head in Bill's direction as she stirs something in a pot. “Dad you're getting really quite hairy you know?!”

"I know", said Bill. "Feel I'm quite, oh so Michael Jackson! The guys just joshed about that".

"Maybe I should fix you up with the League of Underground Hairdressers", joked Katy. "I hear they'll be in the area next Thursday!" They both laugh. Bill looks at Katie lovingly.

He remembered when she had first met Freddie. Among hordes of guys in jeans and trainers standing at the bar, one had stood out. "See that chap?" Katie indicated with a quiet jab of the finger. Bill raised his eyebrows. And that's where it started. Freddie was definitely in the past tense. Katie lived with Freddie for some time; no doubt attracted to the suave successful image he projected. But it all turned to dust. Freddie was a control freak. He just had to be the centre of attention. He checked her texts. If Katie phoned any of her friends, he made a fuss, stomping around making sarcastic comments. But when the call was over, Freddie would go back to ignoring her. He didn't want her to have any happiness outside their relationship. Everything had to be done his way or not at all. His unforgiving nature and his moods spoilt the relationship. Eventually Katie couldn't stand it. They sold the flat.

That wasn't the end of it. Freddie pursued her strongly, now with revenge porn. He became dictatorial and unpredictable. Last year, he crashed his car being way over the limit and was banned for a year. His Company was taking disciplinary action. It's not good for the image.

Ever since she was 18, Katie had had a series of unrewarding relationships. Lasting love had always eluded her. When she was at college, she pursued a likely lad with a gusto that surprised the most hardened men. Freddie was one of her conquests but then the boot was on the other foot. Bill thought this dispassionately, as if describing someone else. But inside he felt a great weight of sadness, his balding head glistening with little beads of sweat.

"Seen anymore of that chap over the road?" Bill probed. "You seem to have been doing a lot of texting everytime we sit down to absorb ourselves in Netflix. Must be more compelling!"

"Definitely, detective Dad!" and they both laughed.

"We've got a lot in common. Robert is not in a relationship before you ask! He's harmless!"

"I guess what we're pining for is something that goes to the core of our being. Love is all you need" Bill said. Not for the first time he wonders if we were not the elastoplast generations,

who had left a little bit of stick with each of their partners until there was no more stick left. We never did get to the freedom of the Promised Land.

And he thought of Beth in New York. And Sarah, his long-since past wife.

The unending cosmos inside the soul of an astronomer still haunted him. A moving escalator conveyed Bill to a degree in astronomy from the University of Washington and a PhD at the University of California. There was still a reverberation of those heady days of the 60s. The Free Speech movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam were embedded in the sacred tradition. By the early 70s, the world was no longer poised for change. After various posts in NASA came and went, it was to recapture something that he returned to San Francisco to lecture at Berkeley; a man who loved his job and who loved his wife. In that order.

Marriage to Sarah didn't go well. His Dad disliked her from the start as if protective of what mum might have said. Perhaps he could sense she would be difficult to handle. By degrees, acid was poured over their relationship. Love was corroded away. Bill's emotions wandered.

Other women caught his eye. Sarah was distraught and could no longer control herself. Gradually, she slipped into a drink fuelled life and sad relationships with other men. One day he walked out. He needed time. Bill went on a long cruise to think things over. It was there he heard Sarah had died in a freeway pile up. Bill blamed himself for her death. The destruction of a human being lay heavy upon him. One day she would come walking back through that door and relieve him of the burden. For two years, he had been a lost soul.

People had not known what to say to him when Sarah died. Politics, religion and sex were now acceptable topics of conversation but death was not. He found he could talk to Beth who had descended into death and was finding hope. Beth was a lot more connected inside generally though it pained Bill that there was an emotional blockage of some sort when it came to holding baby Katie or playing with her. She seemed a little cold to the child, as though not fully accepting her. Bill put it down to her being unsure how to relate to youngsters since losing her own baby. What a cosmos we have inside us.

Bill wanders outside. He gazed at a night sky and stars that tip-toed through the chimneys.

The Universe. Its boundaries are uncertain; its limits limitless. If there is an end, what would lie beyond that end? If one could sail to the furthest boundary of everything, what lies over the horizon? Have we reached the edge?

Some say that the universe is a giant sphere and to arrive is to have returned to the place from where the journey began. Others contend the universe is a hall of mirrors where the light is bent round and what we behold is a reflection of other galaxies in the silent expanse in which we dwell. Or that we are unknowing inhabitants of one universe amongst many.

In a voyage of the imagination, leave behind mysteries that dwell in the outer limits of everything. Go quickly past expanding galaxies and shrinking stars, past galaxies that are vast spiral nebulae and galaxies like catherine wheels in a firework display. Leave Galactic superclusters behind like lights along a motorway; each galaxy a metropolitan community of stars with many times more inhabitants than the largest cities on planet Earth. Flash past ten hundred thousand million suns spread out over oceans of empty space. Past beautiful Andromeda, the galaxy next door. Now we have arrived at the Milky Way. Star upon star rushes by. There is a spiral arm. Imperceptibly, we are being dragged round the heart of the galaxy on a journey that takes 250 million years. All human history could be comprehended within a tiny fraction of one turn on that stately circuit.

And here is a medium size yellow star with a small family of orbiting planets; balls of gas or rock spending a million life-times in a frenzied dash around it. The third globe is a blue and white island. Descending through layers of a thin air--cushion, the imagination glides gently down. On one of the continents a range of hills stands to attention above a throbbing city. As the Earth spun round, day has become night. It is a clear, crisp night at the dawn of the third millennium. On the hillside stands a man. He peers, gazes; slowly mesmerised by the heavens as he imagines a journey such as this through clouds of memory and dancing stars.

Was there any purpose, any cosmic plan in a world where people's lives were split and split again? Though he often lectured about the stars, Bill wished he could be sitting up the tree once more, hearing the stars whisper friendly talk to his face.

That was then. This is now. Bill pours himself a drink. But here is a note from lovely Beth. It brings a smile of wistfulness to his face. Her letters always did.