

Letters from a shuttered country Chapter Six

In the days of the plague

How great to hear from Beth! If Bill's other partners in crime were going to tell a story, Beth needed to tell hers, though not for the consumption of anyone else. This was private.

"Dear Bill,

Fantastic to hear from you! It was good to hear that Katie's doing well. It would be really good to hear that she can find the pathways of true love and not go in for someone who won't cherish her as she deserves.

Sounds like your commitment to bringing her up has paid off richly these past twenty years.

You asked if I'm working remotely and the answer is yes. I feel guilty that knowledge workers like me are in a privileged position. To have to expose yourself to this thing out of financial necessity is dire; even more so if you might risk contaminating someone in a care facility. My cleaner is not of course coming to support me during the crisis –no real need. But her other job is working in a home that looks after dementia people. So easily she could take it with her and this deadly enemy has found a cunning way through the defences. But what can she do? She needs to work in order to put food on the plate for her two year old.

The pandemic is sharpening the divides in society. Because medical care and drugs here are in the hands of those who are driving for profit the whole time, there's little sense of public good in capitalism. Being predatory doesn't make you a capitalist. It makes you a sociopath! Drugs are 50% more expensive over here. Health care is calculated as if you are a profit-centre. More and more I'm questioning the whole system. You guys are very fortunate!

So here I am in the most intense place in the country. It's all concentrated in one little slice of land. New York is a city of carnage, or to change the picture a ghost town. Those who can have left. People got fired rather than being laid off for a while. Covid is a profound attack on our way of life. The news is very troubling and confusing. Should we go out or should we stay in? We don't have control over Covid. But what we can control is our behaviour. Faith really helps. Without it the world is a puzzle, death is a horror movie and eternity a blank.

All this got out of control very quickly because people didn't take it seriously or because they blamed everyone else. Democracies are not spectator sports. We have to know what's going on so we go along with it. For a long time, we've seen rising levels of political polarisation in the USA due to mutual hatred and incomprehension. We have been on a downward path. Who will bring us out?

You and I were both in San Francisco in the days of another plague. You remember how the gay community felt stigmatised at first and closed ranks. Then they let experts in – hooray!

Those years working in that Aids unit are a time to be treasured. I never regretted swapping being a vehicle examiner for that. Vivid memories of Ali's last days are sharper recently.

Thanks for telling me about Steve. All that is firmly in the past but I don't believe I would like to Zoom in with him.

Bill, you're a good man and amongst my regrets are that we never crossed the emotional threshold – let alone any other kind! Maybe in one of your parallel universes, we are together. So let's stay close and give an ample sufficiency of hugs (in sort of a nod to Jane Austen whom I am reading right now).

Warm wishes,

Beth

Well that chewed Bill up for the rest of the evening. Beth had given him constant updates about Ali when she was dying of AIDS.

One day twenty years before, Liam had come for one of his periodic speaking visits. They sipped a take - away coffee in Golden Gate Park.

"Look at that" said Beth in sudden awe, glancing at a flower that had spread it's leaves towards them for inspection. They watched, fascinated, as a butterfly emerged from a chrysalis. In every life, Liam remarked, there are seasons of anguish and desperation that can mean the end or can equally bring a turning point. Beth said how often she had longed for her inner being to be re--born and break free from anchors that moored her to the past.

At that moment, a lady walked by. Beth recognised her.

"Hello Su Lin" she said with pleasure jumping up to greet her friend. They engaged in small talk for a few minutes. Liam wondered if he should leave them to it.

"Su Lin once shared a house with me" said Beth, introducing her friends to each other. "Su-Lin was really into scientology then," she remarked.

Su Lin said she was wanted a spiritual side in her life when met a group of people who seemed to have answers.

"I see through it now but if you saw a group of people who lived in community and who were interested in no war, no crime, who said we've got to look after the planet and respect other people, many people would be drawn".

"Yes..." agreed Liam, "our search for those things is beautiful and good though we look in the wrong places I believe".

"You're right. Look I must go," said Su Lin and they said goodbye. As she was walking off, she paused before turning back.

"I must tell you," she said to Beth. "Yesterday in the AIDS unit where I work, I met someone who knows you. I can't remember how we made the connection".

"What's her name?" asked Beth.

"Ali I think".

"Sure" said Beth, alert with interest. "Bill's friend is somewhere in San Francisco but all he knows is that she has AIDS. Is it very advanced?"

"It's getting that way".

"How long has she got?"

"Three months. Maybe more. Maybe less".

Three months! Su Lin hesitated. "Look. I have to be ultra careful about patient confidentiality" she said. "I can't reveal appointment times. But it breaks my heart to think of anyone facing death alone. If you come tomorrow at Four, you might just bump into Ali".

At Four the next day, Beth went to the AIDS clinic. It depressed anyone who remembered San Francisco as a sunny place to be and centre of the hippy movement. Afterwards, amidst an indifferent atmosphere, the gay community had grown rapidly. Then the plague had struck. Behind the postcards, it was a city of grief.

Su Lin had just watched someone die.

"It's too awful" she said.

"Thanks" she managed a smile, taking a report from a young man, obviously an official person of some sort but who didn't seem like a doctor.

"Is he a nurse?" Beth asked.

"No he's a volunteer. You become part of an AIDS ward team or volunteer programme because your lover is infected. These people know they might be next. Many gay men around here have buried twenty of their friends".

"Sometimes I reach the point where I just can't go on. You're personally involved. We've all nursed friends. With every patient, you relive the tragedy".

"Our generation had those searing experiences of war in Vietnam," observed Beth. "But I've heard that more people have died of AIDS in the US than in the entire war out there."

"What about the risk to Ali's child though?" Beth asked. "Will she die?"

"I can give you the stats" said Su Lin. "Three quarters of children with AIDS are still alive after their fifth birthday. But it's by no means certain that Ali's baby will be infected by HIV or go on to develop full blown AIDS. I'm not sure who is looking after her right now."

"What about this new miracle drug AZT?" Beth asked.

"There's still no cure though AZT does slow down the virus in some cases".

"But what happens now to Ali. What's she to expect?"

Su Lin paused. How much should she tell?

"Ali is already experiencing constant diarrhoea, weight loss and tiredness. And she's often getting unwell, fighting for breath. That means she has a chest infection. But the symptom we have to watch most is deterioration of the brain. Once AIDS attacks the brain, people experience difficulties in thinking, coordination and memory".

Beth had never realised before how much impotence felt like fear.

But there in front of them was a young lady who could only be Ali.

"Hello Ali", said Beth. "Remember me?".

"You look familiar. Beth? Beth! I'm so glad to see you," said a frightened hesitant voice as recognition lit up a worn, haggard face. It was a far cry from a confident bright and breezy person Beth knew slightly though mostly mediated through what Bill told her.

They sat talking for 20 minutes. "Meet Bill," Beth pleaded. "He's desperate to see you".

"I would like to see him," said Ali. "I don't want to die all by myself. Where is he?"

"At this moment, Bill's in Germany. He gets back in early October though I expect he will want to fly back immediately once he has heard from you".

"No" said Ali. "Please. Don't interrupt his work. Tell him I insist he wait until the job is finished. I'll still be here...I'm not going anywhere."

"What's happened to..?"

"Linda? O, she left a year ago. The strain on the relationship broke it in two. I guess she feels responsible for what happened, as it was her brother who gave this to me".

"And your baby?"

"Katie's a year old and in care. I can't look after her like this".

Beth was overwhelmed with grief. She felt she could easily give up her job and work on an AIDS project, doing something useful with her life. As the century's last autumn wore on, she chatted about this with Su Lin.

"You could enquire at the Shanti project here in San Francisco. The feeling of togetherness is very strong there".

Beth had a strong urge to follow that up. The gift of security and self- acceptance that she was struggling to find in her own life could be used to help people like Ali. Maybe she could turn her wounds into gold.

In late September, Bill returned. Beth had kept in touch with him and told him about Ali. Faithfully and insistently, she passed on Ali's insistence that he not break off his work to fly home until he had finished his assignment.

But one week there was a scare. Ali was rushed into hospital. Beth took it on herself to E-mail Bill. He was on the next plane home. Bill was profoundly shocked when he walked in to the hospital ward. Memories were immediately recalled from semi retirement, vivid pictures of visiting his mother when she laying dying. But this was no cancer ward where people were middle aged or retired. Here was a ward of young people who until recently had three quarters of their lives ahead of them. Ali was sweaty, panting on her hospital bed. Wires and tubing invaded the upper part of her body. They were giving her medication to relieve the breathlessness from the pneumonia that stalked AIDS victims.

"Ali!" said Bill. Her hands gripped her father with fear, groping for reassurance. Beneath an oxygen mask, her face managed a thin smile.

"Hi!" she said gladly and held his hand tightly.

They took the mask off for a while so Bill and Ali could talk. Beth left them to it. She wandered round the ward looking at fading lives against a backcloth of some fading roses. What was it like, she pondered, to die like this, deeply scared, in pain and so alone?

"Whatever happens" said Bill. "I'm here for you".

"There is something".

"Tell me" said Bill, trying unsuccessfully to hide his anguish as he held her hand.

"Its Katie" said Ali. "I really want you to look after her if anything happens to me".

"We're a long way from that yet Ali".

The nurse had told him that Ali would probably get over this illness but not necessarily the next. She gave Ali about two months but that was just a guess.

"I want peace of mind for the future. You know, Beth's been a tower of strength" Ali managed to say in one breath. "In this latest crisis, she's been bedding down here every night, clinging on to me while I ride the roller coaster".

They talked for a while. The nurse came to put the mask back on. Bill and Ali said goodbye.

That night Beth sat at her dressing table, slowly combing her black hair. Who or what had given her a heart as wide as the Pacific Ocean she often sat beside as a girl, in the house that once belonged to her father. Explaining the universe was one thing. But was she any nearer comprehending the unfathomable inside, the inner world of her that begged for explanation? Having given everything, when the black hole threatened she felt she would be suspended over the very nothingness from which the original world had sprung, that her being would dissolve into the chaos from which creation was being continually defended.

It took much time for Beth to speak freely about the suppressed turmoil that had driven her to clothe herself with protective dignity and keep up a mysterious air. Back then, her hair was still bereft of the curls that made her face so distinctive though they were beginning to return as the life slowly awoke.

By mid December, Ali was still in the land of the living. Bill forced himself to view every hour she was alive as a bonus. Deep down, Ali was praying and willing herself to stay with them for a little longer. They laughed and joked and laughed and cried. It was like old times again. But then he would look at her in her wheelchair, incontinent, thin and with a damaged brain that was impairing her ability to think. That night, Ali died peacefully. Bill sat with her, anguished yet unaccountably serene. The doctor put the time of death at 4.30am.

A week later he and Beth were standing in a Crematorium. No one else showed up. After the service, they stood in the crematorium where Bill had stood all those years ago with a mother shaped vacuum inside him. Beth was with him holding Katie who kept looking around as if expecting Ali to pop around the corner. Eyebrows raised in pain, Bill sniffed into his handkerchief. His soul cried out to God. Another wave rolled in, a crest of sadness. But

even in its tumult, Bill felt a peace inside and knew he was acquitted of all charges and words that had ever been levelled against him, even framed by him.

Alone in her room that night, Beth cried once more for Ali but then Katie cried too and she ran to him as if to blot out the night and make the sun shine again. As she held the little lady tight, it dawned on her that though she was mourning her child who miscarried, she was accepting the child inside herself. For a moment, the floor fell but then she righted herself and it stopped. It was a moment of integration as when two railway carriages are coupled. Katie slept against her until early morning when Bill came padding in, eyes widening with surprise and pleasure as he saw her there. Beth looked up and whispered her freedom.

"I have accepted the child. I am now one person".

"I don't understand," said Bill.

"It's OK," Beth said softly. "My mind is free of those images. I'm clear". "Someday", she added, 'I'll send you the fragments of poetry I wrote when an awful realisation came to me and unwelcome movies began to play. Give that one a few years though" she added quickly.

It's a spiritual crisis really thought Bill. Live, fling, do the things you always wanted to do while there is still time and youth has not yet fled in embarrassment. Those are the 24/7 messages. But there are other travellers who seek healing from the baffled perplexity that haunts us all, for whom the answer lies in a difficult trip back to the beginning of the journey. Maybe we need to understand the road we've travelled. It's always hard I think to turn round and begin to work against patterns that have moulded us. Difficult but not impossible; otherwise no one could ever dare to be different and get away with it.

Remembering all these things, Bill's mind went back to his conversation with his old friends earlier that evening. "There will be no disappearing down a black hole!" he said out loud.

"Pardon?" asked Katie, popping her head round the door.

Bill told her of the Zoom chat and the resolve to be creative. Each of them was to supply a story. He wouldn't get auto-biographical but he was so glad that Katie had been in his life!