

Letters from a Shuttered Country

Chapter Nine

A tale of two poets

Contemporary culture anaesthetises anything to do with tragedy or trauma into banal superficiality where everything is fun. And then came Covid; the minute enemy that ripped through the planet. The scars would last a long time. The economic shock was both deep and dramatic. Experts warned that the world is likely to face a global crisis in poor mental health after pandemic has passed.

Pandemics tend to magnify existing inequalities rather than flatten them. The most affluent managed to shelter, hide from the virus in their gardens or second homes, work remotely and get food delivered to their homes courtesy of deliveroo and on-line slots. Poverty made the experience of Covid harder to bear. It was the lower paid working communities that were harder hit, often cramped in tower blocks and homes without gardens. Plus of course the elderly and vulnerable. There was an inter-generational as well as class divide. Resilience depends on capacity. How people fared in that public health emergency was a very different experience according to social location.

We were navigating the same sea but in very different boats.

Through the late Spring, the deadly virus wrought its work; restlessly looking for new victims to infect. Despite all best efforts to clamp it down, the invisible enemy deposited itself into unsuspecting carriers, crawling up the nose and silently hijacking the means to draw living breath. It consumed before it destroyed, thence to be passed on to someone, anyone who was available. Or would it be a dead end destiny. Like rabies, it would infect one person and go no further. As it spread across the anxious globe, Covid was mutating, replicating and adding new branches to its family tree. Maybe its passage through humans caused it to weaken. The contagion would give up the fight if humanity was a dead-end host. No one knew though global teams raced against the clock to find an answer.

What could the human race do to combat this genetic strip of instructions whose purpose is to replicate itself? We tried soap. That was effective enough on the skin, washing its way through the layer of fat that encased the lethal enemy. The genetic guts of the virus spilled out. But war by soap was not enough. Inside our bodies, the task was much harder. Governments dusted down a well-researched playbook for how to deal with a pandemic, starting at Chapter One. Others were slow to react and paid for it later. The world was working together at the technical level and the scientific level with much tracing and co-operation across borders between researchers. The world was not

working so well at the political level, bolting down the hatches and trading geopolitical accusations. It was a happy hunting ground for conspiracy theorists always on the look out for a cover up, a plot or an accident that went wrong.

Care homes represented war in the trenches. Care homes suffered some of the most severe outbreaks of Covid-19 in the country. The equivalent of three per cent of the total capacity of care homes in England and Wales had by now lost their lives to Covid-19. In some areas of London the number was as high as fifteen deaths for every 100 beds.

That included Bill's uncle Len. Bill heard the news one Thursday evening, just having stepped back in from the weekly ritual of clapping health care workers to cheer them on and be a national megaphone for thanks. What disturbed him about the phone call was not only to hear that this 95 year old warrior had lost his fight, it was that a Filipino member of staff who had taken particular interest in him and nursed Len faithfully had also succumbed to the biological mockery. Kach died without family or friends near her after spending more than two weeks in intensive care. Bill remembered her as a very gentle, caring, family-oriented person who loved her daughter more than anything. The Care home manager said that Kach had started feeling unwell with a cough and began struggling to breathe towards the end of the month. An ambulance took her to hospital. When Kach was about to go in the ambulance she was crying and pleading with her friend to please look after her daughter. It was so heartbreaking. Kach knew it was the last time she'd see her.

Bill was distraught with misty eyes that became a torrent of long-lived emotion. His Mum's death was the first time he could remember crying. But he had cried when he and his father were united in grief after Micky was killed in Vietnam. Bill loved the tree climbing cousin companion of his youth.

News had come through that Micky was missing in action, presumed dead. For three days, ordinary household sounds jarred like the inside of a tomb. Every time the phone rang, their nerves hung taut, like a cat bracing itself for danger. Then came the missile under their front door. "I regret to have to inform you...Michael Trimble died of wounds in Cambodia two days ago". 15 months later, there was a knock at the door from a one armed man. It was Micky's friend Jay, come to tell Len Trimble how his son had met his death, caught on patrol in an incursion into Cambodia.

A few harmless shots had greeted the patrol as it crossed the border. But it met no real opposition. Vietcong scrambled out from one village and were promptly killed by rifle fire. Heat and tiredness numbed Micky to the blank fear he often felt. The patrol was jumpy, taking no chances. Two boys were looking over the wall at the unusual sight of GI's tramping by. It was better to fire first and ask

questions when slightly more convenient. With the wantonness of a boy destroying some harmless bird just for sport, Micky fired. The boys ran off. Micky wondered what war was doing to them all. He had just contributed his share to man's inhumanity to man.

In the next village, they were offered rice and a kind of cake by an old woman. In the dust track that passed for a street, they could see people staring. Others began to run away and dive into doorways. In a clearing nearby, it was an effort to sleep that night. Micky's life of ease made it difficult to sleep soundly under those conditions. He lay awake smelling the jungle. It was not unlike the smell of the forest back home after a fall of rain. The next day, not far from the village, they found themselves in the middle of heavy shelling. The colonel, phlegmatic as always, asked for two volunteers to work out where the enemy was. Their position was untenable. Micky and Jay were chosen. They puffed and panted their way to the top of a hill that afforded an excellent view of the enemy's position.

They reached the top of the hill before realising, too late; they were surrounded. It was a fight between man and the primeval forest. Despite there being no one there, a brisk and deadly exchange took place. The firing from semi automatics was intense. Ammunition was running short. Micky was hit. His groin was transformed into a bloodstain with crimson bubbles. With one arm blown off at the elbow Jay crawled out in an attempt to get out of there. The ghosts of the trees became shapes of people with guns, shapes that were coming nearer. Micky scored two direct hits at a distance of ten yards. But the end was coming nearer too. For a few more minutes, the air around him sang with machine gun bullets. Then came that deep silence that descends on a battlefield when the victors have won. Just then the shadow of a plane swept like a ghostly hand over the scene, the shadow of an F4 Phantom called in to provide air support. With a few bursts of cannon, the enemy became spirits of the trees once more. Micky's body was recovered. Jay was still alive, watching in disbelief an arm that now finished at the elbow.

Bill could remember as if it were yesterday, Uncle Len drinking all this in. It was a cruelly confusing drink, laced by the evenings of harrowing pain through which he had passed but mixed with quiet pride. Len Trimble was still dimly wondering how he would live out the weary days that remained to him, days of Good Friday without Easter. And Bill wept that Mick would never again hear the sound of crickets in the forest near their home or smell the trees and the grass after a fall of rain.

It was the new Spielberg blockbuster that triggered emotions still tender when he confided with Beth in what was going on inside. 'Saving Private Ryan'. An American soldier trapped in a combat zone fighting a versatile enemy in hostile terrain. That's what had happened to Micky except he wasn't rescued in time. He wrote to Beth to tell her Len had succumbed. First he would tell Katie.

Except he couldn't bring himself to. Bill opened the front door. It was clear that Katie was in love.

After the clapping had subsided and the neighbours retreated once again into domestic incarceration, Katie lingered. Then she saw him again. Robert Morrison had been back late from work now that limited resumption of business was being allowed. As soon as the Volvo swung into the drive opposite, he appeared; looking sharp despite the absence of pin-striped suit. Neither was sure who started it. But one mention of balcony-singing Italians was enough.

A few lines of Rigoletto was all they could muster. But in the delightful dusk, 'Some Enchanted Evening' seemed very fitting (and somewhat easier!). Rogers and Hammerstein oscillated across the street. Robert held forth, then Katie. And Robert brought up the rear. "Once you have found her, never let her go" he sang. The two singers offered a repeat performance and the concert was done.

When she came in later, Bill told her about uncle Len who had been like a father to him at one point when his own Dad opted out of life after Mum's cancer. Katie's enigmatic smile changed in an instant. She gave Bill a big hug that went on for a while.

"So pleased you're finding some happiness", he said.

"I don't know", Katie parried. "I guess there will be lots of lockdown love but see how it goes. Can I be totally honest Dad?" she asked tentatively.

"Of course" Bill said, giving her permission though wondering what was coming.

"Well you know that story you did, that you shared amongst your friends? It's very interesting and all that, but there's not much of you in it."

"Does there have to be?" wondered Bill, as they tucked into supper. "It's a mystery story."

"I get that" said Katie. "But you yourself were in the position of that Professor at one time you told me. I would have thought it would be interesting to make it first person. My real problem though is with Steve's story. Nice try to deflect to someone else, a third person. But like your story, where is the voice of the author? Steve's story just doesn't add up. It's just too much 'happy ever after.' "

"That's a very interesting statement!" Bill exclaimed. Katie had done an English literature degree and Bill's respect for her suddenly mushroomed. An hour later, Beth's reply came in.

My dear friend (came a reply that night as his Smart Phone pinged),

I'm so, so sorry to hear of Uncle Len's passing. There have been numbers of tragedies that have marked both our lives and so I join you this evening (your time), in the resonance of the grieving.

Every soul is unique, made as I have come to believe, in the image of God. For us there will be never be another Len Trimble outside of the resurrection to come. He has lived his days now but for me it is the resurrection rather than some vague idea of an after-life that sets the seal on hope

What a huge amount of loss everyone is going through right now. In New York City we've had several hundred thousand cases and over 16,000 deaths. Today was the first day we've had no fatalities. So what gets us through in such a severe shock? Intervention using the firepower of a modern State for one; dedication of those in the care professions for another. Then there was social solidarity invoking enormous kindness. But there was as well the remarkable charismatic personalities of cities and communities- like the firemen who clapped the health workers. Or the faith communities reaching out in tandem with mutual aid groups that multiplied everywhere but also had their own resource of hope based on another world.

Just as the pandemic may be weakening at last, up comes sickening awareness of the virus in the mind. The horrific last words of George Floyd – 'I can't breathe' – underline the Coronavirus that saps the lungs. But it also shows the way our system suffocates the value of each life. That came home to me last year when I invited a friend from the UK to dinner here. David grew up with racist language and discrimination but was still not prepared for what happened when he arrived at apartment lobby carrying a bag with a bottle and some flowers. The front desk him me through an open courtyard to the back of the building, past residents' garbage bags and into a dirty lift. It seems the doorman thought he must be a delivery guy and made him use the service elevator. It's those lazy assumptions that are as pernicious as the outright racism and disregard of life. The central assumption is that there are different levels of worth- a hierarchy of lives. We've got to get rid of it.

I'm off to march in a few minutes but just wanted to say it's not just that Black lives matter. The elderly matter and need looking after as well. We don't see only the resonance of those who have swum in the sea of grief, we have can find resonance between our different selves. The loss you feel with Lenny will bring back the memory of your cousin. It may also have some echo with that night you saved me when I was coming apart at the seams. Speaking of which, I don't see why I shouldn't share with you the lines of verse I wrote to try to express what was going on. So here it is. Beth

That far off night in Beth thought of the child growing inside her. The child would be safe; never have to be raised in a world of sandpapered edges.

But the bleeding returned; a thin red line that haunted her. Why was her own body doing this to her? Didn't it know she wanted this child? She wanted to scream at her own body as if it blindly following a programme that must be halted immediately. But the next day, the doctor was grim.

"I'm afraid that unless the bleeding stabilises, the prognosis is not good".

"Not good?" she repeated in disbelief.

Two days of bed rest followed. On the third day, the bleeding returned strongly and they confirmed the miscarriage. Beth had a DNC and was then allowed to go home.

Bill was there waiting for her with a bunch of red roses. They embraced but no tears flowed. "Even in distress, she's dignified," he thought. Then she wept quietly, accepting without words the tissues he extracted from the box in her kitchen. After a few moments, Beth regained a semblance of composure.

"The baby's gone," she said without emotion. He left after a while, shutting the door on a woman whose inner being was disintegrating.

"I'm being punished," thought the lady on the demolition site. "I wanted to cheat him. I should never have tried to keep a permanent part of Steve".

She tried to place a call to Steve's office to tell him. His secretary promised to tell him she had phoned, noting that her voice sounded wobbly and tired. Then Beth dissolved into tears, weeping for the child that would never know life. Her grief would have been painful to witness if there were any witnesses.

Throughout that long night, images kept blurring together like slide projector images on the wall of her memory. Flashes dimly formed but were gone, hauntingly, before she could get a fix. As she struggled to sleep, she remembered long ago nights of elusive sleep when she had been too terrified to close her eyes.

Recurring nightmares began to form a pattern. There were hands over her face and then her body, a dark shadow of a stranger whose face she fought to recognise. Beth sat up panting heavily, her stomach knotted as the dark images leered out of the shadows and stood to attention.

It was her father! Dark secrets in a darkened room arose from under the sheets, skeletons shaking her chains in her face, mocking her. Blanked out horrors of what her father did when they were alone rose up from nowhere. Beth saw as a spectator watching with fascinated objectivity, watching in slow motion forgotten memories of being a wife substitute for her father who came to her most nights.

What was this? What on earth was going on? She dimly realised that the miscarriage must have triggered memories long suppressed. One child dying who had lived. Another child coming back to life who had long since been dead. Coming back to life on the third day. Dark secrets in a darkened room.

Beth couldn't remember crying before she was 12. In fact a full year of her life had been ripped from her memory. So it was amnesia then, the amnesia that stops people going insane. She had done anything rather than feel the pain. Was this why she had gone numb, losing touch with her feelings just when she wanted to enjoy herself? Beth became an expert at avoiding these memories. Amidst a surfeit of gathering memories, she took her pen and began to write down what she was feeling.

"Come and see the innocent child".

Once blissfully unaware

Her youth betrayed

By one she trusted

Now there is guilt. Shame.

Where once there was calm.

Dreams shattered,

Childhood destroyed

Smother the pain

To hide its reality.

A layered mask

To face the world

Unchained memory

Buried deep inside

Child made woman

Against her will.

No wonder she had been soiled for life. It was for this then that she had maintained a dignified reserve. She lived her life within rigid layers of self protection. Beth sobbed for herself and for the child within her that had faded away. The floor continued to fall. Mysteriously, two images were blending, blurring, melding. She saw two children, one the reality of what had now died within her and another a forgotten ghost from a forgotten past. Deep within her anguished psyche, a change took place that night that mirrored what was going on in her body. Two children were changing places. The forgotten ghost was becoming a real child as the real child joined the world of ghosts. On and on into the night she wrote.

"The icy hand of fear grips my heart
Making every beat a cry of pain
Helplessly I watch
As you fade away before my eyes
It was yesterday.
The pains that brought you forth
The answer to so many prayers
The sound of your laughter
The wonder in your eyes
Once bright, now clouded
Carrying the weight
Of overmuch sorrow
In so young a frame.
How did I do this?
Become the cause of wounds so deep
Your fragile dreams shattered
In ruins
Round my feet.

A week had passed since the miscarriage and the shock discovery. Beth took up a worn pen, compelled to express emotions that refused to die. She treasured that pen. The Christmas present from Steve was all she had of him now. Her vitality had emigrated. A drained, strained face, gaunt and lined with pain greeted Bill whenever he came by. Beth sat for hours looking at the view across

the hills from her home. Not even the riot of colour could raise her depressed spirits. Since getting in touch with her inner pain, she had never felt so acutely the wilderness desolation of things.

The tunnel, a whirlpool,
Draws me to its centre
Leaving behind the agony
Perspectives distorted
By images of the mind.

The darkness is cold
Numbing my aching senses
Shall I relinquish life
Drown without trace?

I have a choice
Standing on the edge
Withdraw from the hurt
Cutting off the pain
A living vacuum
Alone
I cannot live without love
I would not hurt
If I had not loved.
If I love again
I am vulnerable
Again.
Shall I take faltering steps
Away from the tunnel
And build my life
Out of shattered ruins
Of what once was?

Beth had allowed Katie to see the poetry. They were close and had been from bewildered babyhood.

“Still think Steve’s story doesn’t add up?” Bill asked her the next evening.

“Even more so!” said Katie emphatically.

“Look at this letter from Mandy in your batch of old papers. Trying to piece things together, she clearly confided in you after they had returned to the UK. I know you had been friends but remember this? I’m jumping straight into the relevant part.

Dear Bill,

At times, every nerve in my injured leg reveals its identity, I now walk through life with a limp. But better to damage a leg than lose a life. I have one good leg. And a good job. I enjoy my work. The menu before a human rights lawyer certainly has variety.

What was it that Bosnian woman pleaded with her? 'Tell someone that we are worth fighting for. We are people, not animals for the slaughter or dogs for their sport' ". But though the woman's life and dignity had been ripped up along with her clothing, amazingly, she was not bitter or even held animosity towards her tormentors. Forgiveness? I couldn't do it. That's asking too much.

I keep thinking of how Steve had left me like an old discarded vase by his affair with Beth and his refusal to admit there was anything going on. I don’t have hard evidence that would pass muster in a court of law but recently, there have been a number of furtive conversations I have caught in the breeze when passing by Steve's study; the phone calls when there was no one on the other end, the change in his voice when he mentions San Francisco. Whispered conversations along a hall rose up to mock here, ghosts laughing along the corridor. Despite him laying it on thick that the business trips were both a chore and a bore, I know Steve enough to sense a thin disguise. He is almost certainly seeing Beth again, or at least playing with the romance. Since the accident, Steve had been trying hard. But so many words rose up to taunt her and the axe marks on her spirit felt worse than ever. Forgiveness? Never. I have no wish to recover from being replaced.

It happened again this evening. Your mutual friend Liam had come to look us up. The way I figure it, while he and I were deep in conversation, now is a good time to phone Beth again. Once or twice a month, he found a time and place for a furtive conversation. Transatlantic intimacy gave fresh colour to romantic images that seemed to be painted forever on the walls of his memory. They were a part of him. Slowly, he dialled familiar numbers. But there was no reply. Steve hung on for a few minutes, propping up his emotions. I picture the scene like this as it wasn’t long before he rejoined us.

I take the liberty of sending you something I wrote recently only so you can see the depths of my feelings. If you can just find out from Beth if there is anything going on, please ask her to stop.

I just hope I'm wrong. Now to get lunch. Until last autumn, I staunchly maintained that choosing, preparing and eating food were among the most civilised pleasures on offer anywhere in the world. Since the accident, my world has been a valley or at best a flat earth. Now some hills of interest are slowly forming. Despite my suspicions, for the first time for months, I'm enjoying cooking.

8

In Britain, a writer is writing out her private sense of betrayal and weary, weary emotions.

"God, I'm tired

I've so tried so hard

To make right choices

To put the past behind

God I'm tired

Of being everything to everyone.

It's lonely in here

An endless struggle

To run a house

Go to work

Be there for the children

Superwoman

I can't anymore.

Eaten away

Piece by piece

Nothing left

Unrelenting torture

Hideous scenes replay

Uninvited thoughts drop by

Tormenters of the day and night

Elusive freedom

Temptation to end it all

Permanently

In Britain, the writer comes to an end by the first light of morning.

But for the writer in San Francisco, there would be no respite.

9

“Yes he came back to her”, admitted Bill. “It was to say a proper goodbye – or so he said. That part of his story is ‘happy ever after’. You would need to change it. In his narrative Julia becomes pregnant later. So it is definitely not a neat, tidy closure.

“Self-serving narrative I would say”, concluded Katie. “The guy is wrapping it up as if he lives in a romantic novel. It’s bloody Mills and Boon”.

“But you loved her yourself didn’t you. How you stuck with her through the miscarriage and have remained close from as long as I can remember.”

Bill nodded. Once again his eyes misted over and then the dam burst.

“I saved her”, he said after a while.

“Of course I loved her. In a different universe Beth would have made a tremendous wife. Her sociable, gracious manner was an unfailing invitation to put me at ease. But I would have to reckon that in Beth’s life, relationships were a place you passed through without stopping. Whenever anyone had got close, Beth backed off. It would be a special person she would allow into the inner sanctum rather than just a foot in the door. Why Steve was so privileged I would never know.

“One Friday, I had the strongest urge to call on Beth. I hadn’t heard from her for a while. The ansafone wasn’t on but neither was she responding. That wasn’t like her. I couldn’t resist the impression that I should go over there. These days, I kept her spare key in case she locked herself out. As I drew up outside the familiar home, I could see there was light on inside somewhere but

not in the porch. Beth must be out. Disturbed, I decided to settle down to wait for her return. I couldn't see what was going on inside the house.

It was Friday evening and Beth Johnson was cutting off her long black hair. Thursday evening was the night when the phone had not rung. She was resolved to be out when Saturday evening arrived.

Beth watched as if in slow motion, each piece of hair took its time to dance to the floor. Black shards of broken dreams lay around her, caught in the soft green yellow light of her dressing table as her hair began to form dark patterns on the carpet. Steve had loved to put his hand through her hair, caressing its silkiness. He wouldn't do that anymore. With Steve it was not a little piece of her but a total sacrifice dragged with initial reluctance and then with full-hearted enthusiasm to the altar. This evening, there was nothing left; sacrifice consumed, awaiting consummation.

Beth looked out of the window watching a grey sky that clung tenaciously to the restless contours of San Francisco Bay. At last, she was to escape from the swirling mist. 'I won't make it to the year 2000 now', she thought. Beth was impaled on retribution. Her father stood as a conspirator over her, demanding a ransom. That, she knew full well, was why emotions about Steve were so tangled.

When she was young, the family home they occupied near the San Andreas fault line had sometimes rumbled, the stomach of the earth belching in curious synchronicity with Dad's ugly moods. More recently, it had taken three months for her personal tremors to fall silent after the miscarriage and the trauma of recovered memories. But the tremors now rested in the earth and nothing was left standing.

And now it was late Friday night and Beth wore the kimono that Steve liked so much. When they found her that would be a final message to him. As the last piece of black hair fell tauntingly to the ground, she opened the tube of killers, gulped down 40 and lay on the bed waiting. Beth took a final lingering farewell of the sunset as her world was swallowed up by night. The light slowly faded and the last recollection she had was looking into the face of Steve. Steve or was it Bill? What was he doing here? It was a dream, a final mockery she decided, as she slipped into the whirlpool and down a long tunnel of beckoning sleep that whispered to her.