

## Thoughts From A Balcony in Salford in June

On a clear day you can see for tens of miles. The sky is blue, the sun shines and fluffy white clouds linger in the air. Focus hard: you can spy the tops of the Peak District in the distance, beyond the towers of the Manchester city skyline. Cranes at the top of the new high-rise blocks of flats move slowly and silently. Beetham Tower stands guard at one end of Deansgate. The Co-Op Building is small and squat at the other end. The sun feels too hot even in early spring and the birds rejoice in it, singing their hearts out. The sound of children playing in the neighbour's garden floats over the fence and in the distance a dog will bark. It is uplifting.

Closer to us is Kersal Dale, a heavily wooded valley on the other side of the garden fence, its row of tall poplars showing the meandering flow of the River Irwell down in the Wetlands. On a windy day you see the wind before you hear it, and you hear the wind before you feel it. It starts rolling up the hillside in silence, forcing a variegated Mexican wave from the trees. The whisper of the leaves shivering as the wind kisses them will grow as the wave gets closer until it becomes a roar. Then you feel it on your face, cool and fresh, before you hear it again as it hits the windchime behind you. These are the days when watching a buzzard fly is a truly majestic sight. Then, right on time, the crows arrive. Smaller but tougher, these are fearless Salford birds who aren't afraid of attacking the raptor mid-flight. The buzzard flies higher and faster, often led by a more knowledgeable companion who intervenes just in time and leads the way to safety. His escape is, literally, uplifting.

Three miles from the city centre, you used to be able to feel the energy coming across the valley. You would look out and know the pubs, clubs, theatres and restaurants were full. People were laughing, new friendships were being forged, new loves kindled. Work colleagues and best friends and strangers mingled and drank, watched shows, danced the night away. They filled the air with a heady energy that made sleep difficult for those who weren't involved. Sirens filled the night and the motorway was a constant dull growl, reminding us of just how many people were travelling in and out of Manchester. The energy was uplifting.

Coronavirus struck. Boris banged his desk with his fist and the Queen quoted Dame Vera Lynn. We were fighting an unseen enemy with a twenty first century spin on the War Effort. On the first night that we clapped for the NHS, we stood on the balcony and took a photo. The sky was inky black and the lights from the towers shone bright. There was hope in the air. We were part of a community. We waved to the neighbours at the back. It was uplifting.

There are times when the weather is fickle. Clear blue skies float above Manchester, and the sunlight bounces off the sides of the buildings illuminating them, making them glow golden. At the same time, rain from the heavy black clouds hits us full on, heavy on our faces. We are forced to run inside the house to avoid being dissolved. We laugh and we dry off. We've seen two thunderstorms in different directions at the same time, each lighting up a moonless sky. Angry cumulonimbus in wild formations surrounded us, yet no rain fell. Bats flew above our heads, silent evening hunters. Bowie sang about a Star Man from the lounge. We were calm and still and safe.

And then we saw how the people had left the streets, hiding in front rooms and kitchens until it was safer to go out, whenever that would be. We became a nation living through the

internet. We laughed at jolly families parodying well-known songs with lockdown lyrics. We learnt to meet on Friday and Saturday nights using Zoom or Facebook or WhatsApp. We scrambled for slots for on-line groceries, trading the high street for Amazon and eBay. We started to depend on social media, checking Facebook, Instagram and SnapChat twelve times a day looking for any updates from friends. Updates that did not happen, because our friends were doing the same Nothing as us, with nothing to report. Learning to live this new Nothing Life was exhausting.

Some of us continue to go out to work. They bring back tales of empty roads and no tailbacks, they prove it by leaving the house later than they did, and getting home earlier. Some of them spend their days switching ventilators on and off. They clothe themselves in heavy PPE, hardly able to breathe properly. They pin their photos on the front of their aprons so the patients won't be afraid. Not everyone works for the NHS. Some of the conscripts work in shops, emptying bins, making deliveries, mending cars, mending people's houses and building new homes. They are all exhausted by the combined fear of contracting the virus and passing it onto their families, and by the physical pressure of not having had a break since Christmas. They won't have a break until the virus has a break and the notion is exhausting.

Those of us who can, work from a corner in the dining room, or sitting on the sofa, or the edge of the bed. We depend on the internet to give us access to the Virtual Office. We mutter darkly at slow wi-fi. We curse at not having brought all our paperwork home. We grumble about a lack of space and aching joints. We read about how to claim £1.20 per week from the government to cover the additional costs of fuelling our homes. We make phone calls and have on-line meetings as if this were normal, but we know it's not. We long to get back into the office. We miss stopping at Costa en-route to the desk and wonder when we'll do it all again. We miss the daily commute along clogged-up motorways. The two metre journey from desk to sofa is exhausting.

Some of us do not work. A new word was bandied about, and people were "furloughed". Paid a fraction of their normal income by the government, waiting for the call to come back. To start with, these were exciting days. Walls were painted, houses cleaned, gardens tidied and seeds sown. New hobbies were picked up and old ones revisited. Spanish, French, Italian and German were learnt. Books were read. The dust was blown off musical instruments. We did exercise and dance classes in front of the computer. We tried to cook with meagre supplies as the supermarket shelves held sparse stock and limited us on what we could take. The rare few baked and posted their photos on-line, enraging others unable to find any self-raising flour. Being so busy was exhausting.

Our confused cats have grown accustomed to us invading their space, our dogs are fitter for all the walks. We have discovered parks and open spaces within half a mile of home that we never knew existed. Our gardens are flourishing under skies cleared of city smog as the batteries of unused cars die. Our children are learning unimportant and irrelevant things from us and missing play time in school. We hide our fears from them with minimal success. We wonder if we'll ever get our lives back, and we use the phrase, "the new normal" as if we have any idea of what it will hold. The uncertainty is exhausting.

Then, as the weeks turned into months, the boredom set in. The lethargy took hold. Chores were left until another day, because there was going to be another day to do them. Dust

settled back on the musical instruments and people forgot all but “Hola” and “Ciao” and “Je voudrais un sandwich”. We forgot to dance and we put the mixing bowls away. Alarm clocks were switched off to allow us to recover from the hangovers brought on by our becoming connoisseurs of cheap wine and vodka. Even the tedium was exhausting.

On the last night that we stood outside and clapped, there was no-one else out for us to wave to. It was a dull evening and not even dusk. The distant towers were hidden by the trees, now heavy with leaves. There was despair in the air. The war with an unseen enemy was being met by no attack, only defence, and our defences were crumbling. We were battle weary and exhausted.

We are in week twelve and still the city sleeps. The noise from the motorway has gone and only an occasional sound of a siren will disturb the wind. The noise is rare enough to pique our interest. Visiting the supermarket has become a weekly pilgrimage involving face mask and gloves; we half-heartedly joke about hazmat suits. Smiles are only visible when they reach the eyes, and the eyes are too tired to smile. Fear has taken hold of us. We are afraid of contracting the virus and passing it onto our families. Of losing our jobs. Of not seeing loved ones for far too long. Of a second wave. We wash hands obsessively, no longer needing to sing songs to ourselves to mark the duration. The fear is exhausting.

Finally, we broke. A few of us met in each other’s gardens, but when it started to rain, we sneaked into the kitchen, ate crisps, drank tea, feeling like naughty children who had taken a biscuit from the tin without asking. Some of us went to demonstrate in favour of black lives but were we not also demonstrating about having our spirits constrained? Thousands of our children raved on one night in June, ignoring all rules entirely, but loving Life. We silently urged Boris to change the two metre rule to a one metre rule because half the people in Lidl were working on a thirty centimetre rule. They let us open more of our shops and we couldn’t wait to get there. The excitement and anticipation built.

And yet.

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Still some of us are too afraid to leave our homes. Some of us stand at the front door, ready to leave, but say, “Nah – not today. Tomorrow maybe,” before retreating to the safety of the house and a cheap bottle of Merlot. Some of us fear for the future. The second wave. The Second Coming. An overwhelmed health service that can do nothing but watch people die in their thousands. Again. Some of our hearts break a little more each day as we think of parents and off-spring whose faces we haven’t seen and whose hands we haven’t held and whose cheeks we haven’t kissed for thirteen weeks or more. But we cannot go out. Not while Fear resigns supreme. Not while Death stands on every corner.

With them I retreat to the safety of the balcony, with a fresh bottle of wine, and watch the wind roll gently up the hill.

I am exhausted.

By Claire Ford, aged 50 ¾, from Salford.