

*Hi folks,*

Someday, (hopefully not that long from now), when the world has returned to some semblance of normalcy, I'm going to look back over these newsletters and be able to trace the strange developments and experiences which characterised this peculiar period in history.

Each week it seems as if there's a new set of guidelines we're being asked to readjust to. The new normal won't necessarily be the same new normal we're facing next week or the week after. This past week, here in Northern Ireland, I was allowed to enter my family home for the first time since February, though once inside I couldn't hug my parents and had to sit on the opposite side of the living room throughout my visit. It was nice to be inside, especially after our somewhat soggy attempts at al fresco dining.

But it also made me realise how unsettling it is to be so close to normal life and yet not normal at all. There are so many things I find myself doing at the minute, which are almost mundane, but with an odd Covid 19 twist. There's queueing to get into Tesco's and talking to my neighbours from the other side of the pavement and teaching creative writing classes on Zoom.

It's making me realise how much I took things for granted in the past. Most days, I walk past the chained-up play area in the park. It's still there. It hasn't changed. I can look but I can't go in. In some sense, it's a great metaphor for the new normal. I've written about how bizarre I find this in one of this week's short stories.

This week's feature story also touches on this theme. The young person who narrates it is doing his best to keep up with normal routines and traditions, even though everything feels really strange right now.



My final story of the week touches on Northern Ireland's latest Internet star.

A teenager from Tyrone has been raising thousands of frogs in her back garden and recording videos to share with the world. I couldn't resist the opportunity to write about Tadpole girl and my young friend Lila, (who's also a big fan), was keen to provide an illustration. If you get a chance you can look up Tadpole Girl for yourself. Her videos are some of the nicest, most relaxing things I've seen online in weeks.

I hope you all have a great week adjusting to whatever normal looks like for the next few days. Enjoy these stories and the conversations they provoke. Until next week, look after yourselves.

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*Love from Lockdown, Jan*

## "SWINGS"

Other people are looking forward to their first haircut, their first meal in a restaurant or their first time hugging a friend in almost four months.

I am also looking forward to these things. But what I can't wait for more than anything else, is the moment they reopen the parks and I can swing again.

Everyday I walk past the play park and check that the chains are still bound firmly around the gates. I look wistfully at the slides, the climbing frame and roundabout and remember the good times I've had playing on them.

Then, I spend a few precious minutes, staring at the swings, trying to imagine what it will feel like, someday, not too long from now, to sit on the tiny, plastic seat and scissor my legs backwards and forwards until I am soaring through the air, hair streaming out behind me, like a bird or a plane or a perfectly fired arrow, more free and ungrounded than I have been in months.

