

### "POSTCARDS"

I thought I'd purchased ordinary postcards for my stories. They looked just like all the other postcards I've bought before on holidays and during visits to museums and art galleries.

But I soon discovered that these postcards were a little different. They were like boomerangs. They just kept coming back. I'd mail a postcard and a week later it would come hurtling back through my letterbox, interrupting my breakfast, demanding my attention.

The funny thing was, all my postcards seemed to have transformed by the time they returned to me. They were no longer flimsy slips of paper covered in cramped handwriting.

They were beautiful paintings now and careful drawings, stories, letters, bars of chocolate, memories, good wishes, telephone conversations, hugs and kisses squeezed in envelopes; one had turned into a potted plant, another was now two bottles of delicious wine.

I could not believe my own good fortune. They were ordinary postcards when they left my house. By the time they'd found their way back to me, they were all sorts of wondrous things.

I hesitate to call this strange phenomena a miracle, but I suspect it is.

### "IMAGINARY FRIEND"

For the last fourteen weeks I have had no real company except for my imaginary friend, Mrs Bobbins.

I have grown quite close to Mrs Bobbins. We have a good old chat over our coffee each morning and watch the soaps together in the evening. She's always happy to keep me company at mealtimes.

Having an imaginary friend is not as good as having a real friend, but I've appreciated Mrs Bobbins these last three months. She's really helped me with the loneliness.

Now, I am allowed to leave the house and meet my real friends for coffee and proper conversations I no longer require the company of an imaginary friend. I have explained this to Mrs Bobbins gently but firmly over our morning coffee.

Mrs Bobbins refuses to listen. She doesn't want me to have other friends. She thinks the two of us are getting along just fine as we are. She hides my keys so I cannot leave the house and texts my friends to cancel our plans. She wraps her arms around me every time I try to go outside and will not let me go.

I don't know how to get rid of an imaginary friend. It should be much simpler than this because Mrs Bobbins doesn't even really exist.

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### "CAT PARTY"

Mr Whiskers had never imagined it would last this long.

A fortnight maybe; even a month would've been manageable. But the humans had been home for ages now. They were always in the house, pestering him. The little humans were the worst. They never left him alone. At least when they'd gone to school, he'd been guaranteed a few hours' peace every day. He'd watch the TV or roll in the clean laundry or invite the other cats round for a bit of a party.

Mr Whiskers has had no social life at all for months now. Today, when the humans get up earlier than usual and wash their faces and put on proper feet coverings, he perks up a little. Maybe things are finally returning to normal. The humans all leave the house together. They climb into their box on wheels and go sailing down the street.

Mr Whiskers can't believe it. He is so happy, he goes out to the garden and miaows a message to all the cats in the neighbourhood. "HOUSE EMPTY. PARTY AT MINE."

Within a matter of minutes every cat in a half mile radius is crammed into Mr Whiskers' house. They are rolling on the good carpet and clawing at the curtains and screeching like banshees when the box on wheels pulls up outside. Thankfully it takes the humans several minutes to unload all their bags; just enough time to squeeze all Mr Whiskers' guests out through the cat flap.

"Sorry," he tells them as they leave, "I thought everything was back to normal." "Don't you listen to the human news?" asks the tabby next door. "Nothing's changed. They've just opened the shops again. The humans can't cope without buying things."



### "TICKETS"

"We're running a two for the price of one offer on day returns," says the man at the ticket desk. "Take a friend or partner with you and it's like traveling for half price." But I don't have a friend or partner, I tell him. Today, I am utterly alone. "What about that fella?" says the ticket man, pointing to a man behind me in the line. "He looks to be utterly alone too." He is. I can tell from the way he's standing; all slouched over in the middle like he's trying to slip under the carpet tiles and disappear.

We go in on a two for the price of one ticket, splitting the cost right down the middle. I let him have the leftover penny hoping this will make me look generous/kind/somewhat appealing. I would like us to be friends at least. Possibly more. The idea of introducing this man to people and saying, "wait 'til you hear how we met, it's a great story," really appeals to me.

The man does not sit next to me on the train. He doesn't even sit in the same carriage. I am going all the way to Derry. I see him get out at Mosley West and slunk off. I am angry then. I want to jump out of the train and shout, "it's a two for one ticket! We're meant to stay together, at least as far as Derry." But I don't. I wouldn't want to cause a scene. I stay on the train all the way to Derry, quietly fuming. When the tea trolley trundles past I am one pence short of a cappuccino and the whole day is ruined.

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### "CATERPILLAR"

There's no nice way to say it. Me and my siblings are really ugly.

Our skin is green and slimy. We're covered in layers of squidgy fat and even though we're still quite young, thick hairs sprout all over our faces. We've never learnt to walk properly. All we can do is crawl about on our fat, green bellies with our faces in the dirt.

When Lockdown began, we were quite relieved. We could hide out in the greenhouse for a few weeks. We wouldn't have to go outside or meet anyone else. We wouldn't have to listen to the others making fun of the way we look. My brothers and sisters enjoyed Lockdown. We ate way more than usual and spent ages sleeping in the sun. We slept for so long we didn't notice ourselves gradually transforming.

When Lockdown ended and the gardener re-opened the greenhouse, we were not the ugly, green creatures we'd once been.

We were big-winged and beautiful, rainbow coloured and suddenly capable of flying. The others were jealous of us now. They no longer called us mean names. They could not believe how much we'd changed in a few short weeks.

### "CHERRY SCONES"

Like many other young people, Simon has been learning a new skill during Lockdown. Simon has become a baker. Armed with nothing but a Delia Smith cookery book and lots of enthusiasm, he has taught himself how to bake cakes, buns and various kinds of biscuits.

Simon is rather pleased with his efforts, though as he lives alone with his dog Samson, he has not had any feedback on his baking.

Now the Lockdown is easing, Simon thinks it would be nice to share his cakes with the elderly people who live in his neighbourhood. He goes door to door with a cake tin, offering them his freshly baked cherry scones.

The old people are not as grateful as Simon had expected. One peers into the tin and asks, "what's it meant to be?"

Another says she doesn't like cherry scones and could he do her some cheese scones instead?

The next morning Simon is dismayed to find one of his neighbours has put her cherry scone out on the bird table.

He notes, with sadness, that the birds are yet to touch it, but he refuses to be discouraged.

"It is not my baking that's at fault," Simon tells himself.

"It is the people in this neighbourhood. Their tastes aren't as sophisticated as they could be."



### "MONKEY"

Melanie didn't know how to tell her students she was turning into a monkey. She still wasn't able to admit to herself. But all those days stuck inside, alone, nibbling on nuts and bananas had taken their toll. Melanie was slowly but surely becoming a monkey.

At first, she'd been able to ignore her little problem. When her feet turned into paws she simply stuffed them into slippers and tried to pretend they were the same as before. It was harder when the tail sprouted from her backside and impossible to ignore when she woke one morning to find her legs covered in fine, brown fur.

Still, Melanie was teaching all her lessons online these days and, if she angled the camera just right, there was no way her students would be able to see what was going on beneath the desk. However, now the fur has spread all across Melanie's body and her hands have shrunk to form small, monkey hands, it is much more difficult to keep her predicament a secret. There is only so much which can be hidden beneath scarves and gloves.

This afternoon, Melanie will tell her students that she is turning into a monkey. She sits down at her laptop, turns the camera and microphone on and begins to speak. "I have something to tell you all," she says, but all that comes out is a crazy, monkey laugh.

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### "CROCODILE"

When the zoo shut its gates last spring, they put out an advertisement asking for volunteers to mind their animals until they reopened.

I did my bit. I said I could take something small and low maintenance. My house was tiny. I was getting on a bit. I couldn't be doing with a giraffe or anything too active.

I was expecting a chicken. They gave me a baby crocodile. He was very small. I could hold the length of him in my cupped hands. "Will he grow much bigger?" I asked. They assured me that he was a miniature variety and even as an adult would grow no bigger than a house cat. **THEY LIED!**

Clive - as I came to call him - soon outgrew the margarine tub I placed him in, then the mop bucket and the sink and, by Easter, could barely fit in the paddling pool I kept for the grandkids. Now, it is summer and I have not had a bath for two months. Clive lies curled up in the bottom of the tub, snip snapping every time I go in to brush my teeth.

Don't get me wrong, I love my crocodile. Mostly he is great company. He'll listen to me for hours when I am lonely and rarely ever snaps back. Still, I can't wait for the zoo to re-open. It's so long since I last felt properly clean.

*Dear Long Distance Friends,*

I can't believe this is my final newsletter to you all. I have so enjoyed being your Writer in Lockdown for these last five months. It has been both a privilege and a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

Whilst I wish the circumstances which brought us together had been a little different, I can honestly say it's been one of the highlights of my year being able to write to you all each week and to hear little snippets of reports from people who've been enjoying my stories. Working on the Open Book project has reminded me just how passionate I am about community arts, particularly the impact of reading and writing. Partially down to the encouraging experience I've had with all of you, I've begun work on a book of essays about the role of the writer in community and have just applied for some funding to help me complete this project over the next few years. Thank you so much for inspiring me.

I know I've said this in previous newsletters, but it certainly bears repeating, every one of us has experienced a different kind of difficult over this last period and I'm sure none of us envisioned, way back in March, what 2020 was going to ask of us, both individually and collectively. I think if I'd known how long this was going to last and just how lonely parts of it would be, I'd probably have crawled under the duvet and refused to come out 'til 2021.

I wanted to take a moment to thank both the team at Open Book and all of you fantastic participants for including me in your strange, little community during Lockdown. It was such a help to know I was connected to others through my writing and, on the worst days, when the loneliness felt enormous and crippling, the idea that somewhere, out there, people were reading and finding some kind of connection in my stories, really helped me to keep muddling on. Our final lead story this week is a heartbreaking wee tale about a woman who is also trying to find connection through words.

Finally, I wanted to say a humungous thank you for a couple of really practical things you did for me during a very difficult period.

The fee associated with this project, helped me to pay my bills and put food on the table for the last few months and for this I am incredibly thankful.

It came as a complete godsend when I wasn't sure how I would cope with so much of my work drying up. Also, the structure of having to produce new work each week helped me to negotiate my way through a terrible case of writer's block and keep up the routine of writing even when it felt like really tough going. Your support and engagement has been absolutely invaluable to me and I'm really going to miss these weekly newsletters from next week on.

I hope you enjoy these last few stories - I've tried to keep them nice and upbeat - and the gorgeous illustration from my nephew Caleb.

I hope you are safe and well and surrounded by stories wherever this last newsletter finds you. And I really hope we all get to meet up in the future, ideally in the non-virtual world with tea and cake and plenty of chat. Look after yourselves 'til then.

*Much love, Jan*

### "PIGEONS & PARROT"

The pigeons outside my house are driving me mad. They wake me up at 5am most mornings with their incessant chirping.

They build their nests in my drainpipes and poo all over the windscreen of my car. I've tried talking to them, but I do not speak bird and the pigeons, though noisy, haven't a single coherent word of human.

I asked my friend what I should do. My friend lives on Rathlin Island where there are gazillions of birds and a handful of people getting along quite companionably.

"You need a translator," he said, "somebody who can speak both bird and human."

It made sense. I went straight down to the pet shop and bought a beautiful, colourful parrot. I made sure to purchase a speaking variety.



The girl in the pet shop said my parrot was fluent and very chatty. I took my parrot home and told her all about the pigeon problem.

I asked if she might be able to negotiate a truce. My parrot was very sympathetic. She truly wanted to help. (I don't think she had much patience with pigeons either!)

But my parrot didn't speak pigeon, only human and parrot. I hadn't considered that there might be different bird languages.

My parrot was useless, though she did look lovely and it was nice to have someone who understood me when I moaned about the pigeons outside my house.

### "LETTERS"

Every day at five, Margaret walked the hundred yards or so to the post box on the corner and posted a letter addressed to herself. Every morning at ten past nine the postman knocked on Margaret's door and handed her one of these letters.

'Nice bit of weather we're having,' he'd say, or, 'shocking cold for April.'

Often his was the only human voice Margaret would hear from one end of the day to the next (aside, of course, from the television).

Inside each envelope was a folded paper with a smiley face printed on it.

Held upside down this could also be a kind of sad face. It took two days for these letters to boomerang back to Margaret – three at the weekend.

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### "CAR PARK"

The queue for the visitors' car park has now reached Lisburn.

In a Vauxhall Astra, six vehicles from the front of the line, Albert McKeown has been waiting to enter the car park since last February, shuffling slowly forwards one car length at a time. He has been surviving on a diet of cereal bars and orange Fanta, listening to nothing but the *Now That's What I Call Dance Music* CD his daughter left in the stereo the last time she borrowed the car.

He has not yet lost hope. Albert McKeown is made of sternish stuff. In the past he has completed two marathons, one triathlon and a single, last minute, Christmas Eve grocery shop which was, in his opinion, more harrowing than all three endurance events combined.

Albert McKeown is reasonably confident he will gain access to the visitors' car park at some stage in the next few weeks. Patience is not Albert's problem. Since his retirement he has all the time in the world.

The problem is, Albert McKeown's been sitting here in his Vauxhall Astra, with the dance music thumping and the rain coming down in sheets, for so long he's forgotten why he came to the hospital in the first place. He should probably just turn around and leave but he knows he won't. Such a move would feel a little too much like admitting defeat.