

That Sinking Feeling by Alison Coyle

The tattie mountain didn't seem to be getting any smaller even though I'd been standing at the sink peeling spuds for ages. Is there a more odious job than peeling spuds? Does anyone ever show any gratitude for well-peeled tattie? Mind you, do they ever even think about where the food comes from, who makes it? Mum, can I have a snack? Muuum, can I have a drink? Muuuuum, is it nearly teatime? All they do is eat. All I do is feed. And clean. And work from home. And now I was expected to be a teacher too? I certainly never signed up for home-schooling. I glanced over at my dining table which was currently classroom for Higher English, Nat5 Chemistry and Primary 6 Maths. The Maths class was on Zoom or Google classroom or some such thing I hadn't heard of a month ago! On screen all the kids were sitting in their little squares, like a mini version of Bob's Full House (that's showing my age). I liked the little glimpses into their homes; into bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens. Dogs barking, arguments over who has the tablet, everyone talking all at once. The teacher in their little box trying, and failing, to rein in the exuberance. Maybe constant potato peeling wasn't so bad.

I peeled another potato, ran it under the cold tap and let it slip and slither absently into the sink while I gazed out the window. I had read somewhere that 'there was no greater luxury for a woman than a window over the sink.' I'm not sure I'd go that far, but there were worse views in the world. The Ben looked so clear today. I thought of our family nestled at the bottom, only 40 minutes in the car, but, seeing as we weren't allowed outside our council wards, they might as well have been on the moon. Usually veiled behind a haze of traffic fumes, Glasgow glittered before me. From the Erskine Bridge on the far left, I scanned over the University, the Science Centre tower, the Armadillo, onto the pink 'People Make Glasgow' sign, and

across the Cathkin Braes. The whole city laid out before me, dotted with little pockets of green, my dear green place. So near, yet for now, so far. I wondered what the city centre felt like without the buzz of the crowd? How long would it be until we could walk up Buchanan Street, nose in the shops, have a drink at a pub in Bath Street before going to see a show at the Kings or a gig at King Tuts? Above the city the sky was a spotless baby blue. No clouds, no birds, no aeroplane plumes. Of course, there were no planes now and the sky seemed empty. A perfect blue void. It was an unseasonably warm spring day and I was filled with an urge to throw myself into the blue abyss. Splash around in it like a swimming pool. Cabin fever was clearly setting in.

From the family room, or what was now the office, I could hear the opening beats of the news' theme and waited for Craig to shout through with an update. Sure enough, 'Nearly 900 cases in Scotland now Alison, that's doubled since last week.' Numbers were Craig's 'thing', and he was following them with some alarm. For a while Scotland had seemed smugly invincible but now it was here creeping silently, unseen, amongst us. We look at each other with suspicion on our daily walks. Hadn't Iain at number 46 already been out for a jog today? We judge each other's behaviour. Did you see Suzanne, Eileen, and Gill post on Facebook? Brazenly meeting in Lisa's garden. Can they not count? Nicola's tough line might slow the spread, but the genie was out the bottle and there was no putting it back. The cases were leaping up.

I listened as the distant news anchor invited me to join him after the break when they would be speaking to an eminent Scottish scientist endeavouring to develop a vaccine. A vaccine! That's what we needed! Jab us all and get back to normal! Doctors, shopping, pubs, theatre or even just seeing family, popping into

friends for an unplanned coffee. Although I'd need my roots done first. Hairdressers! Oh yes please. I looked like a scabby badger already! What would we be like if it went on much longer – the boys would look like Chewbacca!

Adverts over, the presenter had begun his interview. I was pleasantly surprised to hear a female voice reply, but scolded myself, why shouldn't it be a woman? Just because my experience in science hadn't been positive didn't mean everyone else found the same. The voice described the process of vaccine creation in a lazy east coast twang that transported me back to undergraduate virology labs. Laura? Nah, couldn't be, could it?

I peeked round the doorframe to see the TV. The screen was filled with the image of young woman; blonde hair up in an elegantly messy bun, caramel cashmere sweater, tiny pearl drops hung from her ears, mouth painted in a bold red – the colour you pick when you are speaking to the nation and need to bolster your defences. It was a far cry from the lanky haired, heavily kohl-eyed Laura I knew, but it was her. No doubt! Laura Brody!

'Craig that's Laura from Uni!'

He scrutinised the screen, 'Laura the stoner?'

'Craig!'

'Well, she was always stoned when I met her.'

'You only ever saw her at Cheesey Pop though.'

The last time I had seen Laura we had had words. Irresponsible. Boring. Drunk. Swot. Loosen up. Take this seriously. We had been in the students' union and she was trying to persuade a group of us to go clubbing. Finals were only weeks away. There would be time to party later but just now we needed to buckle down. Did they

not understand how these coming weeks would shape the rest of our lives? They went out. I went home.

‘Laura the Stoner leading the vaccine charge. Heaven help us!’ Craig said turning back to his computer as the report finished.

I sighed and went back to my potato mountain. If you had told me last year that we were about to be hit by a global pandemic, that we’d be living in lockdown, I might have believed you. If you had told me one of my former classmates was going to get us out the mess, I might have believed you. Blair or Gill maybe, but Laura? I’d have laughed and called you a liar. Yet there she was. Lead researcher. Lab in the States. About to save the world! And here I was stuck at a sink peeling potatoes. Who needs a PhD to peel potatoes, what a waste! I sighed and let another spud ploppully into the pot.

What could I do? What would help? I could sew. I’m a whizz with a sewing machine. A few folk had asked for masks – they even said they’d pay for them. But that didn’t feel right. Nobody should profit from this disaster. And anyway, did they even work? Would they just make things worse? Give folk a false sense of security—

‘Dee dee dum dee, dee dee dum dee, deedle dee dum dee...’

My phone jolted me out of my reverie. I wiped wet, starchy hands on my pinny and propped the phone under my chin so I could talk and continue my Sisyphean task.

A cheery voice streamed out the speaker, ‘Hello Alison? This is Elle, Hope its OK calling, it’s easier than text don’t you think?’

Eh no, but I didn’t say that because the voice breezed sunnily along without pausing.

‘I was given your number by several people who say you are THE person to get in touch with if I am looking for some sewing expertise. I am putting together a

small group of stitchers to make scrubs for the NHS. Don't sew myself but can happily coordinate. Don't suppose you'd be interested?'

The timing was freaky. Kismet or something! Oh, yes! Yes, I was interested. I let the potato peeler fall from my hand into the cloudy water and I slipped away from the sink.

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The 'sink' quote is from 'The Dutch House' by Anne Patchett.

Some names have been changed.

The sewing group we formed was called The Nifty Home Stitchers. We started out as a group of 8 and grew to over 100. Our youngest stitchers were still at school and our oldest nearly 90 years old. We started off with duvets and ended up fundraising to buy in fabrics. We raised over £13000 and when the project wound up, we were able to donate nearly £6000 to local hospices. We made masks, uniform wash bags and scrubs. Over 3000 sets of scrubs were supplied to local keyworkers; doctors, dentists, nurses, care home staff and others. We ran from a hub in Giffnock Park Church and co-ordinated by Elle Steele and Liz Burton-King with the help of volunteers from what was East Ren Voluntary Action who made the deliveries.

Kirsten Oswald, MP, proposed in parliament, 'That this House celebrates the contributions of East Renfrewshire Nifty Home Stitchers and their wonderful community of hard working and generous spirited volunteers who came together to make scrubs and washable scrub bags for NHS Scotland keyworkers... and praises everyone who helped in any way to make and distribute thousands of sets of scrubs and many more thousands of scrub bags to our NHS Scotland frontline workers.'

It wasn't quite developing a vaccine, but we pulled together as a community and showed that in a crisis everyone has something that they can contribute to help.