

## Emma's Creative Writing Piece

In the early days brush it off. Reassure yourself that it's happening far away.

Laugh & practice the Wuhan Shake. It could be Mars. It's all a movie.

As it creeps closer, hypochondria sparks. Ask friends & loved ones who know better if you should worry? Receive warm-glass-of-milk responses. Search their faces for flashes of a lie. They know you too well, they're all Marlon Brando by now.

Placate your mind with every day pleasures; A trip to the library with the kids, Starbucks, Plans to meet friends...

It's a movie on Mars.

While on half-term holiday, escape to the bedroom to watch the news. They're building a make-shift morgue in Hyde Park. Call him into the room in a sing-song so you don't upset their Hide-&-Seek. Lower your voices. He'll tell you it's just protocol, government has to be seen to be... bla, bla, bla. Glimpse the lie.

Pack the kids up & head home.

Lockdown before they tell you to. Tory b\*\*\*\*\*ds. Take the kids out of school. Cancel plans. Buy masks and hand gel. Wear Nitrile gloves to the supermarket, ignoring the funny looks off to the sides. Study the scrolling ticker on news reports. Begin to obsess as tolls increase.

Lay out the faces of your loved ones in your mind. Play a morbid game of Guess Who?

Elderly. Vulnerable. Overweight. Underlying Health Conditions. Diabetes. Weakened Immune system. Pregnant.

Guess Who.

You're thankful he quit smoking. Thankful you never did. Smug that you are "...A bossy chore of a woman." Saturate with grief & guilt.

Don't leave the house without reasonable excuse. Shop for essential items & medical supplies only. Take the children outside once a day for 30 minutes of exercise.

Do. Not. Leave. The. Local. Area.

Begin to judge.

Judge your neighbours. The one's hoarding toilet rolls, having children's play dates, sleepovers, parties.

Judge strangers. The interlopers who visit your village from other towns, brazenly unrecognisable & stretching their legs on your streets. Consider buying a pitch fork.

Cuddle up in bed at night and binge-watch apocalyptic movies. You're students studying for a final exam. Feel the muscle of his arm around you as you make plans for worst case scenarios realising that the things you detest will be things you crave at the world's end...

Government. Military. Brussels sprouts.

Curse your disinterest in gardening – there's no muster of veggies lined neatly in your dirt beds like the ones in your neighbours'. He'll tell you he knows the safest places to go for supplies, food, a cache of weapons. Make a list of who you'd pick off first; Men with decent tools, neighbours with vegetable patches, women who wear yoga pants but don't do yoga. Laugh your whisky breaths into the darkness.

As the weeks pass feel the walls shrink inward like moulding fruit. Petty aggravations rasp & spasm. Begin to snipe. Slash at each other when the kids can't see. Seethe and yearn.

Work your way through workless hours. Eke out the mince with lentils like your Nana taught your Mum in the old days.

Long for date night. The car journey alone together, the restaurants - the thrumming & clinking of strangers. Unfiltered conversations. Shedding your parent skin.

In the cold blinding white light of the hallway feel a harsh shift in him as you hustle & zip the children into plastic playsuits.

He'll ask why you have to take your daily exercise together. He wants to be alone & so do you. You're to cultivate a veil of patience that he won't muster.

Feel a kicking & flailing in your chest. Force it down to your stomach in the hopes it'll drown.

Not in front of the weans. Let the unwashed heat of you rise under your coat & hold as they hang like four little rubber balloons on strings, their plastic suits creaking & scraping by your sides.

Watch him burst and spill as they look up at you, eyes wide & liquorice black.

When he is done say "...because it's nicer." Swallow the lump hardening in your throat.

See the muscles under his skin soften. Accept his hand, your flesh & his melting & reconciling as you walk against the rain.

Walk against the rain.

Once a week stand dutifully in distant congregation with your neighbours and Clap for Carers. Take the opportunity to nosey behind doors. Galleried pictures of family & loved ones line the walls - their frozen expressions smiling out at you. Feel closer to your own loved ones knowing you're all clapping at once. Miss Mum. Miss Dad. Wonder how the childless couple two-doors-down kill the hours. Wait till the claps peter out & your neighbours vanish into their hallways like actors disappearing off-stage. Wave meekly at the old man who lives across the road as he shuffles indoors. He doesn't see you. Feel self-conscious. Berate yourself for not once thinking about the carers.

Find ways within the rules.

Babysit from the garden to let your sister go to the funeral. She'll leave magazines & a flask of tea out for you. Look up at the window & make silly faces at them, mime thoughtless chatter through the glass, smile and deflect while their Dad buries their Aunty. Your sister will watch him grieve at an empty graveside from her car. When they return drawn & inert, slip out the front gate at a distance making sure there are no careless hugs.

As Mondays bleed into Sundays give up on the ironing but keep on tackling the washing. Stack, unload and fold slack-jawed and over-ripe. Lighten when they come in the room, remembering how lucky you are.

Google 'make-up tutorials'. All the vloggers are young and you are doing your eyebrows wrong. Eyebrows are important. Frame your face, paint on hard edges. Wear your new eyebrows with nervous reticence. Your children will laugh. Drape your face in a soaked facecloth & flush your edges down the sink.

Google 'Mini face-lift'.

Turn flabby & languid under sweatpants. Buy a resistance band from Amazon and disinfect the package when it arrives. Follow online exercise classes. Roll around on the floor like a spilled plum & let the children ride on your back during Cat/Cow pose. Become sore under your sweatpants. Use your resistance band to tie up the garden gate when the lock breaks after a storm.

Watch your 12 year old miss out as longed-for transitions & traditions pass her by. Attempt little consolations. Make her laugh. At night while the wee ones are in bed let her cry into your neck like she's five again. Wish she were five again.

Feel little bursts of worry and hurt.

Home-school all 4 of them. Begin each morning with ordered determination before unravelling like a spool of thread in front of them. Search the soft little curves of their expressions for glimmers of progress or understanding.

Google 'Signs of dyslexia'.

Persist like you are herding cats.

Be grateful when he can work again - glad for the income. Ache when he goes offshore.

Cope & cry.

Stand at the bedroom window half-concealed like a marksman & trail the childless couple on the pavement as they walk their dog. Unshorn & un-coiffed they seem suddenly old. Imagine how a dog might carry a coffin. Ignore the echo of intimate laughter lingering as they meander out of view, hand-in-hand.

Stop.

Start to meditate. When you feel close to "being one with the universe," puncture your conscious with thoughts of what to make for tea.

Learn to bake. Enjoy the lazy smell of long-rested bread dough as it fills the house. Let their faces become muddied with melted chocolate and cookie batter. Play a game of *The Great British Bake-Off*. Make bunting and dress them in your beads & shoes, paint little beards on their chins. Enjoy the mess. Let cobwebs settle in the corners of things. Play Duck, Duck, Goose on the trampoline. Scurry off to the bathroom hot-cheeked when you accidentally pee yourself - streamers of laughter behind you as you run from the knees down.

Accept the Gladness.

In the quiet & still of night when they become furled buds of blanket & flesh, share yours & their days with him through a pixelating screen. Edit out the bad bits like you're a war-time bride sending love letters to the front line. Infuse your chatter with light-hearted humour to boost morale.

Boast that today you came close to being one with the universe & hear his staccato laughter as he freezes & unfreezes. He'll tell you that you're a ridiculous person. Remind him that more than once he left the remote control in the fridge.

On the nights when technology prevents your cosy back-&-forth take refuge in the dust-choked books piled on the bed-side table. Try to find yourself amongst the pages.

Miss the lentils.

When he returns home surge & crash against the wall of his chest, the kids winding like happy little vines around his neck & legs. Give him a hero's welcome.

As the impatient world outside begins to stretch its limbs & peek out, recoil & push against it.

Reject the sanctioned meet-ups and distanced play dates. Switch off.

Stretch the precious days out, abandoning the carefully cultivated routines that once kept you sane.

Sledge. Picnic. Play.

Dismiss who you were and what was, dismantle the box you built around you. Expand and Alter. Keep the pre-2020 madness where you set it down. Vow never to return and never to take them there with you. Insist on the virtue of your grasp and hold.

In time bring them to the top of the school driveway, let their strings slip away.

Sing-song "Have fun! Be good!" Blink and swallow hard as they float off.

Placate your mind with every day pleasures...The road dust of warmer weather, the pink confetti of blossom as it flurries onto the well-tended gardens. You are jacketless in April.

Walk on. The sun casting hard black shadows as you go.