



REAR WINDOW

By Bella Pollen

I moved in here last November, back when it was a building site with no hot water and drains that smelt of old meat. Now it's a home, and oh-so-nearly finished, except for one thing – my windows. Both front and rear still look out on the world, unblinkered by curtains or blinds. I mean, what with one thing and another, I just didn't get them done in time.

I bought the place for its grand urban landscape. In the distance, red buses, busy roads and a sky full of planes. I like the mechanics of transport for always taking me where I want to go. In the foreground, however, are residential properties. A giant block of red brick and, next to it, a modern high-rise. The curved architecture of these buildings forms an amphitheatre of balconies and windows, each and every one with generous and unobstructed views into my bathroom.

To begin with, I taped up old blankets. After all, who wants to be ogled at first thing in the morning, stark-naked and bleary? But the blankets never stayed up for long, their weave too dense, or the tape not sticky enough. After a while, I stopped rehanging them. No one seemed to be perving and, besides, visibility was poor. Sludgy winter days morphing into long moonless nights. That inelegant, dripping dash from shower to basin? Seemed nobody much cared, and, by the time spring finally arrived, neither did I.

But that was before lockdown and a world turned inside out. In times of darkness, we humans gravitate towards the light. On a hundred streets, in a thousand cities, across measureless oceans, faces are pressed to the glass, searching for those things we have lost. I'm still not phased by the idea of people looking in at me. What's creepy is the amount of time I spend watching them.

The lives of others have become infinitely fascinating. The Japanese girl with the swishy ponytail. The woman in boldly printed coats, walking her dachshund. The chain-smoker vaping in the shadows. Unaware of my surveillance, they go about their business; brushing their teeth, reading in the sun, doing the dishes. I'm not normally such an intense, if benign, voyeur, but for now I find these rituals of domestic life deeply comforting.

I'm grieving. My father – my fantastic, imaginative maverick of a father – was killed by a truck a couple of weeks before lockdown. My siblings and I WhatsApp every morning. "You ok?" "Yeah, I'm okay, you okay?" We check each other assiduously like chimps picking out fleas. None of us have Covid symptoms, yet all of us are finding it hard to breathe. How to palliate this unspeakable thing, this pain that feels like we've taken a million volts to the heart?

When I look in the mirror, the creature reflected back at me has hair standing on end and scorched fingertips. I'm not ready for anyone but the closest of friends to see me like this, so Zoom is out, except for those few birthday parties that can't be avoided, but as soon as I press that "leave meeting" button, as soon as I dissolve my faux, pixelated self, it's back to Rear Window I go.

Those of us who are not key workers have become the unwilling stars of a new *Truman Show*. Only the flimsiest of stage curtains separating us from the bone-on-bone contact of a harsher reality – the bluish light of hospitals, nurses in bin-bag aprons, those poor intubated souls, *our parents mostly*, desperately fighting to hold on. When old people walk past my window, I give them an extra-special big smile. Code for: *No, please! Don't go. Don't get sick. We need you here with us.*

It's not just people I'm watching. There are cherry trees on my street. Over the past couple of months, I've been in thrall to every thickening blossom. The contrast between the sweet unfurling of spring and the constant threat of death is almost impossible to compute. If there's a dream-like quality to this lockdown – the sky so vivid, the daffodils so bright – then it's a dream we all share.

Locked in, locked up. Locked out. Opposite Trafalgar square, the homeless are camped on the steps of St Martin in the Fields. -its church doors resolutely shut. It seems right somehow, that those folk, usually on the periphery of our vision, now own the capitol – or at least occupy the sunnier parts of its empty spaces even if it breaks my heart there is no-one to feed or reassure them.

Our understanding of confinement is shifting. The other day, glancing out over the rooftops, I swore I saw a black panther, prowling through the satellite dishes. I wondered then about the zoos. The keeper feeling poorly... our great Imperial city turned feral... hippos in the Serpentine...

Time has become more of an illusion than ever. Our perception of its flow no longer corresponds to today's freeze-frame. As the hours burn, the weeks melt away. It's Thursday evening again, and here come my neighbours – the serious guy in the plaid shirt, the energetic cyclist and the young couple

with the chatty toddler. I've always thought that people move to cities for the anonymity – and out there, somewhere, must be Hitchcock's murderous travelling salesman. But not here. No, not here, not in my street.

I look across at them, these nice, decent folk, clapping and banging their saucepans. They're strangers, the lot of them, and yet they all seem so familiar. I get why. They too are in an acute state of grief. We are all improvising, flying by the seat of our pants.

No idea where we're going, of course, but even if they don't know it yet, they're surely helping me get there.

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