
“Like falling out of love...”

June 2020

Business is as usual but not as normal. The hospital isn't empty, far from it, but it is eerily quiet. There is little movement, few visitors and absolutely no sightseers. I see a person walk alertly to the lift. They do not linger or stop to chat. Eye contact is fleeting, fearful, apologetic.

Groundhog Day. Line up on the spot. Sanitise. Temperature check. My hands are dry from the sanitiser and there isn't enough moisturiser to soothe it. My workplace has no window and is too small for visitors. Don't clear your throat or blow your nose. To be *safe*...Go home.

My sanctuary at home is bright with sunlight and I still light a candle. I play classical music. It's undemanding music that asks nothing of me. No words to sing. I write and commune with creativity. My writing desk is set up just how I like it. Bringing other work here is sacrilegious. Working from home blurs that precious line, obliterates it. I must keep work contained in the office where, at the end of the day, I close the door behind me and walk away.

July 2020

The machine is starting up again...

Conspiracy theories. The more fantastical, the more believable apparently. There is backlash about wearing masks. Individual rights ahead of the rights of any other person or the community as a whole. My staff member refuses to wear a mask. She will not be able to work here.

We yearn for time together. A new acronym - F2F. We go outside to meet *face to face*. When I smile my eyes crinkle and my whole face participates. When I smile the mask vacuums to my mouth and sticks to my lipstick. Should I stop wearing lipstick? Should I stop being me behind the mask? When I take off the mask there are smudges of red. It looks like... Another secret behind the mask.

I can barely keep my eyes open and the mask hides my yawns. We take turns when we talk. I raise my hand and wait to be invited to speak. *Can I share my screen? Is that a legacy hand?* Comparative suffering is big here. *I worked 15 hours yesterday / a 60 hour week / haven't had a day off since June.* A virtual gathering is still a gathering. I can take off my mask outside and literally

breathe fresh air at last. There's a lingering sense of danger though, a fear of others and of the unseen. Some have ripped off their masks defiantly. Some, me, keep it on. Workplace uniform includes a mask (optional).

December 2020

Terribly sad things happen even on Christmas Eve. Somehow the date magnifies the awfulness. I see devastation etched into the faces of our staff. Shouldering all the care for something indescribably bad. It makes me weep.

Once upon a time there was a hospital. It bustled, busied, burst with activity. Now this is a museum of healthcare. Of 'once was' and of 'could be'. In the post-Christmas quiet only one café opens selling the coffee that is the life blood of health care workers and patients alike. Our thermometer emits a temperature reading onto the skin. Forehead or nape of the neck, it's strangely intimate baring your neck to another. I wish everyone a wonderful end to 2020 and we pause at that thought.

January 2021

Still Groundhog Day.

The week between Christmas and New Year, when time is bendy, is a distant memory. People still fall and hurt themselves. Have car accidents. Have heart attacks. Get cancer. No wonder we are fragile. I try and make eye contact with others in the lift. This is about being together with another human. Surely we can do this one simple act for one another?

My daughter is isolating. She has a cold, a sniffle. I catch myself reaching out to open her door to go in for a chat. Waiting for time to pass, fourteen full days is a really long time. Being Covid *safe* is a long game. We gain clarity about what is 'nice' to have compared to 'must' have in a workspace. I need a door I can close behind me.

April 2021

Jab is an aggressive word. Pfizer. AstraZeneca. Winner. Loser.

Vaxhole. Someone who has received both doses of Pfizer and brags about it.

July 2021

We are unravelling.

August 2021

Lockdown #six. When someone is in a virtual meeting, on mute and with their video off, are they really there?

September 2021

The line is long and so public. No-one speaks or makes eye contact. We are socially and physically distanced. One chair. Two swabs. Throat, both nostrils. Tears stream and I am swabbed. I walk out through the snaking line of waiting people and it feels like a walk of shame.

October 2021

The roadmap out of lockdown. While the population throws masks literally and metaphorically in the air, we are closing down. There are not enough of us to keep everyone alive. This hospital is fuelled by caffeine, alcohol, hope and desperation. At the end of a shift, at the end of a difficult meeting, at the realisation of another case incoming, we say, bleary eyed and weary voiced, *'you have earned your wine tonight'*. After all these months and all this effort, the surge is here.

My pen is leaking. My eyes are leaking. I can't seem to stop either of them.

November 2021

As the world opens up our doors remain closed. Illness may not realise it, but it is Friday. The floors are being waxed by someone riding a huge machine up and down the corridor cleaning away the week. Illness doesn't know to observe the ritual of the weekend. It's just another day on the ward. There is no cavalry coming now. Every person who could has stepped up and stepped in. Even the backup staff are exhausted. Jab #3. Protect the workforce! The unemployed are the unvaccinated. The unvaccinated are the inpatients. Fear and misinformation have created an underclass. Society can no longer tolerate, be tolerant. The pendulum swings wildly but it always finds the midpoint. Eventually.

December 2021

'Were we safe yesterday?'

'Are we safe today?'

We talk about the data. We rarely talk about the people.

January 2022

I've disengaged. I've become untethered from profession, place, people.

February 2022

School is back and so is the traffic. A human swarm of worker bees returning to the hive. It's the first day of the last week. The ties to culture, company and codes of conduct will take time to unravel. I set the out of office response. *I do not work here anymore.*

The lift doors close. I wonder if I should go back for one last look.

I don't.

I go home.
