

Irene

Irene walked along the queue of shoppers pulling her wheelie behind her. She arrived at her spot at the end of the queue wondering why so many women were out. Their blokes all having a lie-in no doubt. She reflected on the morning: woke at five so as not to miss the alarm at six. Why six anyway? Not as if she had anywhere to go. And then she remembered she did. She was going to Sainsbury's first Special Hour so she could avoid the hoarders and this bloody virus thing. She thought of the flu epidemic in 1947 when her mother had been sick – no special shopping times then. She didn't really need to go but she hadn't been out of the house since late March except to the shop on the corner during her government-permitted one-hour walk. And she had stuck to that – she wasn't going to start breaking the law at her age. Get fined by the police and end up in prison. Anyway, she needed toilet paper. If there was any left. She'd seen on the news that the shelves were empty, making the shop look like it was showcasing its furniture. Except for this one tin of beans, just sitting there.

Alarm turned off and restless, she'd rolled back the duvet and sat up slowly to settle the dizziness - another small struggle age had brought to her in its gradual dishing out of new experiences. There was still a nip in the air and as she reached up to unhook her dressing gown, she felt the familiar ache in her right shoulder - a long-forgotten injury from a bicycle fall in her teens which had begun to nudge her again in recent years, until it now growled at her each day.

As she stood in the queue, she could feel the heat of the June sun on her back. It wasn't even eight o'clock. The doomsayers would be talking global warming again, but she liked a bit of sun, not too hot mind, and the plants had come up early this year, shoots everywhere. Warmth eased into her bones, soothing the arthritis handed down from her mother, in her knees and fingers. The morning had been her usual, standing in the garden sipping a cup of tea and lighting a cigarette. She closed her eyes on the first inhalation of the day - a pleasurable

*hit his head he did, smashed, drug fried, pie-eyed, son of mine,
divine, time, heir spent, bent, filching, sneezing, snatching,
celled, released, returned, busted, broken, beat, thump, thud,
mother hubbard, by the cupboard, fled, now dead.*

and intimate experience. The beds were inspected, the plants nicely tied in and tidied up to perfection, and she spoke back at the birds, grown louder since the planes had stopped. Having made a mental list of the gardening duties to be done before the week was out, she looked over her blooms once more, nodded and spoke a few words of encouragement out loud, reminding them all how beautiful they were. Cigarette stubbed out in the ashtray by the pot of lilies, she returned to the bedroom to prepare for the trip.

Irene examined the queue. In between every four women or so, a rare male interrupted the beaded queue like an interesting charm on a chain. No-one said a word. All stared to the front or down at the ground until a ripple of movement ahead caused a stir of bags and feet to move a few steps closer to the entrance as each shopper was counted and clicked into the store one at a time.

She was behind one of the men, this one in a red sports cap, and was careful to stay two metres back, as directed by the signs on the path. He was reading a newspaper, so she could have a good look. His head was dropped forward on top of a back held proud and straight. Her gaze dropped to his girth, sturdy but slim, to allow the checked shirt to be loosely tucked in. The hand that held the bag was strong and assertive, not ashamed of its workload. The other holding the paper was firm. Her eyes drifted over the seat of his trousers, nicely fitting over a rear that held the right amount of weight for the long legs that carried him to about six foot with his head lifted. His soft leather shoes were well worn but not shabby. Comfortable in their fit. She found herself thinking about pulling at the laces and stretching the bridge wide over the tongue to slip the shoe off.

She had looked in the hall mirror that morning and patted the offending grey curls, not cut since February, and thought of Suzy and her striped nails, laughing and talking while snipping away at the head in front of her. She felt a slight thrill in her stomach at the forthcoming adventure and stretched the paper mask awkwardly across

*doctor foster went to, pill her, spill her, in a puddle right up to
her middle, never the same again, depressed, demented, men,
o, men, paused, ignores, GP sighs, rolled eyes, neurosis
psychosis, over-mothered, over-wifed, forgetting, forgotten, set
a man to watch all night, my fair lady*

her nose and mouth. Smileless, she took the handle of her trolley and turned towards the front door.

It was 7.50. She rounded the corner to see the red brick of the superstore in the distance. As she crossed the carpark, she saw a long queue of old people queuing along the building, round the corner past the bus stop. Each on their own, they stood still, hunched and slouched on trolleys, TWO METRES from the person in front. She felt as if she'd entered a modern sculpture park.

The queue moved forward, and Irene took the man's place, standing firmly on the social distancing sign stuck to the path. TWO METRES. She'd watched him straighten up and take two strides forwards for her four. He read again, a sign next to him pointing out 'so that you know that you are getting closer to us, at this point there is a twenty-minute wait.' Magpies hopped around the bottom of a small tree fixed in its square of dirt, doing its best to cancel out the toxic fumes of the carpark. Which had no cars now – not a single one. She could see as far as the Shell garage half a mile away on the edge of the retail park.

The mask was itchy, damp inside from her breath. She realised she was gasping every now and then. As she stood in the queue she pulled the face covering to below her nose, looking around to stare off anyone who might have caught her. The queue moved forward again. Irene pulled her trolley along a few feet and saw that there were only three people in front of her. She pulled her mask back over her nose and, bored, looked around to see if anyone might talk to her. The woman behind her was tall and thin with long, dyed red hair, ridiculous at her age. Her eyes were too close together. Unfortunate, as they were all you could see above her mask. Tall Woman just stared ahead, ignoring Irene's offer of communication, her chin lifted while fixed on the progress of the queue. She could see over the young girl on door duty and certainly wasn't going to speak to anyone else. Irene looked down at her shoes and wondered just when her style had changed from winklepickers to

*lost the lot, the plot, home grown, home blown,
stone broke, my shoe, my shoe, gone, blown to
bits, blitz, father split, sit on hip, mother's cry, we
all fall down*

Hush Puppies to these reliable flats.

There was a poster advertising discounted wine and Irene thought of her postponed summer trip to Malaga with Ivy, her friend from her first days at the bank. She wasn't too sad. Nothing to be done about it. But when this was all over, she'd be off as sharp as. She had wanted to visit her brother in Australia – they'd been asking her to get out there for years. And she'd like to see him while he was still up and about. She was fond of her niece too, who still sent her a birthday card each year even though she was busy with a family of her own and ran a café on the beach. She'd stopped her letters though.

The queue moved forward again and the man in front was next to go in. He turned round to Irene, pulled down his mask to his chin and smiled.

'Not long now.' He replaced the mask and waved his newspaper in the direction of the sliding doors. Irene laughed under her mask and pulled it down.

'It's like waiting to see Santa.' She pulled her mask up and they both chuckled, the wrinkles at the sides of their eyes starred at their little joke together. Despite their concerns, no-one was interested or noticed their indiscretion and they relaxed. He pulled his mask down again and they began to have a conversation pulling down the mask and returning it as a matter of habit, a bit like over and out when she was a kid playing spies.

He made a joke about the virus. She didn't want to be reminded of all that.

'I only live down the road. Else I wouldn't of come. I'm not getting on any bus with all those germs.' The man nodded and said nothing. Irene went on.

'I heard the masks don't do anything anyway – even the scientists and politicians are arguing over whether they work. I saw it on the news. Well, if *they* can't make up their minds...' The man stood still, his head tilted to one side, listening. Irene shrugged her

*blood bathed, slipped and slid, carried, missed,
Changeling child, covered, mothered, lost and
bound, never happened, happened it did, hid,
clutching, untouched, unborn, still, stolen*

shoulders and turned her palms up to the sky.

‘Anyway, at my age,’ she said, ‘if I went now, it wouldn’t be such a bad thing. I’ve had a good innings and let’s face it, we’re all going to die one way or the other.’

His name was Martin, and he let her pass in front of him with a small dance as they carefully remained TWO METRES apart through the exchange. She was ever so grateful and smiled to herself in the fish aisle when she thought of how kind it had been of him to do that. Nice man.

Shopping had become a military exercise. Arrows on the floor directed buyers along a narrow one-way path. The clothes and non-essentials were cordoned off as if the area was a minefield. Irene wasn’t particularly worried about that. She had no need of buying clothes these days, favouring the second-hand shop, Barnardo’s on the high street which helped poor kids at the same time. She had always intended to volunteer there, just a couple of hours a week. Her friend Joan approved, ‘Gets you out for a bit. Socialise. Something to look forward to.’ Course none of them were open at the moment.

She eyed the fresh stewing beef and considered making a pot for herself. Big enough to freeze a few portions. She wanted good quality stuff, not the meat already cubed. She preferred to cut up the meat herself, get her hands on it. She followed directions to the dairy goods to get the milk she’d forgotten and felt like a criminal going back the wrong way.

She saw Vegan and Free From signs. What the hell was that all about anyway? There’s those that have an allergy or something, but as for the rest of them...Saving the planet, I ask you! She looked the other way and headed for the vegetables in rows of green boxes. She went straight for root veg, none of the fancy stuff. Couple of parsnips, a few carrots, three potatoes, an onion. Loose only, she liked to examine her ingredients, prod and gently squeeze them, putting back the bruised or scarred. Took seconds. None of that bagged

*GP smiled, reviled, mild infection, section her, rejection
her, whinging miss, dismissed, two weeks, missed cyst,
breast on fire, unkissed, unclear, here we go round,
unsound, quick, sick, needled, drained, fluid explained,
no complaint*

stuff. Ridiculous.

She grabbed a packet of Warburton's white sliced and some crumpets for afternoon tea. You couldn't find them at the corner shop and she'd been making do with biscuits. You can't beat a custard cream and a cuppa with a romcom on Channel 5 in the afternoon though. Signs were everywhere reminding everyone to keep TWO METRES apart. She pulled back from a woman who got too close to her in the baked beans aisle and waited while a man hovered over the spaghetti hoops. She was only wanting one small tin, as she very rarely fancied hoops on toast, but it was always good to have one in the cupboard for those times when nothing else would do.

She bumped into Martin in the cheese section while examining the pre-packaged stuff she didn't usually buy. The deli counter was closed these days. She was a sucker for Wensleydale with cranberries and used to buy a wedge each week before all this happened. She hadn't had any for months and thought she'd treat herself to some now that she was here. Martin was going over the cheddar section and she saw him take a solid chunk of Montgomery. She was suitably impressed and pulled down her mask,

'Going for the strong stuff then?' she giggled like a schoolgirl.

'Can't beat this with some grapes, and a nice glass of red.'

Irene placed her packet of cheese in her trolley and tried to think when she had last drunk wine. It was Sharon and Ed's fiftieth wedding anniversary last year at number 29. She'd got a bit tipsy and enjoyed a dance to *This Old Heart of Mine* in the middle of the living room, right there on the carpet. Winston had grabbed her hand, his palms papery and soft, pale against the dark skin of his body, until they firmed and held fast in their twisting excitement, and he twirled her round to applause and cheers from onlookers. She felt it in her hips the next day, a small sacrifice for weeks of re-telling.

*Sitting on the dentist's knee, Mr Wellington stroking me,
back grope, braces hurt, hand up shirt, thirty white horses
on a red hill, first they tramped, first bra clamped, strapped
in, trapped in, straight sat, scaredy cat, mother laughed,
dirty old man, old hand, visited house, nothing said, wished
dead*

Irene pushed her trolley down the Health & Wellbeing aisle. Not one she visited very often but she could do with some soap. She considered the organic, handmade stuff as a special gift to herself, all prettily packaged, but she had to look twice at the cost. Handmade, my arse. The image of a tired woman standing over a wooden bowl stirring the ingredients with the steam rising into her red face.

There was something in housework though. Her thing was ironing and only yesterday, she had heaved a basket of clothes onto her bed. Too early for the radio, she started on the shirts in a peaceful reverie. The pressing away of the fabric's wrinkles and worries, bringing order and meaning to her day. And the clothes told stories. Today, she had on the pink shirt she'd ironed yesterday, pressing hard into the cloth at the colour she couldn't abide, but her friend Vera had so eagerly persuaded her to try. 'Takes ten years off you, girl.' That still made her sixty-seven and it wasn't going to remove the wrinkles.

She moved on to the shop's own brand of soap further along and tried to reach a bar that was above eye level but winced as her shoulder stabbed. She looked around to see if there was anyone nearby to help. A man in the shop's uniform was now stacking shelves at the top of the aisle and she considered calling him.

'Excuse me.' No response. She pulled her mask down. 'Excuse me *sir*.'

Not a flicker. He was clearly on a mission and Irene was not part of it. She remembered a time when she'd be annoyed at the number of men hovering to help everywhere she went, silly in her heels and short skirts. She had worn full make-up until the day Harry died. She looked at the young man again, looked back at the soap and turned away.

An announcement over the speaker directed everyone to the tills as Special Hour was coming to an end. Still hardly anyone in the shop and no-one in her aisle and she felt a bit royal. Like Kate shopping at Harrods. She pushed the trolley down the end of the aisle and

Married, mated, mastered. Danced the days.
Husband and...died. Lying in wait, in cancer.
Malignant, malicious growth, both lost, alone,
disowned, sunk, deep, Bo-Peep, weep, screwed

I wish you would. I hate you. Scratch your
eyes out I will. Bitch. Break your bones I
will. Crack, wrench, tear. Sister, hissed
her, blood, torn, born out of mother.
Crying, screaming. Shut up, shut up.

Sixteen and slick smooth, cigarettes and cider,
tombola, fairground, fair found, apple tree high,
matchmaker matchmaker make me a match, Globe
Road, synagogue, goggle-eyed, Jew lover joyed,
neighbours stared, flared, don't care, dirty yid,
curly-haired kid, keep to your kind

They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace, "One
of the sergeants looks after their socks," Says Alice.
Says Irene. Pull your socks up, standing there like
butter wouldn't melt, butterweed, butterwort, told you
must never touch my figurines, figures, figs, figwort,
you worrywart, worryguts, don't touch them, its broke,
broiled, battered, fish souped.

Round and round the castle like a teddy bear, one
step, two steps, tickle you under there, there, there,
upsidaisy. Mummy didn't mean to hit you so hard, so
you'd fall down. Stand up, stand up for God's sake,
little brat, twat, sitting on the doormat.

Stop the tears, hold them up, in,
shame on you, blame on you,
shin up and best foot,
forewarned, forbid, she frowned,
George Porgie can fuck off
Where are you going, my pretty maid? Messing like that, fine
as a queen, by the photocopy machine, turns their heads, in
their beds, manager's throat, fret, pat on the bum, coffee
break scum, keep her down, Then I won't marry you, my
pretty maid, Nobody asked you, sir, she said, stuck-up cow,
fucked up now, no devotion, no promotion

noticed the lipsticks. In the Rimmel pinks, she spotted the one she used to live in. There on the last row. 058 Drop of Sherry. Pulling out the tester, she twisted it as she had done every day until a few years ago. The perfume took her straight back to the days in front of the mirror with the girls. She reached for a new, sealed stick and tucked it down the front of her trousers.

Smiling under her mask, she made her way to the tills, where Martin had his wallet out, pulling notes to hand to the girl. As he packed away his items, she saw him wave her over as there was only one other behind him with a few small items. She found herself smartening her step to get to his conveyor belt and, as she hoped, he waited for her. The woman in front of her was juggling a stick and her basket of goods and he cheerily helped pack her bags, commenting on how heavy tins of soup were getting nowadays and how he'd have to get to the gym. All spoken very loudly, his deep tones perforating the paper barrier. He did the same for Irene of course, even though they both knew she needed no assistance, except to lift her wheelie trolley to the floor.

They walked to the exit together in silence. As they parted at the doors, Martin pulled down his mask and smiled at Irene.

‘Very good to meet you today Irene. Enjoy your cheese.’

Irene waved goodbye and walked home, pulling her trolley behind her. The streets were deserted. Not a car moving. In the stillness, her steps echoed over the pavement in time to the beat of her heart, alive and resounding at the exhilaration of contact. After she had arrived home, she removed the mask and unpacked, chuckling to herself at the thought of Martin and his wine. She made herself a cup of tea, lit a cigarette and wandered out to the garden.

As she stood by the geraniums, she tutted at herself. She'd get the toilet paper next week.