

Bin Diary

Every morning, the child, 8 or 9 years old, sits down at her chair that looks out through a window into a newly empty world, and opens her red exercise book. She sharpens her pencil and writes. *Dear Diary. Yesterday, I saw a woman I've not seen before come to the bins. Her outfit matched her hospital gloves. Blue. My favourite colour.* The child stares out beyond the bins and past the tree tops to the sky transfixed. She no longer recognises what she sees, once a soft comforting greyish smog-brown, has turned a bright startling blue.

For her inaugural public appearance in the deserted streets, Carolina has chosen her blue sneakers to match her favourite t-shirt. *Blue is hopeful. Blue will make me look like I'm doing ok.* She wriggles into the latex gloves, and then goes out the front door and into the lift. She stands in front of the lift mirror to adjust her mask. She's disappointed with the comical stranger who stares back in the bright lights. *I look feral. I look like I haven't left the house for days and days.* Well, this much is fact. Whether or not she has started to abandon societal norms could be up to individual opinion.

Her mirror image pushes her fringe aside. It's unruly and hangs a couple weeks too long past her eyebrows into her eyes. *This haircut doesn't work well with a mask.* If she looks carefully she can also spot the rogue wiry greys that coil defiantly, for a simple Cut and Colour is now a luxury of the near past. She pushes the fringe to the other side and gives up. The naked space between the bottom of her face mask and t-shirt neckline is fleshy, pink and awkward, exposed, and her soft bare arms an extravagant spread of skin that meets gloved hands. *I really hope I won't see anyone I know.* Carolina's walk from the lifts to the bins to dump the bags is uneventful. Yet she can't seem to shake the heavy weight of self awareness that there are witnesses to her bins fashion fail. She is right, although she does not see them, her audience are here today. Bored anonymous eyes watch from behind the reflective glass doors of the balconies and cracks in the curtains of the apartments that line the streets, and also a child, 8 or 9 years old.

Today the child writes, *Dear Diary. Today is a holiday. But these days holidays and all other days are exactly the same. We just stay indoors.* When she looks outside she can see the

cherry tree which stands in front of the bins. As time has passed she's noticed the bare branches turn green and now the soft pink pom-pom blossoms have arrived. She imagines a swarm of The Virus, a pulsating deathly cloud that wraps transparent fingers around the tree slowly suffocating it. From behind the tree comes a man, and she observes with curiosity that he seems to be dressed in pyjamas.

Alberto fingers the red and white wrapping paper with little pine trees printed on it. It's been in the cupboard, unopened since Christmas, and it's April already. *Time flies. Also there wasn't any point. It's the same every year, except maybe the white stripe is thinner, or double lined, or the blue is darker, or lighter.* He's right of course, but today, there is a point. For the first time since the lockdown he will go out, pyjama protected, to get rid of the rubbish he has been carefully separating. A cardboard box for glass with all the metal tops and paper labels removed. A large heavy duty bin bag that collects the smaller bin bags of daily organic matter in double layers to bury the smell. The irony is not lost on him, that he recycles so piously at a time like this. Yet he cannot help himself. Each piece he folds and sorts is a satisfying achievement of Keeping Order. A pile of flattened cardboard boxes, and a brown paper bag for labels, newspapers, pamphlets, Jehovah's Witness flyers about the End of The World and wrapping paper. There's also another large bin bag of washed and dried plastic containers.

Alberto surveys his endeavours with pride. *This lot will probably take a couple trips to the bins.* He tries to remember today's date so he can count how many days since the day he stopped going out. *Thirty five days indoors!* Indeed, he has been processing routinely for about five weeks already, yet somehow it's still not enough for him to adjust to this distorted sense of time without exclamation. Alberto gets undressed to his boxers, unwraps the pyjamas and carefully saves the wrapping paper. *Pinstripes.* He pulls them enthusiastically over his head, they are stiff and creased. The sleeves are too long. The waistband is loose. He soon regrets not bothering to remove the itchy plastic swift tack that is now gently scratching the skin on the back of his neck, but he will not allow this to dampen his momentum. He clicks the garage door remote and the corrugated metal briefly struggles before it slowly lifts off the ground with a groan, bringing the green earthy smells of the outside world in and bathing him in sunshine. It moves up his pinstriped legs and eventually, in all it's warm, wondrous glory, floods his face right into his blinking eyes.

The child watches the man intently. There is a lady in the distance with a dog, and another man on a bicycle. She didn't see Pyjama Man use the bins, but she does see him scratching his nose and running the same ungloved hand through his thinning curly hair before wiping it on his pyjama leg. He turns his back and walks away. She watches him up until he turns the corner at the end of road near the purple bougainvillea that spills over the side of the walls.

The child writes, *Last night I had the nightmare again. I am sitting on the back of a cart, being pulled by a donkey who is foaming and sweating with the struggle. We are travelling through the desert and red dust billows up in great clouds around us, choking us. I am fighting to take each breath. Then the land and the sky start to crumple like I am a drawing on a page and someone is rolling me into a ball to throw me into the bin. That's always when I wake up.*

Gabriel is hungry, and bored of his lockdown routine. After eleven in the evening, everyone in the house is asleep. The TV flickers back at him with what seems to be the same images night after night. Bodies in white suits with masks and protective glasses. *I can't tell who they are, where in the world they are, or even, what they are doing.* Overly cheery personalities shout words of encouragement at Gabriel from their fake TV studio home basements. Each book in their fake bookshelf backgrounds so perfectly unarranged. Gabriel stares blankly at the spines of the books and the nicknacks unable to concentrate. *At a time like this when everything feels so terribly raw, who knows what is real and what is fake.* Reporters soberly postulate numbers and charts, while across the screen over-large virus balls of disease dance in grotesque repeating wallpapers.

What can I eat? Gabriel walks into the kitchen and flips the kettle on. While he waits for it to boil he spoons out half a bowl of Cerelac and taps the spoon impatiently clink, clink, clinking against the side. In order to properly mix up a bowl of baby porridge you always have to add the water to the cereal and not ever the other way around otherwise you'll have lumps. Gabriel knows this. He also knows that first you should mix up a paste using cold water before you add the hot. Instead he just adds the boiling water and mixes optimistically with the spoon. He observes his porridge with disappointment, a soup of gluey lakes and lumpy

islands with eruptions of dry cereal flakes. It lies there, mocking him as he scrapes it into the bin. A sweetly steaming mess, gently heating up the carrot skins, discarded spaghetti and fish bones it rests upon. The smell, a sickly reminder that it's time for Gabriel to go out to the bins.

The child presses her face up against the window to look outside, for it is dark now. Her nightmare still lingers, an uncomfortable dream-state of reality. The window's coolness offers some relief. She can make out a shape moving in the darkness, so she stares harder, willing her eyes to see more. There's a man out there with a small bin bag. He marches rigid and angry, holding the small bag at arm's length. He lifts the lid and throws the bag into the bin with a flourish and slams the lid back down, catching his hand in the crossfire. He curses loudly and freely, uninhibited in the darkness of the night. The child watching him is laughing now, just as freely. A spontaneous and innocent delight in the absurdity of this shared moment. Noticing a flicker of movement in the windows of the apartments that look onto him, the man stops and stares, scanning for confirmation, suddenly self-conscious. But all is still, the child, holding her breath, her small body contorted and frozen in place is quiet now, hidden in the corner behind the window of the first floor apartment, and cannot be seen.

Dear God, it's me, Maria. Please please make them go somewhere, to some other room.

Before Coronavirus, or BC as Maria likes to call it, for purely selfish reasons she'd pray that her children would simply disappear and leave her alone in the quiet empty peacefulness of the apartment. After seven weeks of lockdown, the atmosphere is stifling, as if the windows have not been opened since it all began. *God, it's me, Maria. Help me, I'm suffocating in here.* She locks herself in the bathroom and turns the tap on to drown them out. Pretends to bath or take very long shits. She knows it is never really about escaping them, but to escape herself. She sits there on the toilet with the lid down and her eyes shut, her head tilted backwards, resting on the cool tiles.

She breathes in and out. She repeats her affirmations. *I can do this. Things will change. I am strong. I can do this. Things will change.* At some point the peace comes back. The tightness in her shoulders is less noticeable. The headache now only a soft hum. *Well thanks for nothing God. Where are you? I'm getting through this all alone.* She quickly learns that

another way to escape is going out to empty the bins, and for twenty minutes she can claim a sort of peace in the new calm of just not being in the apartment. Peace is cheap these days. Unfortunately the peace only briefly lasts before a new thought infects her mind. *Perhaps this'll be the last time I go out, this time I'll meet Lady Rona and I'll die.* Sometimes she fantasises that a spec of Lady Rona will find herself in, attached to the sole of her shoe, or on the glove she used to lift the bin lid, and Maria will spread her unknowingly through the house. *What then God? What will happen to me?*

The child thinks she knows how the woman with the white gloves must feel. She feels the apprehension in every hesitant gesture the woman makes. The woman's dread permeates upwards and seeps into the child watching, and together, yet oblivious of one another, they share how she carefully unfolds a new, small square of paper tissue and wraps it onto the lid of the bins handle. She uses this to lift the lid with one hand, then carefully and slowly lowers her rubbish bag into the mouth and drops it. She doesn't slam the lid down like everybody else, no, this woman purposefully returns it to its rightful position, but forgets to remove the paper tissue.

This is when things get interesting for the watching child. The woman holds out her bins lid hand at an awkward angle as far away from her body that she is able to. She is breathing faster now, and her face is turning redder and redder. She's nervously digging into her pocket with the other hand. The child holds her breath with the woman, because at this moment sometimes the woman drops her precious pocket possession. But not today, and the child and the woman exhale together. A small bottle appears triumphantly, and without stepping away from the bins the woman begins the squeezing and wiping ceremony the child knows well. Eventually satisfied, the woman turns to leave, the discarded white tissue paper flaps a brave goodbye, waving the international sign of surrender dejectedly from the bin lid.

Today the child writes about the sinking feeling in her body, the knot that grows tighter and tighter until she must go to her bed and lie down rubbing her belly, willing it to soften. *Dear Diary. Sometimes I think The Virus is a punishment from earth to teach us a lesson. Instead of looking after our planet we've been doing bad things.* She thinks of great plastic islands floating in the sea intertwined with fish whose bloated and distorted faces contort in hunger

as they struggle to find something to eat, and the burnt, oozing paws of the forest creatures unlucky enough to survive those big fires which raged for weeks and weeks on end, she thinks of the earth like a giant beach ball floating in space and a cloud of oxygen getting smaller and smaller, and of all the wild animals she'll never get to see, now only exhibits on TV. *What can I do? I'm just a child.* Her guilt overwhelms her in waves that lap at her consciousness, until she falls asleep even though it's the middle of the day.

The energetic panic of the first few weeks as if to prove she was doing ok in isolation has definitely worn off. Ana's phone has a virus of its own, a rash of red badges that taunt her apathy and rack up her failures to respond. Now all that's left of the optimism is a digital graveyard of the unanswered messages, the group zooms, the video calls, the memes, the voice clips, unmet call commitments, ignored invitations. *I feel guilty for giving up on you, but our virtual calls don't fill me up the same way as spending time with you does.* Even if she were able to bring herself to log on, her conversations have dried up, there's nothing left to say because she doesn't do anything that interests her anymore. *We cook and we clean, we garden and we bake bread and we go mad in our head and we then throw away the rubbish and so what? What can I tell you that I didn't say yesterday?*

In fact there are new things to be said that Ana is unable to say. She wants to say I'd rather not see you than see you in a mask from two meters away. I want you to hug me and tell me it's ok and it's all going to go away and we'll be together again, but it's not. She wants to say, everything has changed. How can we even be lovers anymore? She composes half-truths, excuses she'll never send, *Today I opened my window and looked out at the bins and then I decided to stay inside rather than go out because I don't know who I am anymore and finding myself is too exhausting a task for today.* She'll wait for The Quiet, the time after the morning dog walkers have gone and come back, and the parents with small children on tricycles and babies in prams have returned, then she'll go out to the bins, accepting in this action the acknowledgement of her failures in consistency. *Sorry, not able to talk. Not able to do anything. Am exhausted from being. The distance between us is now the only thing that unites us. Still love you x.*

The child is watching the two women perform a bizarre dance of side stepping and nodding, of elaborate waving hands and nervous, pregnant pauses. The woman with the mask and large sunglasses hiding her face and only one gloved hand is waving the other woman on like a traffic controller might do. There's a sense of urgency in her gestures, she clearly wants to get rid of her many bin bags, but her path there is blocked. The other woman is frozen in place, she only has a very small bin bag which she clutches to her body like a handbag, and is nervously biting the nails of her other hand. She doesn't wear gloves or a mask. One takes a tentative step forward, one doesn't react. The child hears a deeply comforting, familiar voice, *Each bird of paradise has an extraordinary routine*. Drifting off momentarily to impossible Attenborough-esque utopias, she doesn't notice what seems to be carefully choreographed, that when one woman hesitates then steps aside, the other moves forward delicately, purposely, bowing and nodding, her embarrassed grimace hidden behind the mask she is wearing. When the child looks up again, one woman has gone, and the other is throwing bag after bag into the bins.

Sofia has about a week's worth of coffee grains left. Same with her latex gloves. Her belly briefly tightens with panic. She's not sure what will happen then, when either runs out. The chocolate ran out after the first week. *I hadn't counted on eating that much*. But then again, she hadn't counted on any of this happening at all. She rummages in a cupboard to find the filter and holder. They fit neatly in together and sit above a glass jug to collect the coffee. Every morning since it began, she pours the boiling water into the grains and watches in silence, transfixed as they dampen, then soften and open, floating upwards into the dark murky liquid where a creamy foam begins to form around the edges as the coffee percolates. A sacred spell for sanity.

Another day of this sameness. She shuts her eyes and sniffs the coffee steam. *Maybe I'm mad. Maybe I'm so mad I no longer think I'm mad. Perhaps the world has returned and nobody told me about it and now I no longer know*. The other smell in the kitchen is the rank, sour, slow rotting of the piling up of a couple days worth of bin bags. She doesn't go out, except when the smell from the rotting bags gets too much. *The days blend into one, I don't know where one ends and another begins*. For Sofia, the piling bags count the passing of time more reliably than day and night, when suddenly her pendulum gains momentum and swings. Then

there's a panicked urgency that forces Sofia outside with one gloved hand. *I'll use them one at a time to make them last.* She must deposit the bags so that she can come back and reset the calm. Today is one of those days she'll need to go out.

The child chews her pencil and stares at the white spaces between the grey lines of her red exercise book. *Dear Diary.* She waits. Perhaps she will recall another nightmare, or perhaps there's something that happened yesterday that she can record. She lifts her head slowly and stares outside, bored and indifferent. There's no one outside right now. At the bins an old ironing table has been abandoned open. The child can't tell if it's mid morning or mid afternoon, and there are no hints out there for her that it could be either. There are no people, no cars, no aeroplanes in the sky and the light is sunless and shadowless from the clouds, as it has been for a few days now. She looks away back to the book and runs her finger down the inside fold of the pages, only lifting it when it meets the staples. When she looks up again, nothing has changed. *I am empty now, I am empty like the outside.* She shuts the book and wanders off, for there's nothing more to write.

A few minutes later the child returns and opens the book. From the back of the book she carefully tears off a sheet. The page rips slightly at the bottom, and crumples at the top where she held it too hard. She spends time trying to flatten it by smoothing the creases into the table. Finally satisfied, she begins to fold the page. First in half lengthwise, then diagonally to craft a point like she once learnt at school. There! She's folded a rudimentary paper aeroplane. A tiny petal of tongue sticks slightly out, and in her best cursive she writes, *Hi. My name is Esperança.* She briefly pauses to think. Inspired now, she continues, *Pleased to meet you. I am here in the window that overlooks the bins. Maybe we can be friends?* Esperança finishes her missive with a slight smile, *Yours sincerely Esperança.*

Esperança slowly and quietly slides the window open. She can feel her heart pulsing in her temples. She is not allowed Under Any Circumstances to open the windows to the outside. *If I can just open the window enough to quickly throw the aeroplane out then I can shut it before The Virus gets inside and no one will ever know.* A change in smell announces her victory, and taking a deep breath of the fresh air, she nervously swings her arm back to build up enough thrust to launch the flying message into the air towards the bins. She watches the

aeroplane briefly float in the still air before slowly and pitifully giving up on its virgin flight. It lands in the flower beds near the cobbled sidewalk just under her window, nowhere near the bins. Esperança slides the window shut and sits down at the table to think.

If only I can throw it harder then I can get it to the bins. She tears a new page, ignoring the rips and the crumples, folds again and writes again, resolute. *I'm not going to give up on this.* This time she slides the window open a little faster and a little wider. She aims the folded point of the aeroplane towards the bins and throws it, takes a deep breath and holds it as she watches the aeroplane make a hopeful start, but then nose dive into the flower bed again. She pushes the window back into place, until the lock clicks shut.

The child has not lost hope, in fact if anything her determination to reach the bins has increased. She tears out a new page and with a loud sigh to quieten her growing frustration, and begins to fold once again. This time however, Esperança's fingers tingle and refuse to listen despite her best intentions. Her folds are weak, her lines from tail to tip are broken and the paper is no longer complying to her will. Looking at the disfigured attempt in front of her, she cannot shake the growing sinking feeling of her failure. In irritation she reaches out and crumples the offending aeroplane into a little ball, with a vindictive satisfaction. *There, take that. Now you are nothing. Only fit for the bin.* At this thought, she suddenly smiles.

No matter how many times it happens, the magic of the first leaves sprouting from a single tiny seed will awaken a sense of wonder in anyone paying attention. How is it possible that little pebbles of seed the child's mother planted with her could turn into a forest of boisterous bright leaves, hiding under them the pink peppery treasures of radish they eat for lunch. This sparkle is the same feeling Esperança feels when she realises that the perfect solution for getting her message to her neighbours at the bins is a crumpled ball of paper.

The child sets to work immediately. She tears several, at least five pages, at once from the back of her red exercise book. This time they tear well, her pull is confident and steady, so there are no rips. Once the pages are out, the book lies there dejectedly, thinner now and lopsided, only held together by the staples. Esperança carefully copies out her message onto each page. She writes slowly and ceremoniously. She signs her name with a curly capital E

and a small heart shape at the end by the a. As she writes she lays out each sheet in front of her deliberately. Taking one final look at her messages, Esperança tenderly rolls each into a loose ball, her plea for friendship buried safely deep inside. Sliding the window open once more, the child, 8 or 9 years old, throws each ball out towards the bins. The first bounces off the concrete paving into the hedge, but the next three, with a more careful aim, land near the cherry tree that overlooks onto the bins, and the final ball rolls slightly to stop at the left of the cardboard recycling bin. The child shuts the window and settles down into her chair to wait, and watch, and hope.