

# **Calm Waters During the Storm**

**Donegal Tales From a Pandemic**



Donegal County Library

# **Calm Waters During the Storm: Donegal Tales from a Pandemic**

Published by: Donegal County Council Library Service,  
Rosemount Lane, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal F92 KP90

Edited and collated by Denise Blake

Printed by: Browne Printers Ltd., Letterkenny, Co Donegal

ISBN: 978-0-9574403-2-6

## **RÉAMHRA**

Ba mhaith liom fáilte chroíúil a chur romhat chuig ‘Na hUiscí Ciúine le linn na Stoirme: Scéalta ó Dhún na nGall le linn na Paindéime’

Bhí tionchar tubaisteach ag Covid-19 ar ár saol go léir i mbliana. Tuigimid níos mó ná riamh cé chomh tábhachtach ‘s atá gníomhaíochtaí laethúla ar nós léamh, scríobh, líníocht, amhránaíocht, ceol, meas a bheith againn ar ár n-oidhreacht agus ár stair áitiúil, a bheith amuigh faoin aer, agus a bheith ag labhairt lena chéile i cibé foirm is féidir. Cuireann leabharlanna, na healaíona, oidhreacht, cultúr agus cruthaitheacht i ngach foirm go mór lenár caighdeán saoil.

Tá’n leabhar seo mar thoradh ar chomhoibriú idir dhaoine fá Chontae Dhún na nGall atá scortha ach fós gníomhach, agus Denise Blake - údar, file agus áisitheoir sa scríbhneoireacht chruthaitheach.

Tugann a gcuid scríbhneoireachta léargas dúinn ar a saol le linn na paindéime. Cothaíonn siad dóchas agus misneach ionainn agus léiríonn siad an mothú láidir pobail atá go forleathan i gContae Dhún na nGall.

Cuirtear an leabhar ar fáil duit le tacaíocht ón Chiste um Chuntais Díomhaoine ón Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus ó Chomhairle Contae Dhún na nGall.

Táimid ag tnúth go mór le fáilte a chur romhat ar ais chuig ár leabharlanna agus ár bhfoirgnimh chultúrtha eile nuair atá sé sábháilte amhlaidh a dhéanamh. Idir an dá linn, chun an t-eolas is deireanaí ar Sheirbhísí Leabharlainne a fháil féach ar [www.donegallibrary.ie](http://www.donegallibrary.ie).

Fan slán sábháilte le do thoil, cuimhnigh ort féin agus ar dhaoine eile, agus lean na treoirlínte sláinte poiblí i gcónaí.

*Leabharlannaí Contae agus Bainisteoir Rannáin Cultúir  
Eileen Burgess*

## **FOREWORD**

I would like to warmly welcome you to 'Calm Waters During the Storm: Donegal Tales from a Pandemic'.

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on all of our lives this year. More than ever we understand how important everyday activities like reading, writing, drawing, singing, making music, appreciating our local heritage and history, being outdoors, and simply talking to each other in whatever form that takes, really are. Libraries, arts, heritage, culture and creativity in all its forms, hugely contribute to our quality of life.

This book is a result of the collaboration of active retirees in Co. Donegal, under the expert tutelage of Denise Blake, author, poet and creative writing facilitator. Their writing offers us an insight into their lives during the pandemic. They offer hope and optimism and demonstrate the strong sense of community that is prevalent in Co. Donegal.

The book was brought to you with the support of the *Dormant Accounts Fund* from the Department of Rural and Community Development, and Donegal County Council.

We look forward to welcoming you back to our libraries and other cultural buildings when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, for the latest information on Library Services see [www.donegallibrary.ie](http://www.donegallibrary.ie).

Please stay safe, mind yourselves and each other, and always follow public health guidelines.

*County Librarian and Culture Division Manager*  
*Eileen Burgess*

***Sometimes reality is too complex.  
Stories give it form.***

*Jean Luc Godard*

Look back to New Year's Eve 2020 and think about where you were, who you were with, and what your hopes and plans were for the coming year. I am sure no one wished for the year that has unfolded. It is nearly impossible to put it all in words. This booklet though does show some of the thoughts and experiences of a group of writers who met online through the services of Donegal County Library. I am grateful to Rita Chapman, Donegal County Library, who undertook to organise this worthwhile project; to gather a group of retirees for online workshops that covered the topic of Covid '19 life stories and memories.

It has been a wonderful experience. We are a nation of storytellers and it is heartening to know that the stories can still be told even if it is through the Zoom medium.

I am grateful to all nine writers who attended the four workshops and let their words unfold in diverse and rich ways.

I am grateful to them all for sharing their personal feelings and emotions. This is a booklet to dip into, to read from cover to cover, to have at the bedside, and to keep for future generations.

Denise Blake  
- facilitator

**Group Work - Poems****6-10****Kathleen Byrne****11-16**

Kathleen is from Carndonagh. She worked as a teacher at post primary level. Since retiring, she pursues many new hobbies and is loving her creative writing. She was still working during the first Covid-19 lockdown and this is reflected in some of her submissions.

**Patricia Carr****17-22**

Patricia lives in Fanad where she was born in 1947. She was secretary in Loreto Community School for many years. She has been writing since retirement and has featured in *Ireland's Own Anthology* for five years in a row, as well as featuring in other local and national publications.

**Toni Devine****23-25**

Toni is 74, married with two adult children and one precious grandchild. Retired teacher, adult education organiser, women's health campaigner and eternal feminist.

**Deirdra Friel****26-31**

Deirdra is a wife, mother and grandmother who lives in Milford. Having worked in the Civil Service for 30 years, she took early retirement in 2007 and subsequently qualified as a National Tour Guide. During the summer months she can be seen giving walking tours of Ramelton and Rathmullan. She is passionate about local history and has written a booklet on the history of St Mary's Church, The Lagg, Milford.

**Marianne Lynch****32-38**

Marianne is originally from Co. Monaghan but is 38 years in Co. Donegal. She is married with a great husband and two adult children. She recently retired as a librarian and moved to Letterkenny with a list of retirement wishes - one of which is creative writing. Her hobbies include choir, reading, knitting, crafting and baking...a skill acquired during lockdown #1.

## WRITERS

## PAGES

### Charlotte Maye

39-43

Charlotte lives in Raphoe. She was Principal teacher in Raphoe Central School and retired 12 years ago. She loves to read, travel, walk, cycle and crochet. She also loves music, theatre and cinema. Charlotte looks after her grandchildren 2 days a week, the best job of all!

### Susan Mooney

44-49

Susan lives in Buncrana and is recently retired from St Mura's NS. She is looking forward to "Act 2" of her life. She enjoys hillwalking, and her new journey with "The Artist's Way".

### Bernadette O'Donnell

50-55

Bernadette lives in Milford. Her hobbies include writing, reading, knitting and walking. Bernadette has her work published in *Little Gems* and *Ireland's Own* and she is a member of Four Seasons Writers Group which meets in Milford.

### David Simpson

56-61

David lives near Moville at Kinnagoe Bay. After retiring from working in health promotion with the HSE, he started to write children's stories inspired by native Irish trees. Having then done several years story telling in local national schools, he self-published two stories: *The Mist* and *Holly*.

### Wishes

62-64

## **WHAT TO BRING WITH YOU FOR 2020 Group Poem**

Bring patience: each day will unfold in its own time; plans will go awry but seize opportunities that come along unexpectedly.

Ditch any high-falutin' notions of diet and exercise! Wear comfortable clothes, eat 'comfy' food, spend time reading, knitting, crafting and baking.

Bring a great sense of humour , plenty of patience Bring a willingness to adapt to changes very quickly Get familiar with WhatsApp. Get very familiar with Zoom

Bring a full rucksack, two walking poles, comfortable hiking boots and a good phone/camera, you are going to do so much hillwalking this year! Yippee! Bring a good pair of glasses. You will be doing a lot more reading, texting and writing this year. And a lot less talking!

Bring good walking shoes. Expect the unexpected.  
Bring good scissors to cut your fringe and learn to master the art of DIY hair colour.

Buy a thermometer, a pair of scissors and fill the freezer.  
Give all family members a key to the front door, make sure they all have my mobile number.

Bring wet gear for walking, lots of books and wool for crochet. Bring plenty tea, coffee and biscuits to keep the hubby happy.



Bring tablets, Tena, cash for food and photos of everyone  
Bring an iPad and plug, Detroit, cat and cat food,  
Bring a dozen masks, books to be saved and books for  
reading again, woolly cap, wellingtons, gloves and toilet  
paper.

Bring a rucksack full of patience.  
Bring a map of a road with few or no signposts  
and the few there are - in conflict with each other.

Bring easy access to being able to forget  
Hold what's important to you close.

## **I LOVE - I MISS Group Poem**

I love my clouds in cluster I miss my neighbour's call  
In green grey as they muster I miss the blue road's footfall

I love the togetherness in a shared experience;

"We are all in this together".

I miss the lively chatter of my friends on our monthly girls'  
night out.

I love the time to think and explore hidden corners of my  
psyche.

I miss the spontaneity of just deciding to go somewhere,  
anywhere, and do whatever I want.

I love the rat tat of a wren calling from a bush  
as I greet the morning

I miss Alexandra rushing into my arms

I love big billowy clouds building over the sea with rainbows  
falling into the water

I miss shouty laughter-filled meals with friends

I love butterflies, flowers, sunshine, all the colours Summer  
brings.

I miss that brightness and sunshine peering through my  
kitchen window in winter.

I love a good rib roast, mushy peas and gravy for Sunday  
dinner, the banter

around the table with all my family. I miss

their stories about new friendships, jobs, fashion, education,  
elbowing and teasing each other.

I miss the buzz that was there down the years at Christmas  
time.

I love the scent of the new baby, soft and warm I miss holding him close nuzzling into my neck. I love the smell of new mown grass I miss the long summer evenings in the garden, bees buzzing from flower to flower.

I love walking alone in these autumn days among the multi-coloured trees, through their crisp, crunchy leaves and across the beautiful, soft, auburn-brown heather. I miss our club's fortnightly hill walks, unfortunately beyond the current 5km limit, with my varied, interesting, full-of-life fellow enthusiasts.

I love the light of these days which, because of recent retirement,

I am allowed to enjoy at my leisure rather than having to snatch at the last rays after work. I miss the craic at school, the people-filled, sometimes unpredictable busyness of a large friendly building (and small happy prefab) populated by an assortment of diverse characters, young and older... well, all younger than me now!

I love walking along the Shore Rd, Ramelton with the backdrop of ancient oak trees, crimson and gold and the morning sun glinting through the branches.

I miss not being able to travel to Rathmullan beach to walk on the soft sand, watch the creamy rolling waves and smell the sea air.

I love this time to contemplate, time to reflect, time to be, time to flow like a river flowing downstream.

As we excitedly await the arrival of our new grandchild, I miss not being able to shop in TK Maxx and browse among the rows of baby clothes and delight in soft fabrics and baby swaddles.

I love the yellows, orange, red and auburn colours of autumn leaves

I miss the scents of bluebells, honey suckle and wild roses I  
love the many memories of family now passed on  
I miss them sometime...everyday

I love it all. The quiet control of life, the relief from guilt.  
The hope of a long filled up years to come.  
I can do this. One more throw of the dice.  
I love the smell of clean. Miss it as well. You know the deep  
down clean.

I love getting ahead of the fear and rage that rises  
where my womb used to be and is finally defeated  
before the end of the tenth breath.

I miss very little, except the nuances of close in talking,  
seeing, hearing and touching  
the feeling and the space for thinking in conversations.  
I miss the rifts of chat with family and friends and sharing  
the look and the raised eyebrow.

# Kathleen Byrne

## **A LETTER TO ME DATED 1/1/'20**

Dear Kathleen

'Happy New Year!'

We are now in January. There is a general election coming up. You know what that means: Canvassing, every weekend between now and then! Yes you are working full time. Yes you will have no free time. Come February, you can have your weekends back to do as you please.

Don't grumble too much. There will come a time when you will relish the social interactions of meeting and greeting on doorsteps!

February is here – the beginning of spring! Whose idea was it to have Whole School Examinations this early in the year? I don't remember agreeing to that! Yes you will be very busy every weekend this month correcting, correcting, correcting!

Do not despair! The weather will be horrible. In fact it will be at its worst at the weekends. It will be so bad that you will be glad that you are busy indoors! I'll tell you more, you'll be glad everyone was assessed this early.

Don't forget, the correcting will be all over and done with by the end of the month.

You will have all your glorious weekends free to socialise, pamper yourself and catch up with retail therapy! Oh it's March already. Yippee - lay it on 'me time' is about to begin! All weekends are free – as far as the eye can see.

You want me to tell you what Taoiseach Varadkar said AGAIN ...restaurants and coffee shops closing...all non-essential retail outlets to close...hairdressers and beauticians closed...cinemas, theatres and shopping centres...you may leave home for daily exercise within a 2km radius....We're in the grip of a Global Pandemic. NO, I AM NOT JOKING.

Yours very sincerely

Kathleen Byrne

## **THE MOMENT I THOUGHT THIS IS SERIOUS STUFF - HOW DID I FEEL?**

It was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> in more ways than one! It was the day after An Taoiseach addressed the nation. I awoke very gradually. I reached a level of consciousness where I realised that SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAS HAPPENED. It took some time for my mind to assemble what that terrible thing was. The words and phrases from yesterday's speech ebbed and flowed about my head. Could this all be really happening? What would my parents, grandparents, wise people advise? Sure the likes of this has never happened in living memory. Where do I go from here?

Then the questions tumbled into my head...

- Will I survive this pandemic?
- If I don't survive, what should I be doing in the meantime?
- Is it possible to avoid catching this virus?
- Would it be better to catch the virus and take my chances?
- How is my life going to change?
- In a solo household , will I feel terribly isolated?
- How will it all pan out?
- Are there any certainties anymore?

I eventually got out of bed. I prepared myself to meet the day.

By lunchtime, I was in control again. My instinct was loud and clear: 'You are a survivor'.

## THOUGHTS FROM MY CHAIR DURING LOCKDOWN

My study was never used this much before.  
Now I'm here from morning till night.  
The swivel chair is handy  
I can see walkers pass in ones and twos, families taking  
permitted exercise  
Brand new bikes, every colour of the rainbow  
I can recognise friends from families, they keep a social  
distance  
Can you enjoy a walk that way?

I cycle now – when work is done. It's great  
I see over hedges, cows relaxing in the evening sun  
Chewing cuds, lying close  
I wonder if they know about the virus?

One week in March the wind blew from the North  
Straight into my face  
Cycling was hard those days  
Along with sneaky elevations I never saw before

I saw a funeral today. It passed  
In front of my home  
I stood at the door  
I bowed my head  
Family only – Government Restrictions

## **HANDS**

I've noticed a little bump develop on the joint of my index finger.

It talks to me on rainy days.

My new weather forecaster perhaps?

It does not forecast pandemics.

Scrubbed, washed, gloved for months now.

Sanitized several times a day.

Serving new functions: ipads, ipods, iphones

Zooming, Zoning, keeping me connected

Now I speak with my hands

along with my masked face

## **LOCKDOWN IS A TIME OF...**

One year in four – an extra day

The first recorded case of Covid in our land

It's nearer than you think

It will go as quickly as it came? Or will it?

The daffodils have come and gone

The lawn's been trimmed and now it grows no more

The leaves are falling and the heather blooms

Dark evenings light by dancing flames.

Some say there will be snow this Christmas

A US election – another one in four

And where did Brexit go?

We still lie low and wait.



## **SUNDAY NIGHTS**

Work is done, dinner over, and formal wear's set out  
All is organised for the week ahead.  
It is rest time now, lock the doors, get on your cosy gear  
and slippers  
Connect with friends: texts, calls, emails.

Watch a saved programme on TV  
My current favourite is "Our Yorkshire Farm"  
Amanda and Clive Owen raising their nine children  
On Ravenseat Farm  
Such a heart-warming way of life.

Check all lights are out – appliances off  
My cavalier knows my routine  
He heads for his bed and I for mine  
Mobile switched to silent

The ipad plays interviews of well-known celebrities  
Desert Island Discs.  
Terry Wogan, Seamus Heaney, Maeve Binchy, Christy  
Moore...  
Who will talk me to sleep tonight?

## WHAT CALLS ME...

Life was so normal, predictable, early March  
An electronic reminder, A nephew's birthday,  
buy the present, get a card,  
Deliver on time.

April arrived  
Appointments cancelled  
Shops shut.  
Certainties uncertain  
The new 'normal'.

And 'Normal People' was aired  
The ordinary was extraordinary  
A diversion  
No social distancing there  
Young love, hope.

By May the game was on  
Golfers on the greens  
Birdies, bogeys, bunkers  
Sunny days  
So normal, so predictable  
It's great to be alive!

# Patricia Carr

## **A LETTER TO YOURSELF ; 1/1/20**

Dear Patricia

So this is 2020. Don't be fooled by the sparklers. Not since the beginning of the millennium have celebrations been so misplaced. The year ahead holds little to look forward to. Prepare yourself for a time when ordinary life will be less ordinary. The year will be as one big long week stretched on a rack of silence. Main roads will be almost deserted.

There will be no cheerful, playful ripple of laughter rippling on the air from the school playground. The area around the community centre on a Tuesday will be deserted. You will come to realise the subtle difference between peace and tranquillity. This will be an artificial peace without serenity.

## **THIS IS THE POINT WHEN I REALISED THAT IT WAS GOING TO IMPACT ON MY LIFE**

It was one of the week's highlights. I looked forward to that lovely couple from the North returning to the seat in front of me. Their arrival heralded the beginning of Spring. Lord, he was a handsome man, and they always had a cheerful tale about something. They were so proud when accompanied by their son and grandchildren. Then there was the weekly chat with my old neighbour. What she didn't see, she heard.

The companionship made me feel as if I belonged. Watching online was no substitute. Apart from the praying, this was a social outlet. This was the moment I realised that Covid had impacted my life – that first massless Sunday.

## HANDS

My nails have long been the pride of my hands. They have been admired by many, especially with the bright coloured nail varnish. This crowning glory is now in chips and tatters. Since lockdown my hands have been so much in bleach that the whole of them have become wizened and haggard. Cleaning was never my forte, but needs must.

What I missed doing with my hands: among other things – was swimming on a Monday. Just as I was mastering the knack of holding my fingers together and splitting the waters, this benefit was denied me. I write with my hands too and just as our group was taking off, our efforts were thwarted by lockdown again. Marking a bingo sheet was a pleasure – one does it without thinking of hands, especially when it comes down to the last few numbers.

Waving was another social interaction. When the first lockdown eased, the school bus was passing my gate again. I waved first, then clapped – with my hands.

## MOVING OUTSIDE THE CIRCLE

Comfortable in my recliner chair, one motor is gone but a foot stool is a good substitute. The door to the hall is open, letting a shaft of light into the room. I never close curtains, so this way I can see without being seen. The dog is asleep on my knee. He growls at the slightest outside movement. On the near wall an old style picture of the Resurrection hangs – could this be a sign of hope?

Through the window the sight of a closed guest house and pub is a shadow on the hill. Where once its lights re-assured me, now there is sombre darkness.

Morning dawns. Eager for his walk, Hamish and I set out. At the gate, hardly welcome, but something I have never encountered before. There at the bird feeder, a cheeky rat, perched on his hind legs, does not budge. It gave me time to notice how perfectly rounded his ears were. I had to shout three times before he scampered away. At several points on the road, I lifted snails to the roadside, out of harm's way. The twitter of the small birds was spilling sweet songs in the air without interruption. Nature's orchestra was centre stage. The music of the Atlantic waves purred through the calmness. A rainbow of roses ruffled in the breeze. This was nature without the sound of man and machine.

The spell was broken. A car approached, but no cause for alarm. It was the patrol car. The Garda on the wheel gave a beep of the horn, and both Gardai hailed me with a reassuring wave.

## LOCKDOWN IMAGES

The road is empty. People are going nowhere, because there is nowhere to go. The horses look over the fence, unconcerned, perhaps enjoying the freedom of the still air. Likewise the fox is getting more daring as his sense of smell and hearing are not impeded by the fumes of diesel and petrol. Nor does he have to scamper away at the overpowering sound of engines.

The blackberries and raspberries decorate the hedges. Because there is less tooting and frooing, people can stop and appreciate their beauty. The shiny knobs of dew are like jewels – polished jewels, not tarnished by roadside dust. Our bees are unhindered too – and we need every one of them these days.

The beach is just as tranquil. The heron in flight is master of the rhythms. The chorus of the waves perform to an audience of cloud. Their hissing, musical rhythm is captured in many a music hall symphony. This is where the accordion fits into these images.

## MORNING TIME

I listen to the rattle of the rain on the glass. It is driven by a blustery wind. I relish in the sheer joy of being able to ignore it. How did I do it? How did I, for so many years, face out on such dreary mornings to face a day's work? With one eye open, I cast a quick glance at the clock. It's only half past six. The room door is closed. The world is out there. Nothing can touch me through the glass partition. The day has not yet begun. Nor will it until I feel I want to get up and face it.

I snuggle deeper into the duvet. This is my time, my "down" time. God knows I've earned it. My ship is now in calm waters- out of the storms of life.

Even lockdown is not too big a challenge. I am long past going anywhere at night anyway – so closure of bingo, concerts or dancehalls does not make a jot of difference to me. Visiting or "raking", where neighbours called is long a thing of the past. I don't have to worry about keeping a closed business afloat. So let the silence flow around me until its time to move.

Hamish nudges me, see me reaching for my high vis jacket and his lead. He dances around in wild excitement as we head for our "walkie" on the beach

## DIARY OF 2020

At the beginning of **March** our writing group met for the third time in 2020. I marvelled that we had made it through the whole Winter without any interruption from weather. Little did I suspect that our wings would be so cruelly clipped in such an unexpected way.

No St. Patrick's Day, or as Leo said:

"A Saint Patrick's Day like no other."

March moved slowly into **April**. By Easter I had realised that there was no Lent either. For the first time in many years, I had broken my tradition of "keeping Lent."

**Mid-June** was what I called a "positive"- well two positives. The cancellation of the Donegal International Rally spared us the screeching, speeding and being weekend prisoner in our own homes. The irony was that one lockdown replaced another. The second positive was music to my ears - the NCT had been postponed for four months - it's an ill wind! At the end of **July** my hair was driving me mad, infringing on the back of my neck. Once restrictions eased, I sped to the hairdresser to be relieved of this nuisance. I made sure that Hamish was groomed too, as I could no longer see his eyes.

In **August** I was at my gate as the first school bus passed. I waved first, then I gave them a clap.

In **September** I began an on-line course in Flash Fiction. I have completed four out of five modules. Don't ask me what flash fiction is - I'm not sure.

In **October** the spectre of level five haunted us again. I took the Gardai up on their text offer and they delivered my takeaway meal for me. They were two handsome fellows - but sure I could be their granny!



# Toni Devine

## LOCKDOWN IS THE TIME

I'll never see it that way again.  
All of it!  
So into the treasure box of photos.  
To share with a new generation.  
"Look, this is how it used to be- all gone"  
"Why"?  
"Because we are here now"  
I see these images with grief, loss, and sadness  
for how it used to be.  
Covid has changed the future.  
Now I have to pack up my treasures  
Cover them with the saved gossamer tissue paper,  
put them away and live in this new space.  
Bring in the light! Bring in the earth with all its generosity  
and glory!  
Remember before,  
Remember before, the now, and the not knowing.  
And to be honest "the knowing"  
I've been here before in childhood. A past pandemic.  
I do know it's trajectory, it's distortions of lives , children's  
lives and all the rest. Scary times.  
Recreate the soul. ...be, live, here , now, move on, move into,  
move out of...move on..

## **DISCONNECTED**

### **THE NORTHERN LIGHTS STILL COME**

Soon I hope. They always do. I stand waiting at the gable wall so the lights of Coleraine, Limavady and Derry don't pollute my sky.

One time, about ten years ago the sky, yes the whole sky, turned red and the red swirled, came and took me into it. It was not a mirage. It was magical.

This year I will wait again. Mostly just for the light. It borders the hilltops, sea horizon out to Inishtrahul, no it's not the lights of an outdoor concert in Carndonagh over there.

It's the Northern Lights, green, yellow, a bit of red and mellow light.

I am with the universe and the North Star.

I have my bearings, the gable wall.

Breathe the night air.

## **A WISH FOR THE FUTURE**

I wish for all the 94 years I have allocated for myself here.

I'm booked in and I want to be able to close the door behind me then. No sooner.

I wish I could get a man to come and do all the jobs on the list on the fridge door.

## **COVID ONE MARCH TO OCTOBER**

### **NORTH AND SOUTH**

I live in a divided country.

The good weather came in March. And stayed. Everyone headed here. Or that's how it felt.

They came here in droves from all over. We were cocooning with a five km travel restriction. Sharing the roads, the land, and shores. I'm no cocooning silkworm. I'm not able to walk the hilly roads or path down and up to the beach , the only flat space in 5 km.

My world stops at my front gate. I can see the sea but can't get there.

Covid divided me from you. I didn't like how it turned out this time. I want it to be different and better. Covid will be back.

We need to find a way to share. Let's talk. You me us them. We all belong ,we all own together. Let's talk about sharing and belonging.

# Deirdra Friel

## **ITS NEW YEAR'S DAY 2020**

We had a lovely quiet Christmas with family around. Dermot wasn't here from Australia, but we will see him at Christmas and of course will see the new baby. We have just got the wonderful news that we are to be grandparents for the first time in July. We have booked our tickets for three weeks in New York in September. I am so looking forward to returning there after 37 years. I will soon have to start preparing for Mum's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in February. I hope she stays well.

## **THE MOMENT AT THE END OF FEBRUARY-EARLY MARCH THAT YOU KNEW THINGS WERE GETTING SERIOUS.**

My mother had her 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday on the 15<sup>th</sup> February. Seventy family and friends gathered in the Silver Tassie to celebrate the occasion. We had a lovely afternoon, but I was a little worried at all the people hugging and kissing her. What if she picked up a sore throat or head cold from them? Little did I realise then there was a tsunami hurtling towards us, the pandemic. Shortly afterwards the evening news was taken up with experts talking about viruses, parasites, and bacteria. Then we got the news that the Nursing Home where my mother was a resident had closed to Visitors. Lockdown.

## HANDS

15<sup>th</sup> March, Lockdown began. “ Follow government guidelines and stay at home apart for essential journeys, Don’t shake hands” they warned. “Wash your hands for 20 seconds as long as it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice “ they said. Confined to the house I started work on the wall, a long stone wall hugging the driveway up to our house. It was covered in ivy and moss. For many summers I had asked my husband to clean this wall. To no avail. Now was my chance.

The sun shone brightly each morning as I made my way down the lane to work on the wall. I scrapped the lichens from between the crevices of the stones, I pulled the ivy and cleaned the moss off the wall. I delighted in my endeavours on the wall. It was all immersing work. About two weeks into the job, my son Lorcan arrived at the house and announced that a power washer would do a great job on the wall. As we discussed where we might get one, my husband revealed that there was one in the garage bought in Lidl and which had never seen the light of day. Out it came and my son went to work on the wall. The water surged in to all the crevices blasting out clay and foliage. In no time the wall was clean except for a little bit at the end of the lane where the power washer couldn’t reach. Out I came again with my shovel and brush to finish the wall.

## THOUGHTS ON LOOKING AT PICTURES

The Brooch – Mother's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday in February. Beautiful presents. A brooch and a green silky scarf are still in their boxes in my house. Mother is locked away in the Nursing Home. I can't visit her. Seven months since we have sat beside each other, knee and shoulder touching, holding hands. I used to show her photos of her glamorous days in New York. Yesterday I spoke to her on the IPad. Sadly, I don't think she recognised my face on the screen.

Daffodils – It was March when the daffodils on the laneway emerged. What hopes we had for the summer. Holidays, BBQs and long walks on the beach. Instead we found our roads blocked. We couldn't travel to Rathmullan. No swims in the blue sea or picnics on the beach. Instead we walked the back roads within our 2km. In a way lockdown slowed us down. We had time to look around and see all the beauty of nature around us. Watching the water gushing in streams over grey rocks. Listening to the sparrows chirping. Rabbits multiplying on our lawn. Birds nesting in the eaves. Abundant blueberries on the branches.

We are now in our second lockdown. The scenery has changed. Now the leaves are crimson and gold. No birdsong. Darker evenings. Masked queues in the shops. At night chocolate and red wine to dull the feeling of loss. Will there be a Christmas?

## THOUGHTS FROM A ROOM

I am sitting in my favourite room; my sunroom with my crimson coloured couch and big yellow chair. Over the fire hangs a beautiful painting of wildflowers in hues of blue and burnt orange, a present for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

On the mantelpiece are photos of the weddings of my two sons Cormac and Dermot. One on the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2018, the hottest day of the year and the other a Christmas wedding in Galway the same year. The sun streams in through the four windows of the room.

The door is open on to the decking where we now eat our breakfast lunch and dinner. It's a shame none of the family can join us for a BBQ. The side roads are a blaze of yellow whins. We delight in the splendour of nature before our eyes. On our daily walk we call with farmer Jimmy to see the latest new additions to his flock. Even though we are in lockdown the cycle of life continues. The little lambs are frolicking in the fields. When I look at the sheep and lambs I think of my late father who was a sheep farmer. As it is now April, I am reminded of the beautiful hymn "All in the April evening, April airs are abroad, the sheep with their lambs, pass me by on the road"

## EARLY IN THE MORNING

The sun streams through the bedroom window. It's morning time. No sound of traffic on the roads. No rush to get up. No plans for the day. No meetings. No appointments. No Pilates. Coffee in bed to face the day. Browse the latest news. No news. Only Covid 19 figures, positive cases, and deaths.

The number of deaths in Nursing Homes is frightening. People dying in Nursing homes without their family around them at the end. A different way of mourning. No wakes. No going to funerals.

Outside in the garden however there is no change. Birds are nesting. Butterflies everywhere. The sound of lawnmowers. Over breakfast we make the big and only decision. What road will we walk today?



## A DAY DURING LOCKDOWN

On the 14<sup>th</sup> August my little Jack Russell dog Pepper was put to sleep. She was 16 years old but from the beginning of March she hadn't been well. She had slowed down and her sleeps in the basket grew longer. We had numerous trips to the Vet's with more tabs on each visit.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> July, I got the devastating news that her prognosis was not good as the cancerous tumours had grown. There was nothing more the Vet could do to improve her condition except manage her pain and keep her comfortable. It was clear that our time together was limited.

Over the next few weeks, we pampered her with fillet steak and organic chicken and short walks in Rathmullan. My sons all called to the house to say their last goodbyes. She had arrived with us when they were children and now, they were all grown men. So many happy memories.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Aug was the day we decided to let our Pepper go. We had wanted the Vet to come to the house to put her to sleep in familiar surroundings with us beside her. Unfortunately with Covid restrictions that was not possible. Instead she was euthanised in the boot of the car on the roadway outside the Vet's surgery. At least my husband was able to stay with her and stroke her till she had gone to sleep.

After we buried her at the bottom of the garden, we walked in Rathmullan her favourite place and we ate fish and chips from Belles Kitchen.

It was very difficult returning to an eerily empty house that evening and not having Pepper meeting us at the door. In the mornings that followed, I would come down to the kitchen and automatically look across at the spot where her basket used to be. I am still heartbroken and miss her a lot, but I know it was the best and most humane decision to make.

# Marianne Lynch

## NEW YEAR'S DAY 2020

Dear Marianne,

Your wish will be granted – you can laze around the house, read books, learn to bake, use up that stash of wool, and just be – all without feeling guilty. Covid-19 is coming your way and will be the perfect excuse. Of course, you live with someone who is the complete opposite, so be prepared for some compromising. Any bit of good weather, open the door and let him off into the great outdoors. The time apart will minimise conflict.

You'll get an opportunity to sort through those still-unsorted boxes, declutter some more and push forward with the remaining tweaks to your new house.

Don't forget to keep in touch with family and friends – there'll be few opportunities to meet in person, but technology will help you stay in touch.

Remember the wedding in October – send something small to acknowledge the day....and forget your panic of last October!

## WHEN THE PANDEMIC BECAME REAL

Will we, won't we? In early March we had to decide if we were going on holiday to Puerto Rico in the Canary Islands. Our apartment will be fine, but what about the plane journey? What if we get locked down there?

Fight or flight – part frustrated, part fatalistic, part rueful, part fearful, alert to potential danger, determined to go, afraid to go, accepting of reality, finally resigned to cancellation in the end.

## MY HANDS

I kept them clean, nails short, sanitised and moisturised frequently. It felt strange singing 'Happy Birthday' to them – twice! They kneaded dough, mixed soil for the planters, planted things and scattered wildflower seed in the garden. They miss touching friends and family, simple handshakes in greeting, offering sympathy to the bereaved, feeling the texture of appealing things that won't be bought but tempt, holding music to play and sing.

My hands want to handle notes and coins again. They want to cut down on the typing of emails, not be used for putting on and taking off face masks. My hands want to link with others in shared moments of joy, hope, sadness, and sorrow.

## INNER & OUTER CIRCLES

2km and 5km – where did you spend the most time during Covid-19?

The joy of a sliding patio door – open it wide and let the outside in. Birds singing in clear blue skies overhead, no planes and little traffic. Step outside to work outdoors, eat, relax in the sunshine, to meet friends outside and socialise a little.

Retreat indoors to avoid the heat and sun. No need for heating until October in this bright, warm room – the centre of the house. Centre of cooking, baking, cups of tea and coffee, Zoom meetings, reading, knitting, chatting, entertainment, discussions, decision-making, buying and spending money.

Indoor me and outdoor him – different but complementary.

## **“HOW ARE YOU DOING THESE DAYS?”**

Would you understand if I replied “Wonderful!”? After a hectic 2019 – two retirements, selling and buying houses, moving to a place nearer friends and interests, initiating renovations – I craved a quieter 2020. And I got it....but, unfortunately, at the expense of a global pandemic!

Now I have a government-approved excuse to stay home, not travel, not party, not overwhelm myself with ‘busyness’. I can indulge myself with just being, relaxing, enjoying my new home and garden. These restrictions suit me although I do admit to occasions of wanting social interaction with ‘real’ humans, family and friends – just not too often! Those few occasions are outweighed by the opportunities to take it easy, sit back and relax, knit, craft, read, watch TV programmes and films, potter at my leisure outdoors, doze for an hour or two.

I’ve discovered that I don’t need to buy many additional things – I’m too busy working though the stash of ‘stuff’ I took with me from the previous house. I’m quite happy to do little or no exercise, preferring to de-stress by relaxing! I do realise how fortunate I am to be in this position – no mortgage, no ‘underlying health issues’, no young children or elderly parents to mind, a good pension, a loving husband, independent adult children, varied interests and hobbies to keep me occupied, and hopefully a long and interesting retirement to come. So yes, I do feel wonderful. The general prevailing mood of this pandemic contrasts with my upbeat reply. But this is my truth. Am I the only one feeling this way?

## LOCKDOWN IS A TIME OF....

The smells of baking and trying new recipes; savouring well-made coffees; the smell of fresh bed linen

Not spending money frivolously; deliveries direct to my door

Reading everything and anything; crafting, knitting and creativity

Taking things slowly; hearing the birds singing because there is silence and little traffic; breathing deeply of the fresh sea air at the beach

The slow progress of a new garden; waiting for wildflowers to take hold and grow; enjoying the flowers and foliage of plants planted earlier in the year

Tinkering with the house, smoothing out the remaining wrinkles; keeping things neat and tidy (mostly!); enjoying the split personality of my house; craving colour in my grey and white house

Zoom meetings, Whats App messages, phone calls and emails to keep in touch and keep the links alive; trying not to be critical, not apportion blame, not be negative; supporting friends in need

## NIGHT-TIME

The clocks have gone back an hour, the night comes sooner now. The couch, and me on it, are reflected in the glass of the patio door, but I can still see the plants in the boxes outside, moving in the wind. The lit gable of the neighbour's house appears mid-air, like magic. Holly, the neighbour's dog, moves ghost-like on her final inspection round of our property.

I close the curtains and dim the lights. The fire roaring in the stove brings life to the dark end of the room.

I nestle down, hugging my cup of tea, engrossed now in the drama on TV. I've become more selective in my TV watching, preferring the silence to read, or knit, or simply close my eyes and relax.

I check the outside lights are off, the doors locked, the bedtime glass of water ready. I feel safe in my haven.

I switch off all the lights and retreat to my bed, ready for sleep and the dawn of a new day.

## 2020 ALPHABET OF COVID-19 LIFE

A - Ambitions thwarted, adapted, amended, abandoned

B - Birds singing clearly heard in March and April; Baking - a new discovery of talent; Brexit 'hasn't gone away, you know'.

C - Covid-19 - what else?

D - Depression, a side effect of Covid-19 life, for some a temporary condition, for others a familiar visitor

E - Ennis and the Book club Festival, where awareness hit and doubt crept in

F - Face masks and face coverings, a familiar sight by now; Funerals (and wakes) missed, online condolences not the same thing at all, sympathy cards a sombre replacement

G - Garden, started in February and finished in July, a welcome distraction

H - Holidays postponed, re-scheduled, cancelled; Home - a haven

I - Isolation, both imposed and self-imposed

J - Joy in the simple things

K - Knitting once again

L - Lockdown! - again!

M - Music - some miss live music-making, some don't

N - Neighbours chatting over the wall, all the time in the world during lockdown, nowhere to go

O - Online shopping - a poor substitute for the real thing

P - Perambulation (aka walking) - sporadic, then finally abandoned!

Q - Queues - who knew we could be so orderly?

R - Rathmullan beach - glorious once the 20km limit allowed it, but only mid-week and not during July and August - too many visitors and locals

S - Sanitiser, like face masks, ubiquitous everywhere, some pleasant, some not

T – Takeaways – once a treat, now a means of support for businesses

U – Updates (daily) on Covid-19 statistics, watching graphs go up and down and the implications of either movement;

US Elections – an alternate distraction, but like Brexit, a potential nightmare

V – Voices of passers-by heard in the still of lockdown; the occasional craving to hear a ‘real human’ voice, not a Zoom, Whats App, text or email ‘voice’

W – A Wedding not attended due to tightening restrictions but good wishes sent instead

X – X marks the 2 meter distanced spots to stand on when in a queue

Y – Yellow will never be the same again – the colour of Covid-19 signs and warnings

Z – Zoe, our new electric car, a bright spot in the year;

Zoom meetings – technology helping with isolation and restrictions



# Charlotte Maye

## NEW YEAR'S DAY 2020

Dear Charlotte,

So lovely to have family home! Do you realise how hard it's going to be? Get ready for long periods without any physical family contact. A new baby will arrive in April but you won't see that baby until he is 12 weeks old.

Try not to be anxious about the future, take one day at a time. Be happy to chat to your grandchildren on Facetime, no hugs and kisses!

Be prepared to stay close to home, you will get to know your neighbours really well. Above all enjoy the present, birdsong, wildflowers, and friendship.

## COVID IS HERE

I went to Aldi to get some cannisters they had on special. It's very strange, I can't get a space to park, finally I get one way round the back! No cannisters left but I pick up a few bits and pieces. Long queues at the tills, the man in front of me has four of everything in his trolley – it's piled so high things are falling off! Has he gone mad? I can't believe this is happening!

Leo Varadkar appears on tv from America to announce lockdown. Isn't this way over the top? Can't imagine what life is going to be like!

## HANDS

Hands to hold loved ones close but no longer can,  
Hands to cuddle and hug grandkids but can't visit anymore'  
Hands to knit, crochet and sew masks passed on  
from Mum and Gran.

Hands to play music with Willie and learn  
the ukulele with Bressie!

Hands to revive old skills playing the keyboard.

Hands to sit still and reminisce, recall stories of long ago;  
Of my grandmother in 1918, a young married woman  
With a toddler and babe in arms, looking out across the  
valley

At the house on the opposite hill, coffins carried out one by  
one

The entire family all victims of the Spanish Flu.

## LOCKDOWN

It's a time of doing without family, parties, meals together,  
coffee with friends

It's a time to look forward to Christmas, Santa coming with  
toys for the children

The brent geese arriving with hoots of delight at the sight  
of our green grassy fields!

It's a time to remember, look back at old family albums – the  
great times we had

Camping in France, crepes and red wine and barbecues on  
the beach.

It's a time of hope for better times to come when we can all  
relax and be together again.

## MY ROOM AND BEYOND

Lots of photographs old and new surround me, generations past and present,

Babies, school pics, graduations, weddings, all have flown the nest.

Some nearby others far away but all out of reach now.

Lots to see in the garden, blooms I hardly noticed before.

Birds too of a different hue from far flung places

Covid can't hold them back.

Oh to be free like the birds, to soar high above the clouds,

And wander well beyond the 5k limit.

The cattle graze behind the house, the farmer checks them every day,

The grass continues to grow, he cuts the silage for winter feed,

The circle of life continues despite the pandemic.

I marvel at the wildflowers in the hedgerows as I take my daily stroll,

I even take pictures of them to share with friends!

I stand in wonder on the bridge over the burn at the end of the road

Lots of time now to stand and stare.

## AUGUST 2020

It's the time of year for our holiday home in the sun waiting for children and grandchildren to come

But not this year, no plane trips and long lazy days in the sun.

Cork is our new destination, the baby arrived in April and now it's time for the christening!

They have moved into their new home and we all arrive and pile in.

It's great to be all together again, I sit and watch my three girls on the couch

Chattering away while the grandchildren are tucked up in bed fast asleep.

The christening took the place next day followed by food and photos

Soon it was time leave, travel back home, no stop on the way – that virus again!

Back to our solitary life in seclusion.

## MORNING

We lie in bed checking the news online, the weather  
forecast for today  
What shall we do? Go for a walk, check on the neighbours,  
return and have lunch?  
Suddenly the ipad comes to life, the wee boys in Cork  
are on Facetime!

Shrieks of delight as they shout “ hello Grandma and  
Grandpa”  
The baby gurgles in the background as he sucks on a finger  
of toast  
The kittens appear at the window as they wait for breakfast  
to be served  
A long line of cows meander up the path to the far field  
after milking  
While we sit and wait in Donegal for this long  
lonely time to pass.

# Susan Mooney

## **A LETTER TO MYSELF WRITTEN ON NEW YEAR'S DAY 2020**

Dear Me,

You are never going to believe what is about to happen this year! There are so many shocks, surprises and delights awaiting you!

First, shockingly, your next-door neighbour, Geraldine, is going to die. That will completely take the wind out of your sails and force you to re-evaluate what you are doing with your life.

You will – apparently (?) all of a sudden - Retire. AND you will absolutely love it! Bored? Are you kidding? There aren't enough hours in the day for it all! It is the exact right choice at the exact right time for you. All the serendipity of things working out as they should.

So get ready, girl. Life as you know it is about to change forever. For the better.

Happy New Year!

Love,  
Me.

## **WHEN I REALISED HOW SERIOUS THIS PANDEMIC WAS GOING TO BE**

I really didn't foresee this pandemic coming here into our lives at all! The Principal of my school kept warning us that it would happen sooner rather than later. He predicted our closing down for months, possibly almost as far as the summer holidays. I saw this as a slightly hysterical reaction and considered it a complete overuse of a fertile imagination. These things don't happen in Ireland!

It was actually on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> of March at 2pm, as he told us that we were closing up TODAY for a fortnight, that it finally sank in. I was agape! I was also quite annoyed as I had organised a Prize Giving Ceremony for the World Book Day (Week) Competitions to be held the next day. Suddenly, all my prize books were laid out on the prefab table and I was hustling in my students, group by group, to choose books to take home with them. I marched out after them chanting, "Read, read, read! Don't be coming back in a fortnight's time having forgotten your reading!"

I still only believed it was only for two weeks. Then maybe another fortnight. It took me ages to accept that this mask-wearing, social distancing, no-longer-visiting etc. was to become our new way of life for the foreseeable future. Suddenly, as the only family member living in Buncrana, I realised that I would have to become responsible for looking after my elderly mother and intellectually disabled brother. How things really changed in my world then! We all had to gradually adapt to this New Family Order.

My mother took it all calmly in her stride. But my brother just couldn't understand what was happening. I felt like his gaoler, trying to explain that he couldn't go back to his residence in Letterkenny or his work in Newtoncunningham for some time as yet unspecified.

Now, I thank God, I had them there, to become my "work." Keelan and I did "sports" during the gorgeous sunny afternoons of Lockdown: tennis, table-tennis and "darts." My mother joined in for one-holed golf, bowling and hoops. She supervised myself and Keelan as we learned how to cook, bake and grow vegetables in two raised beds...all after a fashion! In its own surreal way, it was very enjoyable and provided us all with a strange sort of structure and a brand-new pattern to our days.

Some things have now reverted to the "Old Normal": the so-so weather and Keelan's going back to Letterkenny from Monday to Friday. My mother does some of her own shopping again, driving independently, but only locally, thank goodness.

In keeping with the vast changes going on, I have retired from teaching, thereby making a whole new "New Normal" for my life. But there are still moments where I catch my breath in wonderment, look back over the past six months and forward to God knows what and think, "Gosh, is this REALLY happening?"



## **MASK**

The most astonishing and startling sight for me, in these Covid Days, is that of people wearing masks. It still takes a great deal of getting used to. I have to look twice, carefully, to recognise familiar faces behind the coverings. I try to listen really intently when they speak as there is no lip-reading and far fewer facial cues to help in deciphering their words.

Certain people have adapted so well through this communication barrier, smiling with their eyes, expressing with their eyebrows and pantomiming with their hands: born to communicate, no matter what.

Some individuals have even begun expressing their personalities through their masks: wearing a variety of pretty, funny, favourite-coloured facewear, almost as a modern fashion accessory.

I regard this mask-wearing as the most immediately noticeable symbol of living with Covid. Worn with kindness and consideration for others, borne with stoicism and good humour, the mask is a visible sign of ordinary people's ability to adapt and survive together even in the strangest and most challenging of circumstances.

## MORNINGS IN RETIREMENT: FIRST TWO MONTHS

Waking up slowly and cuddling into the duvet for “five more minutes,”

Plodding downstairs in my dressing gown to thoughtfully write up my three Morning Pages,

Then, lovely coffee, the radio, the grand opening of the curtains in my four downstairs rooms,

Unwrapping the house, opening up to a new day,

So relaxed, so easy, so Divine!

It is still too soon to forget the morning rituals of “Act 1” in my life:

Always, somehow, starting on the back foot,

A shorter-than-desired shower,

Watching the clock, checking the school bag

The usual last-minute lunch-making frenetic burst of activity

Before bursting out the door into a busy world.

Thank God, thank God, for this beautiful gift:

“Act 2”, my new life,

For new-morning slowness, gentleness and calm preparation,

Unstressed anticipation of a day ahead filled with activities of my own making,

My own choices.

## AUGUST '20

Last August, I had booked to go on the Spanish Camino with three of my sisters. This was to be year 3, stage 3, on our Way of St. James. It is my idea of the perfect holiday: completely stress-free, nothing to do all day but walk, walk and walk some more. I have found this experience to be exciting, energising and surprisingly meditative.

The scenery in northern Spain is spectacular and full of variety, changing from farmsteads to villages and from mountains to parklands. Often falling behind, travelling on my own, I love the rhythmic click, click of my sticks and the almost-trance of continuous slow, steady-paced walking in warm, gentle breezes and glorious sunshine.

As things turned out, we four sisters DID do a Camino this August...in County Kerry's Macgillycuddy Reeks. One of the older girls generously took on to organise our week's walking holiday and led us expertly using her skills as a qualified walking guide leader.

The Kerry Way was spectacular, ranging from parkland to mountains, villages to farmsteads. Perhaps the temperature and the continuous run of good weather didn't quite match that of Spain, but we all loved the experience, the exploring of new places and the camaraderie of shared adventures. Right now, I am in better health than I have enjoyed for years. This helped me to appreciate and glory in my restored ability to undertake long journeys on foot. Knowing that I was to retire at the end of August, I felt completely free to fully enjoy and embrace The Way, The Irish Way.

# Bernadette O'Donnell

## NEW YEAR'S EVE '20

Dear Bernadette.

I had a glass of wine to ring in the new-year, I did sleep well, but my dreaming was more like a nightmare.

Was I understanding it correctly, that I would have to stay on my own for the better part of 2020?

How would I get my groceries, I suppose I could have them delivered, like the lady in the ad. on television where the nice boy even puts it in the freezer for her.

Will I be able to go as far as Matt's for diesel for my car, will I need the car, if everywhere is closed?

Will I be allowed to drive as far as Rathmullan and walk the beach, what state are my runners in, if I need new ones, will I have to buy online?

Have I any birthday cards for all the grandchildren's birthdays that are going to be coming at me?

I'll need postage stamps. I'll need cash, there's no point in sending empty cards.

I'll need sprays and wipes to clean everything. I'm a vinegar and hot water type cleaner, am I going to get paranoid about all this hygiene and wiping?

Has it crossed my mind that there will be no bingo on Sunday evening? Have I knitting wool?

Yours truly, Myself.

## **LATE FEBRUARY/ EARLY MARCH '20**

Laura rang to tell me to put on RTE that Leo was going to make an announcement from America. She rang back after the announcement to say, “no schools open tomorrow you won’t have Lota coming into you in the morning.”

My thoughts were for Ciaran and Karen with 2 autistic children how will they cope with no schools, at least it took up part of their day. We would not be able to travel to Galway to see them, or travel to Leitrim to see Deirdre and her family. Not to talk of our family in Canada who were to come for my nephew’s wedding...will there be a wedding?

I was going to change my car, I halted, do I need more debt, but the garage man has it sitting waiting for me.

I lost a friend, she was our neighbour for 20 years. I could only stand and look, no hugging, no shaking hands, no rosary in the house, a funeral mass we watched on a webcam and left in time to stand along the footpath as the funeral passed.

## MY HANDS

My hands are pretty lined with age. I never was much good at keeping my nails painted, but when my granddaughters come to visit they always paint them for me.

My hands are also a bit shapeless with rheumatoid arthritis but somehow I seem to be able to get all I need to do done. The weather was good and I didn't need to light a fire every evening.

I didn't have Lota to feed or lift into her cot, the schools were closed and her mammy was home with her. I was able to hang out my washing each day to dry on the line. I could prepare and cook the dinner each evening. I often thought of my mother's hands and the tasks she undertook, getting turf dried for winter fires, feeding hens and cattle. Helping out at harvest time. Baking bread every day, churning and making her own butter. I enjoy working with my hands... writing, knitting, crocheting, baking, cooking, I did tapestry of a lighthouse which I quite like.

## HOME

My armchair is at the side of the stove, I like it there, I can have a snooze on it with my two feet up on a stool. I can see all around the room, keep an eye on the spuds boiling, admire the scenery out my window where I can see William's cattle and sheep in the field behind the house. I have family photographs and a few pictures on the walls. The television sits on its own stand in the corner giving me perfect viewing from my chair.

I can put my shoes on easily sitting on my chair, this is important to me with arthritis.

With the shoes on I head outside, walk down to the road. It's quite safe if I'm careful to go to the crossroads and walk up Claggan. It's the most of 3k up as far as the entrance to

Lough Colm and back home. There's peace and quietness walking the countryside. I might meet two cars or a farmer driving his tractor giving me a friendly wave.

At the start of lockdown the trees and bushes were all budding, new foliage filling up gaps in hedges and forming shadows on the road in the sunshine. Sometimes I walked into town and met up with my friend Mary, we walked the footpaths all around town and out to visit the graveyard, we called through the window to people we couldn't visit.

We went to garden centres and bought bedding plants to fill hanging baskets and window boxes. We walk Rathmullan Beach and down Bats walk and did the circle back to the car. Young children on a purpose hung swing on a tree having the time of their lives. Me and my sister would take our two cars to a point and walked the Harry Blaney Bridge which divides the Rosguill peninsula and the Fanad peninsula and catch up with the goings on of our families.

## **MORNINGS**

I get up around 7.45 and turn on Highland Radio, Lee Gooch breaking the silence. I open curtains and windows. I love this time of just being on my own. It's probably selfish but my breakfast I really enjoy, I don't have to talk if I don't want to, if I talk to myself I can answer myself out loud.

There's milk at the end of the lane if I need it. I always shower early and get a tray of scones into the oven.

My grandson went back to college on Monday morning on Bus Feda and my daughter sent me a 'photo of him laden with backpack and pulling another bag and tears started dropping into my weetabix, sheer loneliness. I minded him since he was less than 1 year old and here he is now all 6 feet of him boarding the bus his mother boarded in the early 90's. I thought to myself second generation I'm really getting old.

## LOCKDOWN

During lockdown, my blackcurrants, 3 bushes, I got 666grams. of blackcurrants and made jam. My daffodils bloomed in beautiful array during late Spring.

Horses on a trek around Coole came to a standstill the morning my sister-in-law passed. She was laid out in the outfit she wore to her daughter's wedding less than a year earlier. Her earrings and scarf worn for the second time. The rose bushes she took from a garden centre in Cork 46 years ago when she and my brother honeymooned, rambled up the gable wall of the house. Her daughters decorated the Altar with them for her funeral mass. Everyone in the church wearing masks.

Our piano sits under the stairs now, its keys browning with age, and stiffening from non-usage. When the children were doing music lessons and practicing their do re me's there was always someone creating a tune.

There are bags of old football boots and flattened footballs in the bottom of the cloakroom, with a reluctance to bin them, I may just perhaps recycle them.

A hairdo in February had to do me for over three months, I threatened pig tails and ponytails and held my fringe back with clips and hairbands. In March Leo made his announcement, we were going into lockdown. There was no drowning of the shamrock on St. Patrick's Day , Easter in mid- April saw no influx of visitors to our County. This would normally be the time of year hotels and restaurants opened up for a new season.

The weather was very favourable, people were able to meet and have refreshments in their gardens. Maureen left a novel and orchid plant on the front step and put a voucher for the local butchers through the letterbox.

May, June, and July would normally be known as wedding season, but this year it resulted in a lot of weddings being



cancelled. Deirdre, Liam and their two girls had their first trip from Leitrim to Donegal in twelve weeks.

In August we celebrated 50 years of marriage, things had eased but social distancing was still in place. We had lunch with Maureen and Deirdre at the Narrow Quarter. We visited our youngest granddaughter, who incidentally has the same birthday as our anniversary and my birthday. The following evening we had a meal at the Singing Pub in Downings, we met a family from Dunkineely we hadn't seen for years. We could only touch elbows.

Confirmations cancelled in May were held before schools opened in September. Luka, Laura's eldest little boy made his confirmation in Milford before starting Mulroy College. Peter sponsored him, we had a small family gathering at Laura's home with lovely food. The children played on a bouncing castle and didn't even notice the rain pouring from the heavens.

Levels of Covid came and went throughout the months, we had to adjust lots of lifestyle habits and routines as we moved through it.

A few funny things did happen:

Laura got a cardigan crocheted for me for Mother's Day three sizes too big for me.

Sonya ordered runners online for me three sizes too small, she clicked on her own size which is three sizes smaller than I wear.

Deirdre ordered a game of Scrabble to be delivered to us but when it came it was as gaeilge.

I'll rip the cardigan and knit it up again over the winter months.

Green's Shoes kindly exchanged the runners for my proper size.

Our grandson did a great job on the Scrabble by turning them over and putting English letters on the other side of them. All is well that ends well.

# David Simpson

## LETTER TO SELF – NEW YEAR’S EVE ‘20

Dear Self,  
Listen out for the birds  
Watch the clouds  
Hear the wind.  
Be with the trees, sanctuary.

## WHEN I REALISED IT WAS REAL

Watching television, showing masked and gowned nurses  
and doctors  
surrounding an obviously seriously ill patient.

This was Italy  
Then it was New York  
Body bags

Finding out the racing lobby had kept Cheltenham open  
Such madness  
This is not a joke.

## MY HANDS

washing, washing, washing  
sanitising  
more washing  
standing at the back door  
bowl of warm water  
with Milton  
ready

wiping packages  
do I need to wipe  
bananas? onions?  
don't I peel them?

bags of books and newspapers  
left for three days  
then wiping  
more wiping

feeling unkind  
wiping the deckchair my friend sat on  
in the garden  
am I smelling sanitiser  
on my dreams?

gardening  
getting my hands dirty  
planting spuds, leeks, onions  
lettuce and tomatoes  
cleaning the soil off  
my hands  
now that feels normal.....at last.

## WHERE I SIT INDOORS AND WHERE I GO OUTDOORS

“I’m just going to stretch out” I’d say to Toni. Time out from the news and people’s views. A break, settling into the comfort of plumped up cushions. Let the TV entertain me, mindless almost, whatever made me laugh or smile, whatever held my interest.

I’d visit with the trees, oak, birch, alder, willow. A different kind of time out, letting the quiet seep into me.

A robin sometimes kept me company. He’d fly away when the cat came to nuzzle my legs. I’d walk out on the bottom lane, past fuchsia bracken, hawthorn. Down by the stream.

I’ve worn the waterproof trousers and even on some days Wellington boots.

Met up with Patsy, my sister-in-law, for a socially distanced walk on the lane overlooking the Foyle and down to the beach at Tremone, rocks, wet sand, the waves.

In or out

I found moments of peace.

## LOCKDOWN

Lockdown is a time with myself, with Toni.

A time that tests how comfortable I am with myself.

Do I have the discipline to get jobs done that I would have felt too busy to tackle in normal times?

Do I give myself permission to be idle? My father hated unproductive time. He policed us to be sure we were doing something useful with our time.

Can I let any day of the week by a Sunday? Stay in bed, late, snack all day, read, watch rubbish television.

We are blessed that my mother died before Covid. She would never have agreed to masks and lockdowns.

And the memories. What do I do with them? At times my mind randomly dips into parts of my life that I haven't thought about, possibly, since they happened.

Lockdown is a time, a new time of being with myself. Time is a raft in a sea of lockdown.

## THE EVENING RITUAL

Is the cat in?  
Has the washing been put out?  
Are the tea things washed and put away?

I always go out and stand on the deck  
Is there a moon?  
Is it windy?  
Are the trees still?

I say goodbye to the garden  
I pop my head into the back room  
and thank  
whoever is looking after me  
for the day.

Has my electric toothbrush got any buzz?  
Have I taken my pills?

I close the doors.  
Gretta had a fit when she stayed  
Those doors are to stop a fire,  
shut them!

I throw my book and my glasses on the bed  
I tell Toni I love her  
And I ask that I be helped  
to sleep  
through the night.

## MEMORIES OF THE YEAR

The joy of heading into the garden to prepare the raised beds. Stephen here with his trusty saw. Learning to fill the raised beds with sticks, cardboard, old grass cuttings and soil.

Realising seventy-two leek plants was probably too many. Planting out spuds and excited to see how they will grow. Time down with the trees, pruning, clearing, strengthening their presence.

It being warm enough to swim. Alexandra, Stephen and Aishling coming over and all of us swimming together. The strange contradiction of being out of lockdown but not being able to go to the beach as it was mobbed by Derry ones, parking all over the place and not wearing masks. Sitting resentfully our garden listening to their cars driving up and down the road at all times of the day and night. Perfecting my macaroni cheese.

Watching YouTube to learn how to plant out leeks, very informative.

Our first spuds, delicious. Way too many tomatoes. The thirty-seven broccoli plants I grew have all become huge with jungle sized leaves- but not a broccoli spear in sight!

We went to Derry one day and hated it. So glad to be at home again.

Anxious as the days get colder and shorter - will the winter be OK?

I like wearing my waterproof trousers as I am sitting down on the earth in amongst the fallen leaves and put my mind into idle. Eventually the special magic of trees seeps into my soul.

Sure, we will be alright.

I Wish for Freedom I wish for the freedom to go where and when I want; the freedom to visit art galleries, museums, theatres, places of culture – to experience them; the freedom to go to my library to browse and be surprised by a random book

I wish for the freedom to invite family and friends into my home; to meet up by accident or design, to chat and gossip; to pass time in good company I wish for the freedom to shop anywhere, to browse, to touch and feel real things, not just look at online pictures; to delight in the middle aisles of Aldi and Lidl and those unexpected displays I wish for the freedom of being free from restrictions, some imposed, some self-imposed, all a hindrance to my ongoing self-development.

I wish I could see faces without masks  
And join my friends in coffee shops for hours on end  
And hear stories; tell yarns and solve the world's problems.  
I wish I could make plans, book holidays, pack suitcases  
And hear the announcement:  
“This is your captain speaking, five minutes to landing”

I wish for as many of my family as is possible to be able to travel to our son John's wedding in Canada in 2022, just to be with him and Chassidy and their son Oisin, who will be four years old, our little grandson. I wish to be in the wedding photographs of their special day for them to treasure.

I wish for good health for all my family and an end to the Covid pandemic to let this all happen.



I wish to be reading stories again to Alexandra before she falls asleep in her room, here, in our home.

I wish to be free from monitoring everyone's distance from me, in shops, car parks, on the pavement, at the back door.

I wish that the new normal will come as close to the way things used to be as possible.

That the aftermath of the lockdown won't leave shops, restaurants and bar doors closed for good.

That our great tradition of wakes and funerals will not be fizzled out.

That social distancing will translate into social gathering once more.

That older people in homes will be there for us to visit, to hug and to interact with again.

That those whose jobs were lost due to the pandemic will have the will to weather the storm and pick themselves up.

Simply, I wish that this pandemic will go as quickly as it came – taking its legacy with it.

I wish for a time when all the family can come around to our house, big hugs when they arrive and be seated around the kitchen table laughing and chatting.

I wish for a time when I can sit with my mother again in the Nursing Home and hold her hand and maybe take her out for a drive in the car.

I wish that my youngest son Fergus's wedding will go ahead next July, and my son Dermot in Australia will be able to travel home for it and we will get to hold our little grandson Diarmaid.

I wish for a time when I can travel wherever I want and meet up with friends for a coffee or leisurely lunch. I wish for a time when Donegal plays again in Croke park and we can travel to Dublin to support them and shout and cheer.

I wish for a time when we can look forward to each day and not be worried about the virus that we cannot see. I wish for a time when each day's news is not about numbers, positive cases and deaths. I wish for a vaccine with the promise of better days ahead without fear and dread.

I wish I could be in one place with all my grandchildren playing house under the trees in the garden, Having a picnic with mud pies and fairy tea!

I wish I was with the Choir of Ages singing Christmas songs with the young and the old. I wish I was in Turkey walking on the beach, having a meal with family and friends. I just wish I was free!

I wish that my large, diverse family could all come together this Christmas, Gather and celebrate noisily, busily, chaotically, Back home briefly, taking time out from their other lives In Portugal, England, and the four corners of Ireland, Rekindling, reminding, recreating even more memories.



Comhairle Contae  
Dhún na nGall  
Donegal County Council

[www.donegallibrary.ie](http://www.donegallibrary.ie)



@DonegalCountyLibrary



@Donegallibrary

# **welcome** to your **online library** **fáilte** go dtí do **leabharlann ar líne**



eBooks, eAudiobooks  
R-leabhair, R-closleabhair

eMagazines  
R-irisí



eNewspapers  
R-nuachtáin

Online Courses  
Cúrsaí ar líne



**Library members can access online resources using their library card number and PIN. Library Membership is FREE.**

**Is féidir le baill na leabharlainne teacht ar acmhainní ar líne trí uimhir a gcárta leabharlainne agus a uimhir PIN a úsáid. Tá Ballraíocht na Leabharlainne SAOR IN AISCE**



(Top L to R) Denise Blake, Rita Chapman, Bernadette O'Donnell, Kathleen Byrne, Deirdra Friel, Marianne Lynch, Susan Mooney, Toni Devine & David Simpson, Charlotte Maye, Patricia Carr.

Líne Chabhrach Co. Dhún na nGall don  
Phobal le Linn Covid-19  
1800-928 982  
Co. Donegal Covid-19  
Community Response Helpline

ALONE 0818-222-024 - 8 am - 8pm.

Design+print brownprinters Ltd T: (074) 91 21387.

ISBN 978-0-95744032-6



9 780957 440326



An Roinn Forbartha  
Tuaithe agus Pobail  
Department of Rural and  
Community Development