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Title: There is Life at this Level

There is Life at This Level

Alex lives on the fifteenth floor. She doesn't take the lift, not even with the old lady shopping trolley full of essentials - and vodka - she lugs up the stairs. She never thought a pandemic would get her fit, but her arms have curves now, and she likes those curves, not like the curves of her belly.

Stephen liked all her curves, even the curve of her belly, but that was a different time when he could lay his hands on her and she on him. That was a different time, when the lift was just a way to transport from one floor to another 15 flats higher, a shortcut that sometimes smelled of piss. Now it is not a lift, it is a petri dish of disease, of buttons pressed by dirty hands where the virus can linger for 72 hours, where someone else could step into the enclosed space and cough, danger, red, do not use the lift. She never uses the lift.

It is the same lift. It is the times that have changed. Circumstances. She likes that word, it sounds Jane Austen, when people danced with strangers, touched, strolled together, kissed.

The stairs are not part of the allocated hour's exercise outside. Alex can leisurely walk down being careful not to touch the handrail and crawl exhaustedly, slowly, up the stairs, because it is at the building's exit that you log out. There was a flaw in this plan, and there were friends and family and lovers in this block who went freely from households, laughing in groups, from one residence to another shutting and opening doors, ushering in people and the viruses people carry with them. She doesn't hear them now. In the beginning of the new times Alex knew a lot of her neighbours and would leave food and medicine for them as required. This was charity not

friendship though, none of the sick people would ever be well enough to do the same for her. But now it comes through the system and if she was sick the system would do this for her.

It is not food and medicine she's hungry for though. She takes a deep breath in before logging out at the exit door to start the minutes ticking. 60 minutes, contactless at the wall, as soon as it beeps she begins to run, her body flooding with adrenaline, the fight she has every day firing up her sympathetic nervous system.

She goes left, she always goes left, it is the same route each time, but it is the times that have changed. Past Abu Bakar which is an essential shop and still open daily though the essentials in the shop vary considerably in usefulness, now she can reach there in 2 minutes flat which means she can get to the corner of the park in 10.

At the corner of the park is a pussy willow, strangled by ivy. The buds are all coming out, fluffy like a squirrel's tail. She spies a grey in the distance reaching up on a beech tree with arms and legs splayed like Jesus on the cross. The willow is as busy as Friday night pubs were, there's a flock of tits - great, blue and long tailed, shouting at each other and nibbling amongst the ivy. The blackbirds have a nest like a flat above the pub but they're not in it, they are calling each other at a distance. Alex breathes. She's got out, she feels present.

Alex only feels present at this hour that she gets to be outside. It starts here at the corner of the park with the willow, where she stretches, bends down on one thigh with the other leg outstretched, really low so she can smell the grass. There is life at this level - a harlequin ladybird flaunts its bully body in all her garish freedom on a stem of grass. She puts her hand in her pocket and lifts up, brings out the packet of seeds that she scatters on the makeshift feeder ledge she bolted onto the tree last year. The birds recognise her now, she's sure of it, they know

her when she's there bent down to the ground and they start chattering with increased excitement. Al-ex, Al-ex she imagines she hears. Every day she hears them say her name, up close like this, unfettered by a screen.

Alex feeds the birds stealthily and then runs on. They are not her only love. If she didn't have so little time she could step back and watch them come, the blue tits dangling upside down, the sparrows swarming in numbers like an army, sometimes with them a siskin, as subtle as herself when she bends the knee. She doesn't wait to watch them but runs from them now as if she doesn't care though every 2 weeks she carries seeds up the stairs with her shopping so she can have this single moment with them.

Alex stuck a feeder to her window last month, but they never came.

It is up the hill she goes, and in the beginning she couldn't make it in the allocated time. It was only 2 months ago her timer buzzed at her wrist and she ran back screaming with frustration that she wouldn't see him, and sobbing so loudly past the feeder tree her birds swarmed into the air and away from her as if they did not know her after all. Like souls leaving their bodies, she thought, at a site of a massacre.

Or a pandemic.

How old-fashioned, she thinks, a pandemic. As if we are just flesh and blood and mortal after all. As if we too we will wither come age and disease. As if we are born and then die, sometimes too soon, often too soon.

Alex runs past the rotten beech that she used to sit under, 22 minutes, good, she has time to unfasten her water bottle, and drench her dry throat, and time to note the lichen growing upon the dying beech, there are holes up and down this old boy, like pock marks from a different disease

in a different time. And hoof fungus, as if inside there is a white stallion about to leap forth. Alex says hi to the beech and there's a fast tap tap tap back that takes her by surprise.

She looks up and there's a woodpecker drilling at her beech. Brazen.

She doesn't know much about birds, she just knows she can't live without them. After this run she will look up greater spotted and lesser spotted and still not know but for now she just looks up at the real planeless sky and squints against the spring sun, and there is the white black and red of whatever woodpecker he is, telling a potential partner he is up for it, or telling her to go away. She goes away. Her eyes are watering and she isn't sad.

Not yet.

At 26 minutes she is by the gorse bushes that lead to Stephen. She breathes the scent in, lurid coconut, and with her eyes shut she remembers that Thai restaurant with him when he told her that joke and she snorted a very spicy soup out through her nose. And she breathes in again and tells the gorse that she still has her sense of smell. The gorse does not reply but it carries on reeking of glorious exotic coconut.

It is another thing that goes, with the virus.

Perhaps Alex is still crying a bit, her face is definitely red and hot as if she has a fever.

It's now she can start to talk to Stephen.

She walks toward the gravestone. It is simple and small and before he died he joked with her that he wanted one like that because he was. She had cried then too, but she had been touching him because that was allowed then, she was holding his hands and they were both crying because cancer; they said; really sucks.

“Trust you”, she says to him now, “to die of cancer when everyone else is about to die of coronavirus”.

There are still other diseases, he would have said.

Alex sits cross legged on his grave and checks the time. 28 minutes. She has 5 whole minutes with him, it is quicker on the way back. A whole 30 seconds more than yesterday. She leans against his headstone as if it were his arms, and they were in bed, as they so often used to be.

“It never felt we had enough time then either” she says. The stone is hard and inflexible, not like him, not like the warmth and softness of him. Even when he grew skeletal she liked to lean on him, or him on her.

The pandemic reached Europe during his last days. They shared memes about it, next to each other, on their phones. They laughed together a lot in his last days, as serious about processing loss as any tears were. Alex knew that privately some people thought her frivolous for it. Stephen didn't though, and as he disappeared, pound of flesh by pound of flesh, he was all that mattered to her.

Alex realises they are not alone. There's a fox, skinny as Stephen in his last weeks, russet brown coat white with mange. The fox is strolling across the graveyard like he owns it, he stops to sniff at a dried bouquet on another of this year's dead. Alex sits there quietly, still, an interloper.

When he sees her, he doesn't run. She does though - it's 33 minutes and the buzzer goes.

Alex kisses the cold grey headstone and wishes it smelled like Stephen's unwashed hair.

Here she goes, back again, her face less red though the ache is going to come to the thighs. Past the gorse bush where she breathes it in again and says goodbye and through the ginnel into the park. From afar she can see another runner all in black and slower than her puffing up the hill.

Alex waves and the runner waves. The wave means both a cheery hello and a hostile do not come near me. Alex smiles to emphasise the former - as, probably, the runner does - but neither will see the warmth of the other. It is important to maintain our humanity in these moments, Alex thinks. And out of the blue she imagines Stephen next to her hearing her and he punches her on the arm to mock her earnestness and then Alex is laughing and the other anonymous runner may or may not hear the lonely chuckling of a woman who for this second doesn't feel alone.

Alex is past the beech tree and can't hear the woodpecker this time and then she's careering down the hill toward the feeder tree and the little birds are all still there flocking in their gangs with such disregard. Oh, and suddenly, there's a scuffle in the tree right near the feeder as she arrives and a kestrel lurching claws out, swoops at her head.

The nesting blackbird rises, a prey just missed.

The kestrel soars up, his tail is like a fan from a Jane Austen novel as he glides away from his ill matched move, Alex's heart beating as fast as that woodpecker on the beech.

She saved the blackbird, she killed the kestrel babies, perhaps.

Alex makes it to the building door as she always does, hot and tired and well and just in time.

Her head is grazed by the kestrel's claws but she won't know it until she looks in a mirror. She is not thinking about this. She has something else to aim for - how to get more minutes with Stephen. She pants up the stairs. Already Alex is looking forward to the next day, the next run, the same day, a new run, a new day.