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**Lockdown in Old Aberdeen**

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From the seventh floor of the Sir Duncan Rice Library, you can see a very long way in every direction. When you first come out of the lift you're drawn towards the void in the floor, from where you can look through seven levels at a slight angle, all the way down to the atrium, café and the entry doors. You position yourself at the balcony, so you have the straightest view, and when you tire of that you look up and see the glimmer of blue through the avenues of bookcases. From the massive windows on the east side of the library you can see the ocean, with its liners and the windfarm to the north; closer sits the spires and chimneys of Old Aberdeen. A vast sweep of geography passes across your gaze, beckoning you with its detail. Now, no-one can look at that view: the library closed its doors for the foreseeable future at five in the afternoon, on Friday the week before last. You can probably guess why; it has something to do with why the prime minister, a few days later, told us from Downing Street not to go outside unless for supplies or exercise. Now the cobbles of Old Aberdeen are quieter than they have been for a long time.

The day I moved into Hillhead Halls of Residence was only the second day of my life that I had spent in Aberdeen. On the second or third day there, with no friends and feeling the four walls of my small bedroom start to close in, I joined a tour of the campus for new students. Starting at Hillhead, the group trotted down the hill into Seaton Park, through the long gardens and then up towards the spires of St Machar's Cathedral, and into the cobbles of Old Aberdeen. I knew then that this was a place that I could spend time in.

The vision of Aberdeen held in my mind's eye had been of a grey, rain-spattered fortress hugging a sodden coastline, hemmed in on three sides by wasteland and standing tall against a stormy sea in which oil rigs groaned against the wind and waves. This is an exaggeration, but having lived in Perth all my life, my ambition was to take myself east, west or south after school, not north. But in Old Aberdeen I found a town that could not have been further from my vision. Granite was everywhere, but as a deep silver flecked with grains of light, not some dull grey. The streets of Old Aberdeen have, for the most part, been conduits between classes for me, but it is impossible to escape the evocative beauty of the ancient quads and cobbled streets. They echo with the past.

Now, nothing echoes. The streets are empty; everyone is inside. Covid-19 doesn't spread by itself; people are the ones who do that favour for the disease. So, we are all inside, as if waiting out an invisible storm that silently rages against the windowpanes.

It is so, so easy to see the comedy in this. Ten new cases, a hundred next week; numbers are abstract. Self-isolation offers the laughter in being trapped inside with your friends, and coursework, dissertations and revision all benefit from the government sanctioned shutdown. But the abstraction is slowly coming reality. First, friends from outside of the United Kingdom start to slip away, to get home before the borders shut. Then friends of friends and distant relatives start to develop symptoms, and the comedy switches to a quiet apprehension, as if the disease is a ghost, haunting the entire world. We all know this is going to get much worse.

But for now, we can still leave the flat, once a day. So, I do. I open the door and let my feet do the walking; like water always flowing downstream, I follow the seemingly ancient patterns of travel, inexorably drawn towards Old Aberdeen and the university. Old Aberdeen constitutes a neighbourhood of ancient streets and university buildings, bound to the east by King Street, west by Tillydrone Road and Bedford Avenue, north by Seaton Park and south until the medieval architecture gives way to modern estates and shopping streets. If the heart of the town is the ancient university, then the streets are arteries, pumping footsteps inward every morning and outward every night.

As I walk, quiet terraces become squat cottages, leaning against each other like elderly couples. The architecture shifts and ages, like walking back in time. Despite the global crisis, the old favourites are still there; beautiful King's College, leafy New King's, the glimmering library, even the hideous MacRobert building. Usually the streets throng with students on their way between classes; now they are silent. The long, broad avenue that is flanked by the Meston and Fraser Noble buildings, where the library's long, square shadow slots into on a summer evening, is completely empty. Now is the beginning of exam revision, so the library would normally be packed, and the lawns of the university would be covered with students basking in the occasional warmth. Now, despite the sporadic sun, I am alone in the streets.

The spine of the university runs in a long line, from the gates of St Machar's Cathedral, past grand mansions and little cottages with stubby doors build for shorter people of ages past, through King's College and alongside the ornate Powis Gate with its tiny towers. As I walk this street, memories from the last four years come flooding back: as a first year, marching drunkenly over the cobbles at three in the morning, then years later, running in the other direction as a member of the running club. Another memory; under the moon, on the way back from another night in the library, I see a fox staring at me from under the sickly orange streetlights. Silently, the fox slinks down an alley to find its dinner. These little incidents permeate the bricks of this place; the past still lingers even when the present has been poured away.

During these last days, I pick up on details that I had never noticed in the past four years. On an empty street, bounded on one side by the walls of St Machar's Cathedral and the other with a series of grand ecclesiastical houses, a strange five-pointed star is carved into the wall. Is it the symbol of a secret society, or the marker of a hidden passageway? Does the final clue of some great and ancient mystery lie behind this granite seal? Each explanation is equally plausible. Perhaps the internet could identify it as a mason's mark, but there's no fun in that. Further down the street, a stone shield sits above a window on an ancient house, bright paint making the tiny golden crown and red diamonds gleam in the sun. Who lived here? A bishop? A knight? A king? In the forgotten cemetery of Snow Kirk, that hundreds pass each day without even knowing the place exists, names record people who lived in the vicinity of this ancient town. Reading them, you can't help but imagine lives inferred from the scant details recorded on the mossy tombstones.

Into Seaton Park. It lies north of the old town, with the river Don curling around the park to the west and Hillhead Student Village rising to the north. The green smell of spring is the first thing one notices as you descend into the park; the march of the seasons is not paused by a global pandemic. The flowers are yellow, white, blue and purple, their petals suspended above the green grass like mist.

Here there are people, walking dogs or exercising, always practising social distancing. The global disaster is an unspoken divide between us all. I climb a wooded ridge in the park, seeking the solitude that the old town granted me. I pause; my height relative to a bank of trees rooted at the base of the ridge put me at eye level with their uppermost branches, which are alive with the birds that make this place their home. Wood-pigeons coo, while the mournful cry of seabirds echo in the sky above the highest leaves. A pair of crows hop along the path, staring at me with inquisitive eyes. Sunlight shifts through the trees, and clouds move in, bringing a chill.

Moving down to the riverbank, I feel the air change; colder, in motion, with humidity hanging thick. I pick my way along the bank, morose; my movements startle a duck, who crosses to the opposite bank in one drawn out flutter, its tail lightly grazing the water's surface. Around this stretch of the riverbank we used to come and light a fire, cooking sausages and melting marshmallows until long after the sun had gone down, when our faces had become ruddy and burned from staring into the flames. People are walking here too; I leave.

I start to speculate as to why so many details have jumped out to me. The sparkle of granite, the marks of history, my own memories, the wildlife; do I notice them now because we have passed into spring, and the dullness of winter has been replaced with a light and growth that draws the eye? Or is it because of the quarantine, and the absence of people has left the natural world to flourish? No - this disaster is not some cure to rid nature of human beings. The features of the old town I walk through are presenting themselves to me because I know I won't be coming back; it feels as if the town knows this too. As if as a parting gift, new details are revealed in my surroundings; in this way, the last time becomes something like a first time.

I am walking back again through the silent streets. A light drizzle falls, and I shelter under an archway, with a view of Elphinstone Lawn and King's College Chapel, where not so long ago I sang carols at Christmastime. The granite slowly darkens as the rain falls. As the smell of fresh rain fills the air, I imagine the rest of the country, the crowds of people wiped away like marker on a whiteboard. In my mind I march up Sauchiehall Street, air thick and street slick with a rain that patters on the pavement and splatters the shop windows, but not finding a single soul to soak for the whole length of the street. Edinburgh Castle, blackened and stark, watches over a Prince's Street where the only movement is an empty tram. Perth high street is empty, Murrayfield quiet, Stirling, Inverness, Portree, St Andrews, Crieff and Aviemore are all silent. Union Street is desolate.

My feet have carried me home. Hand on the gate, I know all of this is being overthought. The constancy of history, of the passage of the seasons, will continue when I am gone. No pandemic or graduation can change that.

Like many people, I often dream of places that I once lived in. In these dreams, I wander the corridors of old schools, the rooms of old homes, even places I have worked. Maybe some night in the next few years, when the coronavirus crisis is in the past and I am far from here, my feet will once again do the walking, and take me out of this gate and towards the old town. Old Aberdeen will be waiting in the sun, to welcome me back.