



ISOLATION
- A SHORT STORY -

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A Short Story

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To all of us who have survived isolation this year.
This is based on all of our stories.

Isolation hits us slowly. It creeps through the psyche and gradually eats away; always working in the background of your day. Humans haven't yet evolved the ability to thrive in isolation. We are built for one another and when the chaos of living on this planet takes us from one another we begin to decline in our separation.

It isn't the being alone that gets us. Being alone is manageable; many of us crave solitude and silence. Every major world religion has solitude as a practice that elevates the soul. Isolation is not the same as solitude. There is a choice in solitude; we choose to retreat and we can choose to reenter society again in time. Isolation is not chosen and that is what kills us; the lack of an escape route. There is no way out.

When isolation comes to our door, it doesn't knock. We don't see it coming and we don't invite it in. Isolation doesn't care for our calendars or plans; it is no respecter of title or rank. Isolation does what it likes, goes where it likes and takes what it wants. It is both slow and quiet and yet it enacts violence upon every part of us. It undermines and it batters us.

Thomas Connelly had never been alone for long. The youngest of five brothers who grew up in a house built large enough for three, he had learned to thrive in the company of others. He had that kind of Irish accent and sense of humour that drew attention and laughter wherever he went. He had a wide and shallow group of friends, any one of whom he could call for a drink, coffee or night out. He had work mates, rugby watching mates, pub mates and other mates whom he had picked up along the way but couldn't quite place.

He was tall, dark and average with blue eyes that were hidden behind his dark rimmed glasses. His head was wrapped in a mop of dark brown curls, his mother's hair passed down a generation, that hung over the top half of his ears. He wasn't stylish but he wasn't scruffy either. He blended in to the crowd until he spoke or laughed. He spoke with the confidence of an Irishman abroad and laughed with the freedom of someone who feels at home in every situation. People liked him, they wanted to be his friend. He was funny and generous and was always good company.

Thomas was made for adventure. He moved through life grabbing every experience he could. He had left school for University in Edinburgh but within 4 months was working in a bar in San Francisco. He had spent the last 11 years of his life bouncing around the world. Charity work in Thailand, a holiday rep. in Cape Verde, a year on a farm in Australia and then a second year on the farm next door. He'd spent the previous 18 months back in Ireland working for his father as a personal assistant but it had almost killed both of them. He needed something more, his feet were itching for the next move and it wasn't long before he had found it.

In February 2020, Thomas moved to England. The next in the long line of Irish people crossing the Irish Sea. He'd managed to condense his belongings into three large suitcases and a backpack. He kissed his Mum goodbye, shook hands with his Dad, nodded, smiled and boarded a flight to Manchester Airport.

Despite having lived in so many places in his life, Thomas had spent almost no time at all in England. He hadn't grown up with any sense of animosity towards the old foe across the water, but it had seemed too close to hold any real wonder for him. It was all new to him, familiar but new. The average street in Dublin was as average as the streets of any English city. The two islands are so much the same but so very different.

Thomas had secured himself a job with his Dad's childhood friend Max Graham. In reality his Dad had secured the job, Thomas had agreed to take it. Max had left Ireland in his 20s and had built a business selling locks from his factory in York. Thomas would work in the call centre, processing orders through to the warehouses. It wasn't exciting work but it paid enough to rent a one bed flat with enough left over to build some kind of life for himself. As long as there was enough for food and a few pints Thomas would be happy, he'd never needed luxuries.

Thomas stepped off the train into a snowy York at 10 past 10 and walked straight into a taxi.

'Birchwood Place, please,' he asked the driver, his voice croaking a little from under use.

'Yeah, not far. Irish are you? Just a visit?' the driver replied.

'Something like that, yeah,' Thomas mumbled. He wasn't in the mood for chatting, he was tired and still feeling the effects of his goodbye drinks the night before.

As Thomas watched his new city from the window of the taxi, the driver turned the radio up. It was the news, another report on the new virus.

'Heard all this, mate?' asked the driver, 'load of nonsense if you ask me. People just love to overreact.'

Thomas nodded but didn't really know much about it. He knew a lot of people in China had gotten ill but not much beyond that. He wasn't much for current affairs. Life was right in front of him, in the moment; the news just brought him down.

'France is thinking of locking down the whole country. Crazy stuff.'

By this stage the taxi driver was more or less talking to himself but he kept going. I suppose if you drive a taxi all day you get used to people not speaking back. Thomas however was more interested in the story since the mention of France. His older brother lived in Nice with his French wife and child. He couldn't imagine a paradise like that locking down.

'I'm sure they won't ...' he began to say as the taxi stopped outside a red and yellow brick apartment complex.

'This is you, mate. That's £9.50,' the taxi driver said whilst searching for his next fare on his phone.

'Keep the 50,' Thomas said handing him two £5 notes and getting out of the car, 'home sweet home,' he muttered to himself.

It was at this moment he remembered that the keys he'd been sent were in the bottom of one of the large suitcases. He had no memory of which one but struck it lucky by choosing right case the first time.

He opened the door and took the lift to his new adventure. This was basecamp.

Watercooler Talk

'Say 33, Tommy,' Ian said, jabbing Thomas gently with his elbow, 'wait until you hear this guys.'

'Not again, Ian, I'm not a performing monkey,' Thomas retorted through a forced smile.

'Fair enough, lad, fair enough.'

Thomas had hoped that by week two in his new job people would stop asking him to say things in an Irish accent but apparently that novelty never wears off. Ian was the team leader on Thomas' floor and he had 'banter' with everyone. Thomas was of the opinion that anyone who shouts 'banter' after they attempt to be funny is never going to be funny. With Ian, this opinion checked out. He was rarely funny and his jokes always cut a little too close to the bone or were repeated to death. Everyone in the office was clearly bracing themselves for the day they were his banter fodder.

'This dude is a nightmare,' Thomas whispered to himself in the office kitchen as he poured a cup of almost cold coffee from the pot. He was too tired to wait for a new pot so this would have to do.

'Yeah, I hear you on that. He's exhausting.,' a woman said behind him.

'Oh, I didn't know you were there. I thought I was talking to myself,' Thomas replied, turning round to see a woman in her early 40s smiling at him in the doorway. 'I'm sure he's fine, just a bit bored of all the banter is all. Sure, it'll be grand.'

'Oh, don't worry, I won't say anything. I can see it too. He just never knows when to stop. He's always been that way. Sharon.' She held out her hand and Thomas shook it.

'Ian's my brother by the way. He's always been an attention seeker,' she continued, 'See you about I'm sure.'

As Sharon walked away Thomas could feel his stomach sink a little. It was the same feeling you get when you accidentally text something to the person you are complaining about in the text. He felt embarrassed and nervous. He was fine with joking around but he hated confrontation and getting on the wrong side of his team leader was never going to be a good thing. Just as he was about to call after Sharon to dig his way out of the mess he felt he'd caused she turned round.

'He isn't really my brother by the way. He's the most annoying person in the office. Got you though. See you next time,' she said laughing as she walked into an office.

'She got me alright.. I'll get her back sometime,' Thomas thought to himself as he sat down for his break with his now completely cold coffee. The news on the TV (one of those massive TVs from the late 90s on a bracket in the corner of the room) was flashing pictures of Paris and people wearing facemasks. A banner was rolling across the screen, "France in 14 day National lockdown from Thursday midnight. UK Government Press Conference at 6pm."

Thomas lifted his phone and sent a text to his brother.

'You alright?' he typed. Thomas loved his brothers but they never wrote much more than they needed to.

'It's crap but we will be fine. Supermarkets are a write off. People acting like a nuke has gone off,' the reply came almost immediately.

'Stay safe, anyway.' Thomas wrote and put his phone away. It was already time to go back to his headset and cubicle to help people to install locks which came with very clear instructions. Hopefully he'd find something new soon.

Upon arrival at his desk he found a post-it stuck to his phone. 'You should have seen your face, Shaz,' it said in curly black writing.

'Oh, I'll get you back,' Thomas thought, but for the life of him he couldn't think of something to do.

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5:30 pm came around very slowly for Thomas. Last summer he'd worked as a surfing instructor. He found his mind drifting to those days every time someone called Alison or Beverley yelled at him down the phone for something he had no control over. People rarely yell at surfing

instructors. There's very little to complain about on a sunny beach. When 5:30 pm did arrive, Thomas was up and out of the office like a Meat Loaf lyric.

As he reached the lift, his hand was slapped off the button.

'You lasted another day then? A real survivor.'

It was Sharon. 'Don't worry, Tom was it? You'll get used to this place. It's not glamorous but the people are decent.'

'Thanks, Sharon. I'm sure I'll be fine. Just gotta watch out for that "brother" of yours,' Thomas replied whilst doing quote marks in the air and instantly regretting his hand gesture. He hated people who did that, why was he now one of those people?

'Anyway, let's hope the big press conference tonight isn't bad news. Hope we don't follow France.' She said.

'See you Monday then, Sharon,' Thomas nodded as he left the foyer and into a rainy evening. He lifted his phone from his pocket to discover 17 messages from his mother that could be summed up as;

'France locking down. Check on Mark.'

'I have. He's fine,' he typed back and then pressed play on his podcast, pulled up his hood and walked home.

The news wasn't great. It was as Sharon had feared. A lockdown. Only two weeks though which didn't seem too bad. Within an hour, text messages from Ian arrived saying that the company would supply equipment to work from home and that some forms and policies would be sent out the next day.

Thomas didn't think that sounded bad at all. He could work in his pyjamas, drink better coffee and have 30 minutes more in bed. A dream.

An hour later at the supermarket he began to think life might not be such a dream after all. Shelves were bare; stripped of stock by panicked people. No pasta. No rice. No toilet roll. He grabbed what he could and headed back a little bewildered.

Being a naturally laid back man, who had lived with the belief that things generally work out in the end, Thomas was astounded at people's panic. There were barely any cases in a country of millions, it all seemed like an overreaction. Yet, deep within him there was a seed of doubt that was beginning to embed itself in his mind. Was there more to this than he had seen? Can that

many people be wrong? It kept him up that night as he worried that he was ill prepared for imminent disaster.

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'Dear Thomas,

I hope this finds you well. In these unprecedented times, the board has made the decision that for the foreseeable future all staff will be required to work from home. We value our staff's safety highly and have made preparations with HR and IT for home working arrangements to be made for this to behind from this Thursday.

Please find a home working policy and self assessment form attached to this email. These should be read and completed by close of play on Wednesday.

Take care and stay safe,

Max Graham
CEO'

'Well that's not bad.' Thomas thought to himself. He suddenly had ideas of working whilst lying on the sofa in a tracksuit and slippers. He would not miss the office coffee.

The first few days of working from home were great. Thomas found himself feeling more relaxed at work than he had since he started. Perhaps it was not having Ian around. He also loved not wearing a tie. If he could have it his way ties would be the reserve of weddings, funerals and court appearances and nothing else.

After those first few days of novelty the sparkle began to dull a little. Start times got earlier and end times got later. With his office also being the living room it became harder to hold boundaries. Admin tasks ran late into the evening. Work that, when kept in the office, would have waited, was done in the evenings. After three weeks of overworking from home Thomas was tired and bored. He had to make some changes.

Thomas's plan for a better work life balance became irrelevant by the following Monday. The country was to be locked down for longer. The firm had decided to take advantage of the government's furlough scheme and Thomas was to be placed on furlough.

Another email with cheery well wishes informed him of the decision. He'd earn 80% of his wage but not have to work. He was thankful for the 80%. He could make it work. There was nowhere he could go to spend the money. He also welcomed the idea of an extended rest. Furlough didn't seem too bad after the overworking of the previous weeks.

Days of late to bed and late to rise followed, He grew lockdown beard and became an expert on console games. It became easy to forget what day it was and Thomas kept track by what daytime TV was on; home renovations on weekdays, food shows on weekends.

For three weeks he lived a life of relaxation. He ate takeaway food delivered to his door and did more or less what he liked. Then at 12.33 am on a Wednesday morning at the end of March, whilst channel flicking through hundreds of stations and their +1 shadows, he reached, for the 5th time that night, the channels of women in their underwear waving a phone at the camera, he felt the first pangs of loneliness.

He had only spoken out loud twice that day. Once to his mother on the phone and once to thank the postwoman. He hadn't looked someone in the eye in weeks. He hadn't touched another person for longer. His human contact was scrolling through social media and admiring people's baking and home decorating skills. He'd never felt alone before. He'd always filled his life with people. He always had a lot of friends.

It was at that moment that Thomas realised that nobody was checking up on him except his family. There was nobody for miles who had dropped him a text or a call since he locked the door behind him three weeks earlier. If something went wrong he wouldn't know where to go with it.

'I'm just tired. I'm being silly. Overthinking,' he said out loud to his empty flat, his voice cracking from under use. He took himself to bed, but sleep was slow to overtake him. He stared into the darkness of his room hoping to be back to work and human contact soon.

Weeks passed and numbers of infections and deaths soared. Politicians and conspiracy theorists peddled their wares, false hope and lies, but no end was in sight. Lockdown was extended, masks were made the law when in public spaces. Trips to the supermarket became like a march of silent strangers. Communication from behind a mask was so unnatural that people moved around the aisles on mute. No eye contact. Steering a wide berth. Fear of the invisible killer was king and loneliness was his queen.

He passed his time with online workouts and shopping. Parcel after parcel arrived, a few things that he needed but many he didn't. He would walk once a day and return to a flat that felt more like a cell the more often he returned. Boredom with no end is a destructive force. Silence is an enemy when no voice is going to call.

The nights were the hardest. A brain that hasn't been stretched for days does not rest easily. A mind unchallenged will play memories to fill the space. Thomas would lie awake through the small hours remembering every regret of his life. Faces of those he had hurt or who had hurt him would return and tell their stories. He would wrestle with the ambitions he'd never pursued

and the opportunities he'd spurned for fear of failure. Disappointment and dread are a dangerous coupling.

On a Tuesday in April, who knows what date, Thomas woke up to a knock on his door. His eyes focussed on his watch to see 11.04 am. Another morning wasted. He scrambled to his door wrapped in a towel. He was greeted with the smiling eyes of a woman he'd never seen before, her face covered in a mask. A parcel sat in the hallway between them.

'I live in building C. This came to me instead of you,' she said, 'It gave me an excuse to get out of the flat to be honest.'

'Uh, thanks,' Thomas replied, still coming to his senses, 'just another impulse buy. Furlough is full of them.'

'Ha, yeah. Who knew we'd need so much random crap to keep us going? I'm Nita,' she replied, holding her hand out and then pulling us back again, 'no hand shakes take some getting used to.'

'Oh, I know. The elbow bump isn't for me though. Thomas.'

'I know, it says it on the parcel. I'm basically Sherlock Holmes,' she laughed at her own joke, 'anyway, I'm off for a run. See you around.'

'Hope so. Thanks again.' Thomas replied and closed the door.

Perhaps it was isolation and the lack of human interaction but Thomas spent the rest of the day thinking about Nita. He was prone to this kind of thing. Thomas was one of those people who as a teenager would fall in love with a girl he talked to for 6 seconds in a shop. As an adult he hadn't changed that much, he still, after a few drinks, thought friendly bar staff were flirting with him rather than just being good at their job. Today, it was a friendly neighbour, delivering a misdirected parcel who he was spending too much time thinking about.

He fell asleep again on the sofa, halfway through his 5th mob movie of the week. He needed to get some kind of routine. He could feel his mental health was becoming more fragile as lockdown wore on. He wasn't built for this kind of existence. It was so destructive.

Thomas woke up early for the first time in days and forced himself to get the day started. He figured that some healthy food and exercise might help his ever-lower mood. He also thought that he should shave off his lockdown beard as it made him look like an extra in a bad medieval

tv series. Little choices might help his mood. So he got up and prepared to do all of those things.

He pulled open his curtains and the heat and light of a sunny spring morning filled his room. His eyes strained to focus on the outside world. He'd been in his apartment-cum-cave so long that he hadn't seen daylight for a while. As his vision adjusted he realised that he was standing exactly opposite Nita who was waving from her window holding a cup of coffee.

'Hello,' she mouthed through the glass, 'nice day.' She pointed at the blue sky.

She was about 20 metres away, across the car park. Thomas waved back and nodded as he pointed at the sky.

'No beard?' Nita mouthed, rubbing her face with her hand and laughing. 'Cute.'

Thomas grinned and tried to mouth the phrase, 'as soft as a baby's bum,' but it was lost in translation. His co-mime just looked confused.

Nita pointed and clearly mouthed the words, 'wait there.' She returned a few moments later with an A4 pad and a marker.

07220876546 - Me - Nita xx

She held the pad against the window. Thomas grabbed his phone and added her number.

'Hi' he texted, unsure of what else to write.

'Hi yourself,' came an instant reply, but the three little dots remained on the screen, more was to follow.

'I figured if you needed anything or if you caught the plague you could text me and vice-versa,' Nita wrote.

'Ah, that's nice. Good idea,' Thomas replied, 'mostly wine and fast food at the minute, covid is making me a fat drinker.'

'Lmao. Talk soon then. I'm off for my daily exercise allowance. N xx.'

Thomas waved and walked into his kitchen. It was nice to have a conversation. Even if it was by mime and text message. Nita really seemed nice. He needed some good people around and the fact that she was beautiful helped a lot.

'Don't be an obsessive weirdo,' he said out loud as he clicked the kettle on and reached for the latest subscription bag of expensive coffee he'd bought on a whim. Another lockdown purchase.

At 11.02 am Thomas looked up from his laptop to see his phone flash - a text from Nita.

'You awake?' it said.

'Yeah. You?' he replied then followed up with, 'I mean, you clearly are. You okay.'

'Just a bit lonely. Feel a bit like everyone has forgotten about me. I know that's a bit dramatic but it's how I feel,' Nita replied, 'sorry for the depressing message.'

'Oh no. Don't be sorry. I feel the same. You're the only person to contact me all day. Well, that is, apart from my mum and all she had to say was that someone I've never heard of has 'the Covid' as she calls it.' Thomas replied.

'My mum is the same. Must be an age thing.' Nita replied, 'are you a close family?'

'We are and we aren't. We don't see each other much but we adore one another,' Thomas smiled thinking about his mum busying herself in the kitchen when guests arrived. He missed her infuriating ways.

Thomas and Nita continued to share about their families. Her mum and dad had moved to Canada three years earlier and she hadn't seen them in a while. The distance from family felt, to Thomas, like something they had in common. He found himself opening up to her in ways he hadn't to anyone for what felt like an age.

The longer they messaged that night the more their stories ricocheted off one another. Thomas imagined that if they'd been in a pub they'd have been finishing one another's sentences. He found himself smiling a lot. He was sure that if he'd been able to see Nita she would have been smiling too.

'Oh Wow. It's 1 am. How did that happen?' Nita texted. I have a work check-in call at 9am. To make sure I'm still alive, I guess. Thanks for the company Tommo. You're a babe. Nanight x.'

'You're a babe yourself. Night x' Thomas replied choosing to ignore Tommo, which he hated but also hating himself for using the word babe.

For the first night in ages he felt a little bit of hope as he went to sleep. He felt less alone. He felt less like this was going to be hard forever. He smiled as his eyes closed for the last time that evening. Sweet dreams indeed.

Over the following days Thomas and Nita would share little moments of their day; selfies and photos of granola. They'd text their opinions on game show contestants dress-sense and the ever worsening lockdown hair situations of television presenters.

Days started with a 'morning neighbour' and ended with 'night night over there.' Every time his phone buzzed with a text his mind buzzed too, a little kick of endorphins that carried his mood to a better space, even if only for a few seconds.

He regularly found himself sitting on the sofa scrolling through the photos Nita sent him. She was beautiful, with her dark eyes and hair. She had that look that Thomas' mum would describe as "like a wee hippy girl.' He could hear her saying it when he looked at the photos.

Thomas fought his inner romcom and tried hard not to write a grand gesture and happily ever after in his head.

'She's just a neighbour who you're texting,' he would say to himself, 'you're both lonely, is all,' but deep down he could feel a connection growing as the days went on. He found it harder not to fall into his old ways.

There's nothing romantic about a man who falls in love with every woman he meets and then reads into her every word. So much of the romance we get force fed by movies is unhealthy behaviour. Many of these leading men behave in invasive and obsessive ways. Thomas' knew this, it's why he fought his thoughts. Feelings of attraction are one thing, obsession is a whole other matter.

'Night you XX' his phone buzzed from Nita.

'Night neighbour.' he replied and turned off the light.

They'd just live critiqued the newest 'let's all try and feel good as a nation' show on tv. They shared the same level of sarcasm and faux-judgemental humour and it made the evenings of isolation easier having someone to joke with. Thomas needed the company. Even if it was from across the car park.

Two hours later Thomas woke to the buzzing of his phone. He groggily reached for the handset and saw that it was Nita.

'Hello? Nita? Everything okay?' he said, slightly frantically from the shock of being awake.

'Just feeling lonely and I decided to call you. I can't sleep,' came the soft voiced reply. 'Can you talk to me for a while until I sleep?'

'Okay. Sure. Um. What should I say?' Thomas, like anyone would, struggled to speak on demand. 'Did I ever tell you about my hometown? It's beautiful.'

He went on to talk about his hometown using every Irish stereotype he could think of. He wished she hadn't started, he could feel homesickness infecting him as he spoke. He missed his mother and he missed the coast. He missed his dad's jokes and the smell of the sea.

'You're nice. Thank you, Tommo. I like you. I'll sleep now. Night night,' Nita interrupted the tourist's guide to Ireland and hung up before Thomas could reply.

'I like you too, Nita. A lot,' he said to the dead line. 'I really do.'

Over the coming weeks the texting lessened and the phone calls became longer. Thomas felt like he'd known Nita forever, yet he'd never been closer than 6 feet away and even then it was once at his flat door. They would stand in their windows and talk on the phone. Thomas called this analogue FaceTiming and thought he was a genius for making that joke up. It wasn't that funny though.

On a Tuesday, Ian called with the good news that Thomas would be returning to work 2 days a week. They'd made the office 'Covid secure' which was a phrase that Thomas detested almost as much as 'socially distanced' but he knew what they meant. He was to be back in the office on Friday.

He texted Nita the big news.

'Ahh. Losing my lockdown comrade. Sad times,' she replied with a gif of a crying kitten.

'Haha. Very sad. It's only two days a week. I'll be back. Miss me!' Thomas replied, feeling smug that he'd be missed.

Friday morning was brutal. Thomas had been getting up at 10 or 11 most days but he had to be at work for 7:30 am. His body wasn't used to going to sleep early, so when he woke up he'd only been asleep a few hours. He was late from the moment he stepped his feet out of bed. He rushed through a breakfast and skipped his shower just to make it on time.

He arrived just as Ian started the team meeting.

'I see not everything has changed then. Welcome back Thomas.' Ian said.

'How can I already be annoyed by you?' Thomas thought to himself but just smiled and nodded.

After the meeting he reached for his phone and realised that he'd left it at home. He'd have to go for 12 hours without his phone. What a disaster! How would he avoid talking to Ian at lunch? He worried about Nita thinking he was ignoring her.

At lunch time he had a reprieve. Big news was being announced by the Prime Minister at a press conference. It was great news. People were allowed to mix in groups no bigger than six made from 2 households. Travel restrictions were lifted and some shops would be allowed to open. It all kicked in at midnight.

Thomas' imagination raced to him knocking the door of Nita's flat with flowers and chocolates and showing his grand (clichéd) gesture. He could now ask her on dates. They could actually spend real time together. He could let her know how he felt without it feeling forced or pointless because of lockdown. Great news. 7 pm couldn't come soon enough.

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A 12 hour shift quickly became a 15 hour shift. People realised that the office was open and months worth of calls flooded in. Exhausted and carrying an almost cold pizza, Thomas didn't reach home until closer to 11pm than to 7pm. He lifted his phone and it had one message. He was surprised and disappointed.

'I'll miss you,' it said, sent at 7:40 am.

'I missed you,' he replied.

He ate his pizza watching the news but constantly checked his phone. No reply. She must be asleep. He should get some sleep soon. Tomorrow was coming soon and he had things to do.

For the second night in a row Thomas slept poorly and for the second morning in a row he rose early. That morning though, he was energised. He shaved and showered and was out the door by 8:30am. He returned an hour later with chocolates and wine.

He spent the half hour from getting home until 10 am looking at himself and trying to think of what to say. He laughed as he realised he looked like a character in a tv Christmas film playing out his speech for the second to last scene.

'You're an idiot, Thomas. Just say what you want to say. Right, let's go,' he said winking at himself in the mirror and instantly feeling ashamed of himself for doing it.

He grabbed the wine, chocolates and his keys and left the flat. It was raining heavily as he crossed the car park. He almost slipped but arrived safely if soaked through. The lift was closed for covid safety, which made him wonder why it wasn't in his building; he'd have to take the stairs.

He walked along the corridor with his heart beating fast in his chest. He didn't know why he was so nervous, he'd never been shy around women or about asking them out. This felt different, they'd known each other for what felt like forever but never really met for any length of time.

He pushed the button and stepped back but almost immediately it opened. A middle aged woman opened the door.

'Hello. Can I help you?' she said, looking Thomas up and down.

'Oh. I think I've the wrong flat. I was looking for Nita,' Thomas said.

'Oh. Anita. Yes. This is the right place but you've missed her,' the woman replied with a concerned smile.

'Missed her?' Thomas asked, 'has she popped out somewhere?'

'She's gone home. Her flight left this morning.'

'Her flight?' Thomas asked, he could feel his voice raise slightly.

'She went back to Canada. She was only renting this place from us. It's a holiday let. Her flight was eventually rescheduled to this morning,' the woman replied but Thomas didn't hear much after the word Canada. He was sinking.

'Um. Thanks. Yeah. Okay. Thanks,' Thomas muttered and walked back down the corridor and into the rain. He was stunned.

He threw the flowers in the sink and collapsed on the sofa. He lifted his phone and called Nita's number. No ringtone. No answerphone. It was off. Thinking she was probably above the Atlantic somewhere he sent a text.

'You're gone?'

It remained unread for good. He kept checking for days. He never heard from her again.

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Some people walk with us through our lives and others drift through them for a short time but have a huge impact. They catch our eye or catch our hearts and distract us from the chaos or monotony of existence on this planet. They are the what ifs and near misses. Keep your eyes open for them. They might just get you through and you'll miss them when they're gone.

