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Julia Bennett

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Lockdown 3, Day 58: 3rd March 2021

Julia Bennett

The Story

As the nearly empty early morning train from London enters the outskirts of the northern city, Natalie wakes to take her tablets. 6:03 am. She is used to waking at this time. But today, sleepy after staying up late playing online games with people across timezones, she dozes off again until eight. She finally hauls herself out of bed and lets Matty, the dog, out into the small back garden. Startled, next door's black and white cat jumps down off the wall where she had been surreptitiously keeping an eye on the bird feeder.

Almost three hundred miles south, on the Kent coast, Robyn wakes to the sound of her ex-partner moving around the small, one-bedroom flat. She's cooking something, bacon—Robyn can smell it. The kitchen is also Robyn's office.

After a breakfast of bread, freshly delivered from the local artisan bakery, and homemade raspberry jam from her mum, Natalie grinds some beans by hand and takes a mug of strong coffee upstairs to the box room at the front of the small terraced house in one of the not so up-and-coming parts of Manchester. She switches on her computer. 9:13 am. Despite almost a year of working, largely unobserved, from home, she still feels the compulsive pull of the nine o'clock start. Matty, who has padded up the stairs behind her, lies down on the floor by the radiator. Emails checked and disposed of, she looks out of the window at the jackdaws nesting in the chimney of the house across the street. It's grey outside, which fits her mood. Even with the radio on, she can hear the lodger getting up in his bedroom next to her office. His constant presence irritates her intensely, despite having been friends for ages and having lived together happily for several years of (old) normal life.

Robyn paces around the kitchen to the rhythm of seagull cries. Wires form a complex web across the room as chargers are plugged into available sockets. Using her phone, she is copying Zoom meeting links in an attempt to avoid setting up her increasingly decrepit laptop. At 9:21am, she jumps into the shower before her first meeting of the day, which she joins with hair still damp. The smell of her ex-partner's bacon permeates the kitchen/office; even a fresh pot of coffee and coconut oil shampoo don't hide it.

At 11:02, Natalie gets a call from the mortgage valuer. In order to solve the 'problem' of her lodger, she is hoping to re-mortgage and be able to afford to give him his notice. Her dream is to have friends and family to stay over the summer in what will be the freshly painted (perhaps buttercup yellow, she thinks) spare room. She puts the valuer off until after the weekend as there are various things she wants to fix before she comes. On the plus side, she now has a good excuse to cancel the

date that had been arranged for tomorrow—a walk in the cold with a stranger, even a good-looking one, doesn't really appeal to her. But being single forever was never her life plan either. And time, in terms of her fertility, seems to be rushing along like a river in full spate whilst she is stuck in a Groundhog-day whirlpool of lockdowns.

12:04 pm. Robyn is out of milk. Meetings over for now, she walks to the local supermarket to get some, along with a 'meal deal' for lunch. She's confused by what is included in the deal and what isn't. It seems to have changed since she last did this—months ago now, before this latest lockdown. Even simple changes create a kind of discombobulation. What used to be the easy dance of waltzing through everyday activities, like snatching a cheese and pickle sandwich from the chiller display, a bag of salt and vinegar crisps and a nice cold can of coke, now feels as complex as performing an Argentine tango on 'Strictly'.

Excited and slightly panicked by the quick response from the mortgage people (she only applied a week ago), Natalie buys a radiator cover for the hallway from B&Q to save painting over the rust. Then she takes Matty down the road to the local park, where they chat with fellow dog walkers. It's cold out and Natalie hadn't thought to take gloves. At least it isn't raining. Purple crocuses dot the damp grass, and spears of daffodils are promising a brighter future around the base of a large beech tree. Matty finds a decent stick to play with. It's good to have a reason to get out of the house every day, and it's also lovely to be able to spend so much time with Matty, who is getting on a bit now.

3:17 pm. Robyn is in another Zoom meeting. Her laptop, balanced precariously on a copy of 'The Rise and Fall of the British Empire', keeps telling her the disk is almost full. Deleting stuff doesn't help. She is hyper-aware of the dirty dishes stacked behind her in the sink; she hasn't worked out how to blur the background. Out of the kitchen window are cheerful signs of spring despite the grey skies. White blossom blankets next door's cherry tree. There is the sound of a machine nearby, perhaps coming from the house down the street that is being renovated. A seagull atop a chimney looks in at the messy room mockingly. Robyn struggles to concentrate.

Natalie finishes work for the day and then heads to B&Q to pick up her order. She buys paint for the hall and plants for the front garden. As it's nearly seven when she gets back, all the neighbours are home and there's no space to park outside the house. It takes several trips to and from the car to bring everything inside. As she struggles in with the final load, next door's cat scoots out from under the bushes and squeezes under the gate. A quick chat with the lodger, who is watching 'Coronation Street', and then she adds leftover pasta to homemade sauce from the freezer for a quick but still healthy dinner. The lodger comes into the kitchen to eat too and shares his cheap red wine.

7:56 pm. Robyn is in her pyjamas, waiting for the final meeting of the day. She is a little nervous. There are a hundred women present in the Zoomiverse, and she is one of the speakers. An hour later, her Whatsapp is pinging with messages to say thanks and well done. Women are fiercely supportive of each other, Robyn finds, perhaps because they are a small minority in the transport industry. Someone mentions a cat stuck on top of a train at Euston Station.

Before heading up to bed, Natalie gets around to the YouTube yoga she missed this morning due to her lie in. Afterwards, she feels calm and relaxed. There are clean sheets to put on the bed. Dried outside on the line for the first time this year, they smell of the outdoors, warm sun, with a tiny hint of spring on its way. After double-checking the back door is locked, Natalie snuggles into her freshly-made bed, with Matty lying on his bed on the floor.

Finally able to pack away the troublesome laptop, Robyn puts some M&S lemon chicken in the oven, a little worried about how the kitchen might smell in the morning. But right now, it smells—and

tastes—lovely. The kitchen blind is down, the beady eyes of seagulls shut out, just some scented candles for lighting. The cooker fan hums as it cools down. Messaging friends. The fridge buzzes, a strangely calming sound. Almost time for bed.

10:54 pm. Euston Station. A tabby cat jumps from the top of what should have been the nine o'clock train to Manchester, onto a bin put there by concerned staff to help it disembark. Tail in the air, the cat swaggers off into the night.

The Research Story

'Natalie' and 'Robyn' are pseudonyms for two of the fifty-nine participants who shared their one-day diaries with me, dated 3rd March 2021, when the UK was still in Lockdown 3 as it had been since 6th January. Having immersed myself in their diaries in order to write this fictionalised account of their days, I feel I know these two women intimately. Of course I don't. At least not the 'real' Natalie and Robyn, who entrusted me with their stories. This is a piece of fiction based on their diaries, pulling a little from other diaries I received, from my own experience of the day, from the media, and quite a lot from my imagination. By creating short fiction, I am hoping to engage with a wider public than an academic journal article would usually reach (Watson, 2016).

All ethnographies are about telling stories, and the veracity of that story is always open to some debate (Denzin, 1992). The aim of telling ethnographic stories is to draw out wider issues than those of a single individual (Speer, 2019). By starting from the individual story—via the diary—and then bringing this into conversation with other diaries or stories, there is a shift from an ethnography of multiple individual experiences to the shared experience of the day, thus centering the time and place of the stories. Although the media of production (writing) is shared between original diary and fictionalised story, they are different modes of meaning-making (Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey, 2006). The fictionalised story is to the diaries as a film adaptation is to the original book: one takes from the other but potentially rearranges details for dramatic effect. Importantly this extra step in the writing of the ethnography allows for a more comprehensive or "3D" picture of the day, each protagonist acting as a distinct camera angle in providing their perspective of the shared experience (Bennett, 2014).

Fictionalising the diaries is an ethnographic experiment which aims to extend the boundaries of academic research on and public engagement with experiences of lockdown. Writing sociological fiction is intended to present sociological concepts in a publicly accessible way (Watson, 2016); as Tipper and Gilman (2019) say, sociological fiction can be a useful tool for thinking oneself into different scenarios. The experiences documented here will be shared by many others across the UK: whilst each is unique, the diaries also share the rhythms of this particular day. As with Stewart's (2007) figuration of everyday life, the stories comprise familiar snapshots and details of daily routines: food, exercise, conversations, animals, work, smells, tastes, colours, weather.

I brought together these two diaries because they seem to speak to each other, to have a synergistic rhythm (Lefebvre, 2004). Both are living with people they would really rather not be sharing a home with. Both begin the day feeling quite down, but finish it feeling a sense of achievement and calm, making the most of small sensory pleasures such as clean sheets and a scented candle. For me, these stories of the day exemplify daily life during lockdown. No single story tells the whole story (Denzin, 1992), but, pulled together, these two diarists allow us to see what being a young, single woman might have been like during lockdown.

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Julia Bennett is a sociologist at the University of Chester researching belonging, community, place and everyday life.