

The Door

By Faye Bird

One: Sara

Together

-I hate you!

I screamed it.

Normally I would scream it and leave the house, slamming the door, hard, making everything shake – the windows, the walls – so my anger was as visible as a giant uprooting a tree – and I'd stride up the street so fast my angry thoughts would be running behind me, unable to keep up, like a small child desperate for love.

But now I had NOWHERE TO GO.

Nowhere.

But my room.

Caged.

This is what it feels like to be a lion in a pen in a zoo in a city where stuff should be happening, but it isn't. And I'm pacing the floor, up and down, backwards and forwards, and if you came up to stroke me, I'd bite your arm off.

I want to see my friends. I want to see my boyfriend. If I don't see them I think I'm going to burst - like I'm in some alien horror where my insides come out and my face is screaming, but there is no sound. I'm a silent scream. That's what I am. Like that painting that's everywhere – Munch's The Scream – that's what I feel like. No one can hear me because there's so much on the inside right now.

She won't let me out.

My Mum.

And all I want to do is go out.

Three weeks in.

On the news this morning they said they are going to announce three more.

Locked in.

Locked up.

There's a meeting on Thursday and they'll announce it then. But if they know what's going to happen, why wait? Why not make it three weeks from today? And then we can start getting on with it, getting over it, getting it done?

I keep looking at the calendar on my phone and counting the weeks. The weeks we've been here, the week's still to come, and wondering when it's over, who I'll go out with and where I'll go.

Seven weeks in, will I still even be me?

Twelve weeks in, will I even know myself?

Won't everything be different? It's hard to imagine that it'll go back to how it was, but then if it isn't the same, then what?

My brain can't catch these thoughts – can't catch them long enough to look, process, understand. It's like trying to capture a kaleidoscope of butterflies in a net full of holes.

I don't like it.

The way it's making me think.

It's like living in a pause -

We're on hold.

I'm on hold.

And there's too much time to think.

Bored.

Bored. Bored. Bored

Bored. Bored. Bored. Bored.

Mum says that something always comes out of nothing, that there is lightness in dark, that good comes out of bad, that when you've reached the lowest point the only way is up.

Mum always spots the flower growing in between the cracks – the tiny flash of colour between two grey slabs.

All I can see are the slabs. All I can feel is the grey. The nothing.

Are we at the lowest point yet?

Because every day feels like a day in which time forever slows down and I'll never get to go to town, hang out in the park with Lexi, go shopping with Ava, lie on the grass with Caleb, hold his hand, look into his face, wish him happy birthday and kiss him and kiss him and kiss him again. Because it's his birthday and I didn't want his birthday to be like this - I had plans - for us. Surprise plans. No one wants to celebrate a birthday like this.

I know that sounds bad, with everything that is happening.

But it's totally real, it's how I feel.

At least you've got your phone. Imagine if you didn't have that.

That's what Mum says.

But it's not the same on your phone.

I mean I lived on my phone before the virus – streaks and selfies and snaps – but it's not the same. Not now that's all there is.

And I can't edit my life, like I used to, because I'm not living my life, and my hair looks bad and I've noticed I get dimples when I laugh (how did I not notice that before?) and so I'm not face-timing anyone. No one. Not even Lexi. Because I don't even know what to say. I mean, what would I even talk about? There is literally nothing to say.

I've never wanted to go to school so much.

When I go back I'm going to be so happy to see everyone. Even Sean and Mikey and their white socks and black trainers and endless chat about Man U.

Even Brianna and her daily barge into the lunch queue.

Even Mr Wallace.

In fact, I can't wait to go back into Mr Wallace's class and for him to make that stupid joke as he gives out the work because you know what, I'm going to laugh. I'm going to be SO happy to be back in his class and I'm going to say -

Good one, Sir!

I'm going to smile him a smile like I've never smiled before.

I'm going to let Brianna in the queue.

I'm going to talk to Sean and Mikey about Man U.

Because I CAN'T WAIT.

I just can't wait to GO BACK.

There's only so much Netflix you can watch in one day, right? Before you realise that you've just done a full circle from

Bored back to

Bored back to

Bored and

Bored again.

Mum says, *Why don't you...?*

Read

Play a game

Do a puzzle

Exercise

Sort out your clothes

Phone someone

Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp, House Party

Make something

Bake something

Start something new

Italian, Spanish, French, German, Japanese

Walk

Cycle

Run

But I don't want to do any of those things.

I just want to see someone.

No - I want to see Caleb.

Wish him happy birthday.

Seriously - what's there to stop me just going to his anyway?

-Mum, I'm going out.

-What? No, you can't... Where?

-To see Caleb.

-No, Sara...

-We'll stand 2 metres apart.

-Where?

-I don't know, at his house, at the park. If we stay 2 metres apart it's okay, right?

-But will you?

-Yes, Mum!

-I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea. Everything in the news – it's telling us to stay home, stay in. It's not essential. It's not an essential trip.

-It's essential to me, Mum! I'm going mad not seeing him and I've got something I need to give him –

-Listen, Sara. This isn't forever. It's just for this next few weeks, for however long. When it's over –

-When it's over? Seriously, *when* will that even be?

-I don't know, no one does, but right now, we need to follow the advice, go out with people from your own household, not meet anyone else so that –

-So we don't spread the virus! I know! But if we don't get close to each other, we won't spread it! I know about social distancing. I'm not stupid, Mum! Sometimes you treat me like I'm stupid, like I'm 5! Don't you trust me?

-Don't push it with me, Sara. I understand how you feel – how much you want to see him – and I do trust you –

-You don't!

-I do. But it's a no. I'm sorry.

-I hate you!

And that's how I left.

Two: Mum

Alone

Imagine a door – wherever you are – however you feel – imagine it. Draw it in your mind, or simply put it somewhere close. Now you know that it's there. And you can go through it whenever you want – just once – just one time – and when you do, you will find me. I'll be waiting. I'll be there.

My mother told me this story when I was a child. It was a story that had been passed down to her from her mother, and she passed it down to me.

I see it now – my door.

I've drawn it with white chalk on the dark blue of the kitchen wall. It's looking at me and I'm looking at it. I worry that if I blow on it, or if I lick my finger and press on it, it might just disappear. So I don't do that. And there's no danger that anyone else will, because Sara just left the house. She just climbed out of her bedroom window. She doesn't know I saw her, but I did.

She's gone to meet Caleb.

And now it's just me – here – and outside there's a virus, a pandemic, and suddenly after three weeks together Sara is no longer here and I am alone.

Why don't you go out, play with your friends?

That's what Mum and Dad used to say to me in the long, hot summers when I was a little girl, bored and alone.

Go and find someone to play with!

But the thing is, as a child, I was happy being alone. I had friends to play with, friends in the street, but I liked playing alone.

I'd spend whole afternoons digging in the earth. I'd spend hours with a worm. I'd lift it out of the dark, warm soil, carry it around, watch it wriggle, slide, contract, then put it back in the ground, wait and watch for its next move.

Sometimes I'd make it a house – a wormery – on a tray or in a cardboard box. I'd water it, sprinkle it with leaves, tuck it away for the night and in the morning I'd wake and sneak straight down to see if the worms had stayed. I don't remember if they did or they didn't. I guess, they left, because that's how it is, and that's okay.

Thup. Thup. Thup.

The sound of the ball against the sidewall as I played catch and throw.

Thup Bounce Thup

Throw and Catch.

Thup Bounce Thup

Catch and Throw.

And when it rained, and I couldn't be in the garden, I'd stand in front of the long mirror in my parent's room and try to catch my reflection out. I'd turn my head very slowly to the side, my eyes desperately trying to hold on to what I could see in the glass. Would I catch my reflection, stock still, unmoving, as I turned? Would I find it staring back?

As I've got older, I like it less - being alone.

Right now, I do not want to be alone.

And I don't want Sara to be alone.

I want Sara to come back home.

Because sometimes it's the bad things, scary things, stuff that is out of your control that happens when you are alone.

Alone is where the wild things are, it's down the rabbit hole, it's what happens when the cyclone comes and lifts your house and drops you down on a wicked witch and makes you journey to Oz and meet a wizard who lets you down.

There's no place like home.

I tap my heels and close my eyes and I wish with all my heart for Sara to come home.

I look at my door. My chalky door.

Mum, are you on the other side? If I open the door will you be there, waiting, just like you said?

I hear her voice.

The ants are back.

The ants.

It's summer.

Bloody ants.

That's what Mum would say.

I feel as if this happened every summer, but did it?

I'd come downstairs in the early morning and find my mum in her dressing gown filling the kettle.

Careful where you stand, love. They're everywhere!

I'd look down at the kitchen floor and see hundreds of tiny black dots running this way and that in peril, as if they knew that the end was coming, but for a moment, in their panic, and despite the fact they'd found their way in, they couldn't for the life of them remember the way out.

I'd sit on the floor – no, I'd squat, because I didn't want them crawling up my legs, getting into my nightie – and I'd watch them.

Do I care about the ants?

That's what I'd ask myself.

Is it bad to kill the ants? God says it's bad to kill living things.

All things bright and beautiful. All creatures great and small.

But there are lots of them, and however many Mum kills, they keep surviving, coming back, despite the morning and evening pouring of scalding hot water.

So why kill them? What's so bad about them? What do they actually do?

That's what I asked Dad.

He said you had to kill them to keep them away.

If you leave them you'll just get more and more and they'll go into the cupboards. They're dirty. We don't want them in our cupboards, in our food.

That's what he said.

But the ants didn't look dirty to me. The kitchen floor did. Sticky and dirty and I didn't think that was because of the ants.

Don't step on an ant he's done nothing to you. There might come a time when he's stepping on you.

Sometimes I'd run in from the garden in my bare feet – hard earth, hot patio, sticky lino. I'd run through the hall, up the stairs, leaving a trail of crispy grass from between my toes like scattered breadcrumbs so I could find my way back.

You're making a mess!

Mum would call out – break away from her adult conversation – then lower her voice again to continue speaking into the chunky phone that sat unmoving in the hall.

I ignored her.

Out of sight, out of mind.

She'll keep talking. She'll forget.

I look at my door.

I don't want to keep going back. Why do I keep going back to the memories, to the sayings, the words, of the past? Why can't I look forward? Look forward to seeing her again when I open the door. Look forward to what the world might look like then?

Maybe it the aloneness.

The nothingness.

The space in my brain that's been created by the not-going-to-work-going-out-seeing-friends-travelling-talking-meeting-people-trying-new-things – it returns me instead to the pictures of the past, magnifying the reflection of a life lived so far.

Right now it's hard to look forward, project, think about what I might still do.

So I'm in this day.

Come home, Sara.

Just come home.

I love you, a bushel and a peck, a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck.

I'm remembering again.

Remembering being small enough to be scooped up entirely – all of me – pulled onto a lap and into a hug – enveloped, bundled, fitting – like a roo in a pouch – and then tucked in with kisses where the love was so big it was in everything and everywhere until I had to fight to break free of it because sometimes it felt like it was all too much.

Good too much, not bad too much.

And someone would grab the chub of my cheek between their finger and thumb...and it was fun, funny, but it kind of hurt – like a tickle that goes on for too long.

I'd pull away, smiling, rubbing my face.

Love is amazing, love is beautiful, but love forever leaves a mark on a fragile, feeling heart.

No one ever tells you that, do they?

You have to find it out for yourself.

X marks the spot.

I'm drawing a map.

A treasure map.

A map for freedom.

I'm colouring it in - yellow for the sand, green for the palm tree, black for the footprints that will lead you around the island to the spot.

Dig here.

Dig for victory.

Dig for the stuff that will make your dreams come true.

The jewels, the pearls, the glistening gold cups and chains – and then what?

Nothing lasts forever.

It's what I said to Sara.

These weeks will pass.

I sit looking at the door and I think about what life was like ten days ago, twenty days, thirty days ago.

I met a friend in town for coffee – we talked, laughed, made plans.

I got the train to Waterloo and walked along the South Bank for a meeting at London Bridge. I looked at the Tate, weaved through the stalls of Borough Market, overheard conversations in at least four different languages outside The Globe.

I counted my daily steps – must try for 10,000 every single day.

I met my oldest friend for pizza. Always at the same place – same table – or at least we try. We messaged before - will you look for a deal this time or shall I?

These were the everyday things.

The little things, the nonsense things, the things that if you asked me then, mattered just a bit (or so I thought), not too much.

Now they seem so frivolous, and yet without them, a huge chunk of my so-called life has gone.

Friendship.

Possibility.

Chance.

Gone.

I read today in the paper that it will never be the same again.

Locked down.

Until we find a new normal.

Even the language has changed.

Stay home, save lives.

Now we live in our homes, not outside of them.

Love the one you're with.

Sara – it's been three hours now.

Better days will return.

I'm looking at the door.

Please, please Sara, come home.

This is my one form of exercise. If anyone asks me, this is what it is. It's just different to normal because it started with me climbing out of my bedroom window, not walking out my front door, but it's a walk now, like any other, like the walk Mum's forced me out on every other day of this week and the two weeks before that. If anyone asks me, it's my one form of exercise. Not that anyone will.

It's kind of weird being out without Mum.

I don't like it.

Every time I see someone ahead of me, walking towards me, I'm looking at them with suspicion and I'm watching and waiting for them to show me their next move – will they step in the road, wait in some widening alongside the pavement that luckily just happens to be there, or wait for me to take the lead and get out the way? It's like a dance without any music or passion.

What happens if I don't leave the 2-metre gap and we just walk past each other? I don't really understand. I keep holding my breath when I'm close to someone, maybe too close. Does that even do anything?

I guess what happens is I'll either get ill in a few days or I won't.

They said young people aren't ill with it, they carry it, they infect. But now I've seen stuff in the news about children who are ill.

Everything keeps on changing and not changing at all.

Now I'm branding every person I pass as good or bad, depending on how much space they leave between me as they pass.

And how ill they look.

And whether they smile or glare.

-There's nothing wrong with me! Why are you waiting there?

That's what some old guy just shouted at me as I stopped to give him space to pass. He was wearing a facemask and gloves and he didn't look like there was nothing wrong with him. He looked scared. We're all scared, aren't we?

This is no way to live.

That's what I'm thinking now. Because I'm judging him and he's judging me - we're all out here judging each other and none of us are feeling very free.

I wonder, would anyone ever just come up to me and cough in my face? Like an act of terrorism? Like a really angry, messed up person who's been stuck inside for days and who's just lost it and left the house in a storm and has the virus and hates the world and...is that what I've just done? Got angry and come out here and brought my hate into the world? Or am I just thinking way too much?

Oh, teach me how I should forget to think.

Juliet.

Ms Stanley will be pleased. I'm quoting Shakespeare. In the Easter holidays. Wish I could tell her. Wish I could put on my uniform and go into class now and tell her. Wish it was all like it was before. Normal. Not like this.

There's someone coming towards me again now.

My heart is banging, and I don't like it – being out like this – leaving Mum like I did – being alone like this – the world, everything, being like this.

Never leave someone you love on an argument.

That's what Mum always says. But I did. Because I wanted to see Caleb, to wish him happy birthday, to wave, blow him a kiss, see his face – not in a picture or on a screen – but for real – his face – because I miss it...but will it feel worse seeing him and not being able to hug, hold, touch? Maybe this was all just one really big mistake...

There's a bus stop.

Loads of people – no, five or six – waiting.

I look behind me. The road's pretty empty. I'm going to have to step right into the middle of it to get past everyone – step right into the middle of the bus lane to get out the way.

Two metres out the way.

I'm getting closer now.

I can see their faces...the people...I'm by the hospital...everyone looks like they've just finished a shift. They're wearing face masks slung like bandanas around their necks, wide-eyed, exhausted, waiting for the bus, waiting to go home, waiting for this all to be over.

Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.

Maybe I should go back.

I feel bad.

Everything feels bad – here, now – and at home.

But I'm halfway there. I'm halfway to Caleb's and all I'm doing is walking down the street, now the road, now passing the key workers, the doctors, the porters, the nurses...did they lose patients tonight? Did they send anyone home tonight?

I look at my phone. Nothing from Mum. That's kind of good, but kind of not. She'd usually call.

A message from Caleb – How are you doing?

He's asking me.

Love is heavy and light, bright and dark, hot and cold, sick and healthy, asleep and awake – it's everything except what it is!

More Shakespeare.

Weird.

I'm just going to keep walking because I've come this far and I'm nearly at Caleb's and I won't stay long and I've got random Shakespeare in my head and I don't want to know what that says about me...except for...I think I love him...Caleb...I think this is love.

I stand for a minute.

I don't know what I feel. It's excitement, anticipation. It's fear. It's all those things.

In a minute, maybe the feelings will disappear.

Maybe when I see Caleb I'll feel nothing because it was all about the build-up, the action, the getting here - it was more about that than the arrival itself. If the feelings disappear, then maybe it's not love.

The street is quiet.

I can hear the birds.

Maybe I've used up all my feelings now. Maybe if I stand here for a bit longer I'll catch up with myself - feel normal, level, sane.

I stand at the end of Caleb's path and I look at his house.

I've been here before, but it doesn't feel the same.

It is so still here today.

I am so still.

For a moment, none of this feels real.

I look at his door.

I walk towards it.

I knock.

And then I take

Ten

Nine

Eight

Seven

Six

Five

Four

Three

Two

One

Steps

Back.

And the door opens, and he is there. Caleb. And he smiles. A wide, happy smile and I smile right back.

Happy Birthday!

I call it out to him.

I came because I just had to wish you Happy Birthday!

That's what I shout.

And he stands and looks at me, smiling.

And the world pauses as I speak again and I don't realise what I'm saying until the words are already out –

And I love you. I mean I'm pretty sure that in the middle of all this, that I love you!

I am still.

The world is still.

And Caleb's smile turns kind of serious and he looks at me and he says –

I love you too.

And neither of us dares to move.

Four: Mum

Together

I look at the door.

I wait for Sara.

Never leave home on an argument.

That's what I always say to her. I wonder if she'll remember that, now, as she walks to Caleb's and then turns back to come home.

We've had arguments before – of course we have, but never in a situation like this where there's no room to blow off steam, find some space, when everything feels so unsafe.

Never leave home on an argument.

I remember my Mum saying that to me as I slammed the door in her face and screamed back at her – *I'm going! And you can't stop me!*

And she didn't.

I was 15. The same age as Sara is now.

I look at my chalky door.

I can't even imagine what I'd like to see on the other side of it now. Apart from you, Mum, of course. But if I could step into any world, at any time, go to any place, I think I'd go back to right here and right now thirty days ago. I'd go back to that. Just that. Because I want to live my life like that – like it was before.

But for now, I am waiting.

I'm waiting for Sara and I can't do anything else while I wait.

I can hear my emails pinging on the laptop, but they're not going anywhere. I'll get to them once Sara is back. Because even though I know she'll go to Caleb's and I'm pretty sure she'll come straight back home – and I'm sure we'll make it up – I just won't feel okay until she's home.

History repeats.

Except I'm not going to let it repeat. Not this time. I'm sitting here, on the kitchen floor, and I'm looking at my chalky door and I'm not going anywhere. Not this time.

I hear the key in the lock, the push, the turn.

I look up – it opens.

-Hi. You alright?

Sara.

She's home.

I nod. And before I know it, before I can stand up and pull her in close for a hug, she's sitting down next to me on the kitchen floor.

I tip my head to hers, gently. We take a moment. Together. Before she moves her head away.

-What've you been doing?

-Sitting here. Thinking.

I point at my door.

-I drew this.

-Why?

-Because it reminded me of Nana.

-Drawing a door on the kitchen wall in chalk reminded you of Nana?

-She used to tell me a story, when I was little, when I was scared. She'd draw me a door – in my mind or on the wall.

-Why were you scared?

-Oh, lots of reasons. The monster under the bed, the spider down the plughole and then when I was your age, that life wouldn't work out, that I wouldn't know love. The big things, the unknowns. Don't you think about those?

- I trust that things will work out, Mum. I guess because they always have until now.

I smile.

-I'm glad you feel like that.

-I'm sorry I left like I did, on an argument.

-I know.

-I just had to see Caleb. It's his birthday today.

I look up at Sara.

-I didn't know that, you didn't say.

Sara shrugs.

-You like him?

Sara looks up.

-I love him.

I smile. My daughter - in love.

-How does it feel?

-It feels nice. No, it feels amazing. A bit scary too.

I nod.

-Love is so many things. It is everything and nothing.

-What do you mean?

-I mean it can make you feel all that is good – when you're in love the volume is high, the colour is bright, the joy of just *being* – being you, being part of you and this other person – being *we* - it's suddenly in everyone – and everything – and it is the best of life.

-And the nothing?

-When it changes, which it does, because it can't be like that all the time – or it goes – because not every love can last, then the absence is the nothing and the nothing is hard.

-But at least you had it to begin with? Isn't that something to remember, celebrate? That's not nothing.

-Ah, but because you had it, and you know how good it was, all you want is to feel it again. It's the human condition, no?

Sara nods.

-I guess. But right now, it's everything, Mum.

-And Caleb, does he love you too?

-Yes.

-Well that's brilliant! Ignore me and my nothing!

-I just wish everything else would go back. Be normal. I want to make it go back to how it was.

-I know. I feel the same.

-It's like the nothing.

-It is.

-I'm sorry, Mum. About before.

-Don't be sorry. We're here now. Together. You came back.

-Of course I came back!

-And Caleb loves you!

-Yes!

-Well, how brilliant is that?

Sara and I laugh. Together, we laugh.

-So Mum, are you going to tell me Nana's story now?

Sara points at my door.

I nod.

-This story was the last thing Nana and I shared together, the last time we spent together, quietly, happily, before we got into a fight because she didn't want me going out.

-What happened?

-I left – I stormed out the house – in fury and hate – and when I came back, she'd died. She'd gone.

-Mum, I didn't know – I'm so sorry – I –

Sara takes my hand.

-So that's why you say to never leave home on an argument?

-That's right. But this story, it helped. It's always helped. And now you know something of love – the everything of love – for family, for friends, for someone who is special to you and only you, for the whole world and what it means to you – I want you to have this story. Because maybe, when the nothing comes, you can imagine the door too, and it will take you somewhere else – it will bring love close – it will help.

So, imagine a door – wherever you are – however you feel – imagine it. Draw it in your mind, or simply put it somewhere close. Now you know that it's there. And you can go through it whenever you want – just once – just one time – and when you do, you will find me. I'll be waiting. I'll be there.