

PREFACE

Blinking in the Light is a short story based on the 25 interviews that Coventry locals gave in July 2021, during the research part of this project. Though the narrative is fictional, it borrows from the details and stories that people gave us.

We asked: what were the lockdowns like for you? How did the restrictions impact your life, and the lives of those around you? What is still changing now? Which feelings are long-lasting?

This is an interpretation of what they told us. It was used for the voice-over in the film *Emerging from Lockdown*.

Georgie Evans

BLINKING IN THE LIGHT

I'm about to serve a customer when I notice an elderly man who I've never seen before. He has one hand on the door handle, and he stands, peering inside the café. Then he turns and carries on down the street.

Through the plastic divider, I say, 'People are doing that. They run away when we're busier, don't want to come in.' I pause, watch the customer tug her mask over her nose. 'That's six-fifty, please.'

She hands over the money and tells me she's glad to use cash again: she can't budget when she has to pay for everything by card. I nod agreement. She looks around, searching for the table that will make her feel the most tucked-away.

As she's walking across the café, someone else walks up to the counter and asks what's happened to the security. 'Sorry – security?' I ask. 'Counting people in and out,' he says. 'No, not here. We're just a café,' I say.

He huffs, heads back to his table, and I hear him grumbling about lockdown and policing and numbers and stats. I shake my head, get back to work.

The café has been open, wonderfully open, for a few months. It felt odd at first to dust off the tables and chairs, wash the tablecloths, put a bottle of hand sanitiser at every table. On the first day it was hectic; I had to turn people away. But it calmed when people found other places to go, like the restaurants that re-opened with fancy shelters separating their tables. Sometimes I would sit in the café for hours without a single customer, the coffee machine bubbling sadly behind me.

Now, though, most of my regulars are back. They fill up the tables, sitting separately but enjoying the little noises of people in the same physical space.

A couple of the old faces haven't returned. I don't know where they are – if they're still in the city – if they're keeping themselves safe from disease behind walls and windows. Or... No. I'm not going to think about what else might have happened.

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I'm trying to remember town at its quietest, when there were only two or three people around, and they'd always be walking with purpose through the precinct, keeping to their parallel tracks as if some intangible force were repelling them from each other. It feels like that time could never have happened. Did it really? Were we kept apart, kept away, for that long?

I hated when the café was closed, in the first lockdown. But when I spent real time there, I realised it was the perfect space for my daughter and I to spend our days – better than feeling stuck in our little flat. I'd invested in decent Wi-Fi a while back, so it was easy to set her up on a table with the laptop, a notepad, and a glass of juice. I would bite my lip as she did the schoolwork I gave her, not knowing if I was doing it right, but slowly we found a routine together. I would help her with schoolwork in the mornings and in the afternoons I'd leave her to draw or write or watch something on the laptop while I batch-cooked meals to take down to my mum's. We'd drop them off on mum's doorstep on the way home, waving at her through the front-room window.

Then lockdown came again, and once again, every table in the café was empty.

But my girl was back at school. She cried, asked not to go; she was too used to the smallness of our world. I'd taught her to avoid everyone, and suddenly she was expected to face a school full of people, each of them breathing invisibly into the corridors.

I missed her.

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Those two ladies settle in the café every week, at the table by the window. I don't ask them to come to the counter any more. I walk over with my notepad, ready to take their order, and they always beckon for me to sit down for a minute.

They tell me how much they've missed this, and each other. That they've been pals for sixty years and they spent most of lockdown sneaking into each other's back gardens. And that their grandchildren went to house parties and managed to dodge fines by hiding in wardrobes when the police came knocking. Then, today, they told me they're lucky to be here. They were quiet for a minute, their faint smiles nudging into the silence the words leave.

I made their coffees and served them the biggest slices of cake I had.

The weeks rumble towards the weekends, when I know town will be busy, loud and alive. Every week, this happens, like a tide; the wave of people will crash and froth away when Monday begins.

I pick up my girl from school and sometimes, as a treat, I'll take her to play in the new playground down by Bull Yard. I sit with the other adults, chatting about vaccines and school bubbles.

It feels as though I'm the only one still wearing a mask, although when I walk past the test centre, the lad outside is masked and stands well away from everyone who isn't.

Someone says to me, 'I just want life back,' and I think about it all week.

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There are lots of types of days. Some days I sit in Broadgate before work, when the benches are damp with last night's rain. I have only Lady Godiva and her horse for company, watching over the city like a lockdown patrol.

On other days it is bright, and the bench wood warms as the sun begins its climb up and over the sky. The city transforms, slowly, and I watch it all. Its silence becomes bustle and before long everywhere is busy, loud, full. The streets that have been dragging through the lockdowns now seem light. People walk by – they are smiling – and I can see their smiles.

But lining the square, like ornaments, there are people hidden by masks. I see them sidestep round large groups. They're trying to escape the crowd and find empty benches out of the centre: perhaps they'll have better luck by the cathedral, or down in University Square. They're not ready, yet, for the city.

I walk to the café, blinking in the light, and go about each day as it swings from quiet to busy. From behind my counter, I see the city. I watch it pick itself up and move along past my windows. I think: we're doing it. We're rediscovering the joy in having company. The city holds us together, leads each person towards another down the bustling streets.