

## Certain People

People want to know that they are right. Her customers' conversations, invariably came to down to this: *Am I right? Do you think I am right? Yes, Yes, I am right, aren't I?* We pressgang other people into supporting the choices we have already made. Traduce the lives of friends as evidence that they are going about it all wrong: living in the wrong towns, doing the wrong job, raising their kids the wrong way, and sending them to the wrong school, even if it is expensive, and so on and so forth.

When the pandemic retreated, and the first customers returned to her click-and-collect service at the library, she saw in their eyes, underlined by homemade masks, across the aggregate of dozens of faces, a new question: *what is happening to us?*

The libraries should have re-opened weeks ago but the unions fought it tooth and claw. All through lockdown, the unions had accused her and the other senior managers of harassing the librarians as she made daily welfare calls to her staff. Most of her team - the good ones - accepted reassignment elsewhere in the borough: delivering books to people in need, running online history classes for the kids in homeschooling. One of her assistant managers Sue died during lockdown from a cancer that was diagnosed, untreated, and ran rampant, all in the lonely shadow weeks when the streets were empty.

She went to Sue's funeral. It was an odd affair. The small, socially-distanced congregation wore masks. She had made herself a black mask for the occasion. They were not allowed to sing hymns, only listen to recordings of them on the tinny sound system. Sue's father had been brought from his care home for the service. He was distressed. It was, as she later told her children, *very, very* sad.

Her boss Maggie was there. She had lost her husband much earlier in lockdown. He had been terminally ill for a couple of years. It was too soon for Maggie to be back at the cemetery. The grief was fresh, his grave had not yet settled. Even though she had not lost anyone to the pandemic - her parents were already dead, and luck had spared her husband and herself - Clementina felt that she was grieving too. Isotopes of grief got in her bones, persisted in the marrow. She couldn't identify it because it was a feeling that was greater than could be contained in a single heart. It was a collective grief. She saw particles of this grief in the eyes above the masks. A grief that said, this is not what we thought would happen in our lives. We have lost a future, and we don't know how to mourn it.

In her Zoom meetings with Maggie, she was adamant that the libraries

should reopen. People need information. They need facts and knowledge. Otherwise it is all emotion, and the politicians serve up enough of that. Without facts, there is just fear and anger and a pressing desire to be proven right. Some of her customers were vulnerable, and did not even understand why the library was closed: she would see them rattling at the locked door as she cycled by on her way to the garden centre to pick up her veg box. Her library was the one of the few places used by everyone in the community: middle class mums dropping off their kids for coding clubs, the reading groups for the Turkish community, boys doing their homework, the hipsters working on their projects on the library wifi: people needed somewhere to come that wasn't their home and wasn't a commercial premises, like a cafe or a pub. Somewhere they could work on their knowledge. Every crisis needs facts on the ground: if she had her way, she would put pop-up libraries in war zones.

The unions were worried about the staff getting infected. We're all worried about that. But the library was exactly the kind of service that if it stopped for too long, somebody would cut it, and then it would be gone forever. She didn't want to get COVID any more than the next person: but there are duties and responsibilities greater than individual well-being. Her husband supported this: he was going back to work at the school. Maybe they were fools. Maybe they would get it in the second wave while the rich hid away in New Zealand.

People like to know that they are right. To begin with, everyone who lived outside of the big cities believed they had been right all along to live a slower, more spaced-out life in the country. But then there were outbreaks in farms and factories. The virus makes us all wrong, that's what is so hard to live with. Every course of action seems *wrong*. It was easier when the government ordered them to stop, stay put, do nothing. It was the uncertainty of facing so many possible futures, all of which had a good chance of being the wrong one, that exerted such pressure, and made moments that had once been so mundane - topping up the Toyota with petrol, popping into Holland and Barrett for her supplements, just walking down the high street - so fraught.

She felt sorry for the shop owners. The staff all looked terrified by the customers. Nobody feels like buying very much when you are wearing a mask. It feels too hot, too much in your body. That was it: the mask kept you awake and aware, when so much of their old life relied upon your dreaming.

To a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. To a librarian, every problem can be solved by a book. Pop-up libraries: during lockdown, she had suggested they relocate some library services under a big tarp in the

courtyard. The authorities said no. All they say is no. When people need to do something, need to belong to some common action. It feels good, to do something that makes a difference. It feels a damn site better than going to the pub, or whatever else people are now being encouraged to do. Maybe, in the old ways, we were all doing it wrong. Life. Society. How we live with one another. Maybe the reason why we spent our time reassuring ourselves and others that our decisions were right was because, deep down, we knew that it was broken. Daily life had become like cycling with a puncture: its possible to keep moving, but it feels treacherous and bloody hard going and you know that persistence only causes more damage.

There was a week or two when the streets were empty, and the blackbirds took over the railway platform, and the air was fresh and clean, that she believed that there could be change, even amidst all the awfulness of April.

A pop-up library, then. Somewhere to go when you need to know for sure. Impartial, accurate knowledge to help people think the way they need to in a pandemic. And books too. And a welcoming face. When she re-opened the library, the new security guard had told her that even though she was wearing a mask, he could tell from her eyes that she had a beautiful smile.