

## After the end

Effie scrubbed at the edge of her mug.

‘Alexa, play radio four.’

It was 5 pm, and time for the usual PM briefing. She didn’t expect anything new, but it had become as much a habit over the past year as social distancing, hand washing and wearing surgical gloves to handle shopping.

‘Mummy, mummy, look what I drew!’

Effie placed her forefinger to her lips, the fine muscles in her ears standing to attention.

‘I have to tell you now, that time has come. As of 5 am tomorrow morning, all UK citizens and residents can resume normal social contact. The pandemic is over.’

Effie thought she could detect a note of emotion in the PM’s voice, as her own heart broke into a sprint. Priya hopped from foot to foot, shoving her drawing up towards Effie’s hands. An isolated tear rolled down Effie’s cheek. Wiping it away, she smiled at Priya and, clutching Priya’s two hands in hers she said:

‘Tomorrow, we can go and see Gran.’

As she imparted this news, Jack crashed through the kitchen door.

‘No! We can’t!’

Effie registered first the panic in her son’s voice, then the blank, serene look on her youngest child’s face.

‘It’s OK, children. We’re allowed to now. The pandemic is over.’

Jack looked at his little sister.

‘Priya?’ He reached for her hand, freely given as Priya’s other thumb sought her mouth. This was going to require some explanation.

'We can go round and see Nan for real now, Priya. We don't have to use my phone to talk to her any more, and you can take one of your paintings and give her a big hug.'

Priya shifted very slightly backwards, looking down, as the sucking on her thumb grew more determined.

Jack moved forward and across his sister's body, feeding his hand behind his back as he did so.

'Mum, if it's all the same to you, we would just as soon carry on with the video calls.'

He sounded so grown up for eight.

Effie's heart seemed to drop within her torso. She held onto the sink. Of course! Priya was just three when all this started. A quarter of her life ago. She wasn't used to cuddling anyone other than her Mummy and big brother. She had learned to associate cuddles involving anyone else, with danger. How could she be expected to suddenly pick up where the adults had left off, especially with all the anxiety that had been a constant part of their lives for the past twelve months? Sure, Effie had done her best to protect her children from the knowledge that yet another hearse was passing their window, that people she had waved to just the day before were now dead. But she could not hide it when Daddy got sick. His shifts at the hospital had kept him there overnight for two weeks, before he succumbed to the virus. Telling her children that Daddy would never be coming back was like being expected to walk them into a burning building with a smile pasted on her face. But somehow, they had all found a way of carrying on, joining in zoom family exercise classes, writing when the children were in bed, planting seeds in window boxes, and chatting via video to her mum who, at 62 was the oldest person left in their family.

This was going to take time. Effie realised in that moment she would have to find a way to ease this transition for all of them, just as she had a year ago, and then when Ravi died. She longed, as she knew her mother did, to be like a normal family again. But perhaps life would never be normal again. Whatever normal was.