

Small Kindnesses - D

First, I remove the visor, pulling it off with anger. Next, the mask. It catches on my nose and I struggle for a moment, until it slips over my head, red lines on my face from where it's been gripping me. Then the gloves, and the gown. I fumble with the knot, my fingers tired and careless. After that, the cap, and finally a second pair of gloves. I breathe again - no more lives to save today. I nod at my colleagues. Many of them are facing extra night shifts, hours of long arduous work, yet I'm almost jealous. My work is all-consuming to me, so intensely important that I'm never quite ready for it to end.

I pass a friend in the hallway, he cracks a joke, and we laugh together. It feels almost normal. I look at my watch, apologise and rush off, thinking of my train. I catch it just in time, and sink into a seat, sighing. The normally packed train is painfully empty; just me and a middle-aged woman a few rows back. She notices the NHS badge hanging out of my rucksack, and leans forward. I instinctively flinch away, nervous of getting too close. She probably isn't infectious, but I'm surrounded by illness every day. She understands my gesture, and retreats.

"I just wanted to say thank you." She says. "My father caught it last month and I- it's thanks to people like you that he's still here." I smile, unsure of how to respond. She stands up to leave, and I wish I had said thank you.

I get off at the next stop, and walk through the park home, navigating around the families and elderly couples I pass by. I feel tainted, dangerous, wishing I could protect them from me and potential infection. Even so, I cautiously begin to enjoy myself, noticing springtime changes. I see the blackbird family in the oak tree, and the bluebells pushing past the grass to reach the sun, and the colour of the sky. When I reach my street, a child is drawing a rainbow in chalk on the pavement. I unlock the door to my flat, glad to have a place of my own to go back to, even without the company of friends and family. Bixie the cat rubs up against my ankles; I feel a little less alone. Once she's fed, I make myself a plate of scrambled eggs on toast, only now realising how hungry I am. Mum calls, as she always does at this time. She says she's fine, and then asks about me. If I'm being careful, if I'm eating properly, if I'm lonely. I affirm the first two, but pause after her final question. It's only then that I think to check the time; Thursday, 8pm. I hesitate, listening, and hear applause, gentle at first, then louder. Bixie meows along with them, and I find my answer.

"I'm okay."