

## Chapel Arts 2022 Short Story Competition Third Place – John Wilkins

### Isolation

Becky was having a 'Desert Island Discs' moment. Not, so much what she couldn't do without, if isolated on a tropical island, more what she was desperately missing in her current situation. It was her smartphone, she decided, her social media and music more than anything and, of course, her regular chats with her mum, but anything operated by batteries were not allowed during her confinement.

She yawned, rubbed her eyes and reached for the controller to the hospital bed, having just woken from a thoroughly satisfactory sleep, a side effect of being in an airtight and insulated room where extraneous noises were severely attenuated. The motor purred as she incrementally raised the back, the world-at-large slowly appearing through the nearest window. The muted squawking of seagulls, probably fighting over last night's discarded fish and chips, provided the barely audible soundtrack to commuters rushing by, all sensibly masked as per the governments' latest instructions, reminiscent of extras from a science fiction movie as they stomped robotically along in perfect synchronisation.

Over the last few days. Becky had grown used to her clinical surroundings; the state-of-the-art instruments bleeping merrily away, the graph of her heartbeat scrolling thankfully across the monitor, her own personal ventilator and, of course, the all important panic button if she became distressed. She reached for her oxygen mask, now only needed intermittently, sucking in a few gulps of oxygenated air before lying back on the bed. It was a time for contemplation.

At last, she thought, the final day, remembering the doctor assured her that if today's oxygen saturation and blood pressure readings were

satisfactory and the latest blood tests clear she would be allowed to go home. Almost all her holiday had been spent cocooned inside this bubble, the first few days on a ventilator and then in recovery as the pains in her chest and headaches gradually diminished.

Alone in this sterile environment, Becky had been admonishing herself during the hours of daylight. She realised it was all her own fault, having listened to the lectures; follow the science, adhere to the rules, consider your and everyone else's health. Even the graphs showed there were still people, often young healthy people like herself, who succumbed, those who couldn't, or selfishly wouldn't, follow the most basic of instructions. It was hard to believe that she, a science graduate with a first class degree, became one of them.

The handsome instructor called Conor had distracted her, and probably a few more in the class too. The man had fended her off, of course. but with the half-hearted finesse of an England test batsman, but she had taken that as a green light as they were, after all, only taking a leisure course at the local sports centre. Impatience cast its spell and Becky ignored all the good advice, putting herself at risk to race back before the others so she could have time with him on her own. The diagnosis meant that the second half of her holiday by the seaside had been spent locked up like a prisoner in these laboratory conditions, with no contact with anyone but the nurses and doctors and no option but to comply.

Becky hadn't read for years, too busy partying and enjoying life, but a small library of books were available, obviously chosen by someone both academic and discerning, including older classics by famous authors; Dickens, Fitzgerald, Hardy and even '20,000 Leagues Under The Sea', her childhood favourite by Jules Verne. She had nothing else to do, being cooped up in this sterile bubble, so reading had become an enjoyable experience again. She still craved social contact, even someone to discuss the books

with, her friends and family, perhaps even Conor, if she hadn't missed the boat by now.

The doctor arrived through the pressurised door, standing at the end of the other bed and stationed several metres away, like Becky following the latest rules by wearing a face mask. What did her father always say, 'Shutting the barn door after the horse had bolted', and shivered at the thought.

"All the readings and tests look good so you can go home, Becky. You were lucky, you know, if you hadn't been so close to this new facility it may have been a different story," the doctor explained seriously, the instruments pinging to seemingly emphasise his point.

"I know, I was very reckless." Becky agreed.

He continued, "Remember, you're not completely out-of-the woods, as full recovery takes time. You'll probably be lacking in energy, even breathless sometimes, so it's important you take it easy for a while."

"I understand, and I'll follow your advice. Thank you doctor."

Becky breathed in the cool, fresh air as she left the hospital, her senses vibrant, welcoming even the squealing of excited children on the nearby beach and clattering from the adjacent building site. Her mother was waiting outside to drive her home, standing by the gate and talking to Conor. She felt her face colour with embarrassment. He had obviously already made acquaintance with her mum and stood back politely while they tearfully hugged.

"Conor explained what happened and how serious it was, Becky," she said sadly.

"Yes, I should have listened to what he taught me," she replied, smiling towards him.

"You weren't the first and won't be the last," he explained, "and when I realised how distressed you were I had to get you urgent medical help." They drove away after waving goodbye to Conor, and Becky took one last look back at the hyperbaric chamber, the pressurised facility used for treating her decompression sickness, the bends, that she had suffered after coming back to the surface too quickly during the practical part of her diving course.

Clutching the scrap of paper with Conor's phone number. she realised the journey home would be a good time to reflect on her isolation and the lesson learnt; when it comes to your health, everybody should follow the rules.