

Farm road with puddles and stormy sky



The sharp plants on the left are saying, "Don't come along here".

The puddles make me wish I was seven, with wellies on - I'd love jumping in them. But at 72, it's more a case of thinking, "Am I going to slip in the water if I go that way?" Grey clouds are threatening, with the blue patch looking into the distance and saying, "You should have gone that way."

The weird reflection with the white patch next to it is probably just of the cloud, but it could be a woman's head trying to entice you into the water and turn you into a ghost.

TEACHERS ONE

I went to our local primary school this morning, with a cheeky request for them to display an advertisement for a book sale for Christie's (I usually do a poetry evening and get the children involved, but obviously that's not possible at the moment). There was an electronic, immensely complicated admission system: "Are you staff/visitor/business, etc?". "Have you had/ been in touch with anyone who has had COVID?" etc. Name? Postcode? Phone number?

The headmaster came out, looking a bit tired, and not only agreed to put the poster up, but very kindly said he would text parents to let them know something was going on. He was trying to cope with a full primary school and had obviously done a lot of work to make sure it was safe, but was also worried about his 14-year-old daughter having to return to a full school, especially about the bus journeys when the children would probably have masks tucked under their chins and would not bother social distancing.

To cheer him up, I quoted my neighbour's four-year-old: "I love you, Daddy. And I love Mummy. And I love Arthur (his elder brother). And I love everybody except Boris Johnson". His response was a chuckle and "Out of the mouth of babes..." So we parted smiling!

TEACHERS TWO

This took me back to the late 1980s, when I was an English teacher and Maggie Thatcher brought in all the daft paperwork. I missed the worst of it because it added to existing stress and I gave up and went to work for my husband publishing local history books - about the same 12-hour days, but with a lot more control of how we managed it and the ability to relate to people properly.

The forms just turned children into statistics - instead of having the ability to teach them in ways that would help them to deal with individual problems and learn how to do their own research, teaching became a matter of ticking boxes and achieving numbers. So tests began to be geared to what would get the best results rather than to students' needs. All my friends were saying, 'I just can't wait to retire'.





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Rubbish poem about litter:

Oldie Sue went up the brow
To take a single photo;
Got distressed by all the mess
That gets chucked from the motors.

Junk food wraps and paper scraps,
Fag packets and the crisp ones,
Cans and bottles, some half full,
Some dented and some chipped ones.

Aren't these-prats aware of rats
And that they're bad as vandals?
For yes, their crap can wound a chap
Who's walking in his sandals.

Yes, litter can be dangerous
As well as just unsightly,
So please don't drop this horrid mess,
But take it home; do rightly.

10 years ago

It was an ordinary day -nothing in the diary, when I was hoping for a memory. So I would have been working - looking at my computer - a small silver laptop with dusty keyboard and bright screen - scanning an old page of a book. Also searching for some blue card for the cover and climbing over old cardboard boxes in what I call the 'print room' to get at it (It used to hold my husband's large, old-fashioned metal printer, which has now been recycled as he's no longer here). I glance up out of the window and say, "Sorry!" - he was very clean and tidy and will be wincing at the messy piles of stuff.

Searching for the card reminds me that I have been trying to tidy during the lockdown, but resolutions don't always get resolved. I have achieved some reordering of my desk and windowsill, but haven't sorted the piles of paper on the 'dining table' yet, and this course is leaving me with new piles to find space for. But why not, if I enjoy it? Which I do. I think my Neil will forgive me!

DORIS ONE

About five-foot-two, with neatly-permed hair and very active - she regarded 12-hour days as normal, since she ran an old folks' home with her sister, also a trained nurse. A very practical woman, married to a much more arty man who worked part-time as an actor as well as being an optician. I was told that when he wanted to buy a piano, she told him they couldn't afford it, but he went and bought it anyway!

The practicality and work ethic were fortunate, as he died when I was only eleven and she had to bring me up on her own. She stood no nonsense and was, like her own mother, very good at assessing people and coming out with crisp phrases: as a teenager I was told, "Don't disgrace the family" when going out to meet my friends. I thought she was prim until a couple of years later, when I heard her say of the unmarried couple in the flat upstairs, "I don't care what they do as long as they pay the rent." But sometimes she was right - when I met my first husband (a bad choice), she just told me to "Have a chocolate and forget him."

The underlying kindness persisted, though. In 1970 she had a bad stroke which left her unable to walk or speak more than a few words, but if she saw another patient in need, she would wave at the nurses and point down the ward to the sufferer. But she was independent by nature, so it was a blessed relief when she passed away in 1978.

DORIS TWO

About five foot two, with neatly permed hair and very active - even after she retired from office work, she would either go out for a while or occupy herself with housework or painting the garden gates. Also very practical and married to a much more arty man- my father-in-law liked to draw and paint, and was also quite a keen photographer. When they came to live near us, they would frequently take the bus together to wander round their home town of Bury and meet up with old friends.

But she also stood no nonsense. One day they were having discussion about the fencing with their neighbours and the lady (a W.I. stalwart who was married to a man she met when he was a prisoner of war on her father's farm) was wittering on a bit. My father-in-law, Geoff, gently raised his hand and said quietly, "Shut up a minute, Marjorie, and let me finish", at which point her husband, Rolf, raised his fist and said, "Don't you speak to my wife like that". Unfortunately, Geoff died not long afterwards and my mother-in-law never forgave Rolf; from then on he was known to her as "That silly bugger next door." My late husband, Neil, had inherited his father's sense of humour, so in our house, Rolf was just the "TSB".

This Doris also had a stroke not long after Geoff died; she recovered well enough to walk with a stick, which came in very useful when travelling on buses - if kids were trying to push in front of her, she would simply stick it out to obstruct them. But she was also kind- she once paid the bus fare for a teenager she didn't know who had got on with not enough change, as the fares had gone up. When she became too frail to get out on her own, she decided to move into a home and enjoyed the company, but unfortunately soon afterwards caught a chest infection and died in 2011.

1% pay raise for NHS staff!

These are people who have worked extra-long hours, putting themselves - and indirectly their families - at risk to care for people with COVID and now they are left with a backlog of cases which had to be postponed. We are already short of 40,000 nurses and more of them - and doctors - are thinking of leaving the NHS after years of government interference and bit-by-bit privatisation by the Tories. I know the country is short of money, but it is outrageous that this measure should be passed by a Prime Minister who has simultaneously had the nerve to claim - was it £10,000? - for his flat to be renovated! Boo to you, Boris!

Conversation with a cat

Whyee have you shot the door? It's time you fed me.

But I'm doing the garden and I can't let you on your own.

Whyee not? You know it's my house.

No, it's not really, you live next door.

But you said I was welcome. You fed me. Whyee are you being so horrible?

But I thought you were feral and needed the food. I didn't know you were loved so much by Harry, Debbie and the children.

You're not spiteful! Just because they love me, it doesn't mean that you can't. They're in the office and I can't get in to get warm. You should have some respect.

I'm not spiteful! I nearly love you, too, but I can't because you're their cat.

Bitch! I'm going then.

(it hops back over the wall and doesn't come back until the next day.)

Speaking to someone from the past

Hi grandma – I look forwards to seeing you again one day. I hope you're not too embarrassed by my quoting you in my piece for the creative writing group – you probably think my time would be better-spent tidying the house up or scrubbing the kitchen floor, which I didn't get round to on Sunday. But at least you know your lessons have lasted and that I admire you as an example of how to be independent – that came in very useful later in my life. I hope you'll be proud of me now as an independent widow, albeit one who does silly things sometimes.

Diary – Sunday 28th March, 2021

Curtains shut next door – walked to Farnworth to shop.
Ambulance outside when back – she has low blood pressure.
The ambulance man said they couldn't tell me anything, but
I could go and ask. I looked, but downstairs was dark and the
crew were upstairs with her, so I didn't interrupt.