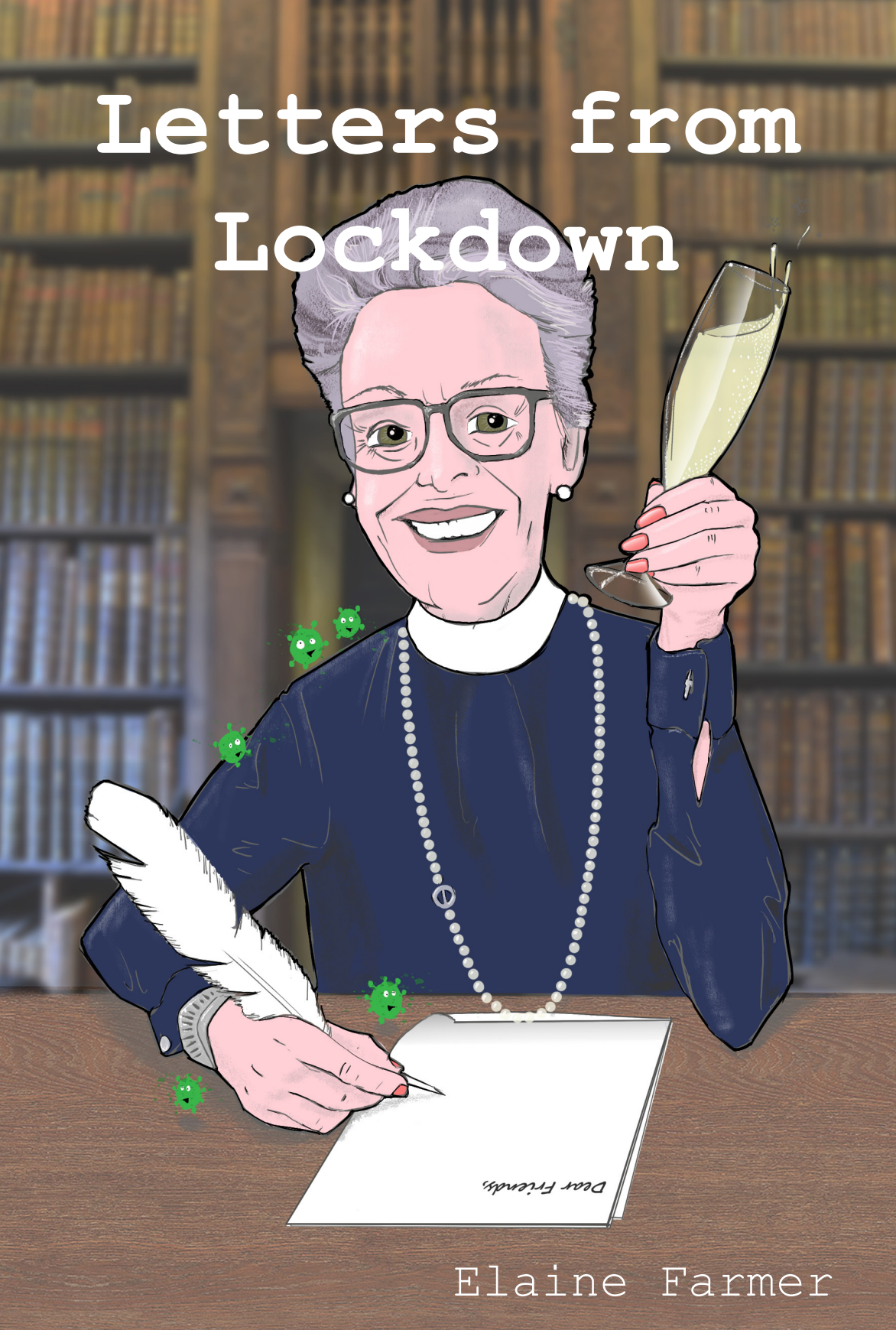
Letters from Lockdown



Elaine Farmer

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In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of . . . but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.

Danto, *Inferno* Canto I:1-60 *The Dark Wood and the Hill*

Letters From Lockdown

Friendship Going Viral

Elaine Farmer

Adelaide
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Making a lasting impact

For Bill,
Our children, Julian and Catherine,
And all my other friends

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Introduction

I've always enjoyed letters. When I was a child it was very special to receive a letter, 'Miss Elaine Haigh' on the envelope, 'Dear Elaine' on the card or note. The 'Miss' made me feel grown-up. Letters usually arrived only for my parents; receiving a letter myself was definitely a 'for me?' moment.

Years later during our early diplomatic postings, long before the convenience and speed of computers and emails, I often filled hours writing letters to friends. In those days, the spouses (mostly wives) of diplomats were quite commonly not permitted to work by local labour laws so we were on our own in finding occupation, meaning and purpose. Writing letters seemed a good idea. I would write pages and pages, double-sided, thick letters that then needed extra postage! These letters kept me connected with home and friends. They provided occupation and I loved receiving replies.

One reply effected a considerable change in my thinking. A friend wrote saying she would always put my letters aside till a quiet moment when, with feet up and a cup of coffee or a glass of wine to hand, she would open it and enter another world. I came to realise the simple fact that receiving letters gave real pleasure to others, as well as to me. I noticed that, as letters continued to be exchanged, they became learning exercises. Titbits of information, gradual opening up of minds and hearts; slowly others revealed more and more of themselves. Their joys, sorrows, doubts and questions about life expanded their characters for me. In learning more about them, I was more able to give to them. And I grew as a result.

Over the years, I learned that what I could give in letters to my friends was more important than what I received in turn. This is what can happen with friends. They become safe places for each other.

Places where self-defensive shields can be put to one side, and the offering of friendship becomes an offering of the self. For me, this giving became a real form of hospitality, hospitality which offers the other that safe place where trust can grow and people can truly be themselves.

Hospitality was central to life with my husband Bill in diplomacy; the diplomat's table is where relationships are forged, friendships begun, and national interests tended. Through my letters, hospitality acquired centrality in a very different way but one which I think is no less valuable for its being quiet and mostly hidden.

Hospitality became even more alive when I was ordained an Anglican priest. It became the glue that kept the two parts of my identity—priest and ambassador's wife—together. Spiritual and material held as one. What I did in preparing diplomatic occasions is what I do when preparing the altar to celebrate the eucharist. I want the linen smooth, the flowers fresh, the candles trimmed, the silver polished. I want the music just right and every little detail attended to so guests at both table and altar can feel invited and welcome.

The letters in this book were written to friends during this 2020 coronavirus pandemic, a time when many friends seem farther away than during normal times. It is not a book about God. It is not a book about church or faith. But, if you are a person of faith, you will know God laughs and cries when we do—God is in the shadows in these letters as well as in the sunshine. If you are not a person of faith, I hope you will see in them life in all its exuberance, humour and sorrow. For it's the same thing, really; we're just using different words.

May I suggest that you brew some tea or coffee, or pour yourself a glass of wine, and settle down with me and my friends, think how you've coped in these COVID times, and enter another world.

> Who dare say No, when such is your request
> that each around your table should be guest,
> that here the ancient word should live as new,
> 'Take, eat and drink—all this is meant for you.'[1]

Elaine Farmer
October 2020

1. John Bell, Hymn No. 259 in *Together in Song. Australian Hymn Book II*, Harper Collins *Religious*, 1999, and reprinted 2005 with permission from *Wild Goose Songs 3, Love from Below*, Wild Goose Publications.

1
The Wars of the Roses

Dear Friends,

The Wars of the Roses are not over. At least not in my garden, where roses are rampaging through autumn. Experienced gardeners tell me that the summer bushfires filled the atmosphere with so much smoke that, when the rain came, gardens were showered with nutrients. I've no idea whether that's true or not but after my rose bushes were smashed by the hailstorm and drenched by rain they have come back blooming. It's as if they've wiggled their roots with delight and gone English on me, saying, "Cor, I do love a good summer prune!" The results have been astonishing. Great blousy blooms sending delirium amongst the bees and filling every vase I can find. Mind you, the bushes have also gone into major self-defence mode, producing the most vicious thorns, and there's been blood on the ground as I've tried to harvest their bounty. Worth bleeding for . . . we sit surrounded by bowls of beauty.

Apart from the roses, I'm over 2020!

So far this year we've had horrendous bushfires causing untold loss of lives, homes, livelihoods, livestock, forests, native animals and birds. Then floods and, at least in our part of Australia, The Hailstorm which smashed its way through cars, buildings and gardens. Now it's The Plague.

In recent times the big money seemed to be on whether we'd get frogs or boils after the fires, floods and hail but there wasn't much mention of plagues. I find the language intriguing. Another example of how the Bible has wormed its way into the English language and—were I a betting person—I'd bet most people who've been

talking about raining frogs or bursting boils have no idea where their colourful images come from.

So now we are all more or less stuck. Hunkered down at home getting infuriated by overexcited journalists who persist in saying we are "bunkered" down. Travel curtailed (give or take a qualifying word here and there). Out-of-control citizenry rampaging through supermarkets buying every toilet roll in sight; this must be the first time in recorded history that loo paper has been the object of passionate desire. Hoarding on a scale not seen since World War II say those who remember those days and, no, I don't. I'm not that old. Businesses folding or as near as spit to doing so. Talking of which, we're all supposed to keep 1.5 metres apart; I can hear lots of little boys (and big ones for that matter) boldly declaring they can spit further than that. So much for social distancing. That's one of the new buzzwords.

While restaurants and cafes, for example, are closing around us some businesses are doing quite well. Traditional butchers are beaming over queues they've not seen since before giant supermarkets pushed their who-cares-about-quality-convenience-is-the-thing mantra on to a gullible marketplace. Homeware suppliers are reporting a 400% increase in sales of freezers. One major outfit says they could sell a thousand a day if they could get hold of them. Even plant nurseries are reporting a surge in requests for vegetable seedlings as people begin to remember that vegetables grow in the ground and once upon a time most people grew their own. They don't seem to remember that plants take time to grow, but then all signs indicate that we'll be confined to barracks for a very long time so maybe they will get to use their produce.

Then there's the whole obsession with hand sanitiser. Important, of course, but there's plenty of soap around, people, no shortage of water at the moment, and no need to panic. Sanitiser is completely unobtainable, as are the couple of simple ingredients to make it oneself. And on and on the madness goes with too many people becoming embarrassingly selfish and greedy. There have even been fights in the supermarket aisles with police called to haul the screaming combatants away, doubtless leaving behind plenty of other shoppers, their faces smug with virtue over their better behaviour, quietly stooping to pick up the coveted loo paper. Well, I hadn't really been going to buy any but . . .

Oh dear, I must beat back cynicism. I do understand that uncertainty is unsettling but it's extraordinary how many people seem unwilling to stop, think, and be rational. The virus might kill but common sense won't.

Meanwhile, Bill and I are well, comfortable and refusing to worry. We have cancelled travel to the US and the UK this year, a great disappointment as I was to have preached in several familiar and welcoming churches. The whole trip has become untenable, which is sad, but next year is another year and this year's dilemma will pass. The only thing worrying Bill right now is whether my mostly controlled obsessive (he says anal-retentive) tidiness will burst out, given all the time we will have at home rather than out and about. He, playing fast and loose with the German language, calls it my "Frau Kommandant" mode when I start cleaning or tidying him away. I deny it, of course, though I do admit that I did do something yesterday that I have never done. I cleaned the telephone hand pieces.

Then I did get over-enthusiastic as a gimlet eye lit upon my computer keyboard. Big mistake. I cleaned it and it is completely buggered, as we say in polite society. Or may be. I am told its inner workings may dry out. Twitching slightly with separation syndrome over threatened access to my computer, I took myself off into the allegedly plague-infected world to buy a replacement. Now I'm a bit like those butchers. Grinning. Not only were there plenty available but I bought one for only $A8.88. That's $A8.88! I suggested to the shop assistant that surely it must be $A88.88 but she just smiled and said I should leave quickly. I am still bemused. Anxiety allayed, this keyboard is pretty clunky—what else could it be at that price?—but it'll do for the moment.

While I was having that boring little adventure, Bill decided he'd try to repair the black wooden ducks in the garden that had been smashed by the hailstorm. Some years back a gardening magazine had said model black birds deter real birds from plopping on outdoor furniture. It proved to be true, to our astonishment. When we removed the broken bodies after the recent hailstorm we watched and waited. And, lo! the next morning, bird droppings. I kid you not. Now with super glue and spray paint, two are back on the job, albeit one is rather pigeon-toed, poor thing. Half a foot has gone missing but at least it's standing.

In all the anxiety being expressed about isolation a recurrent wail is "what will we do at home alone". It's another mantra of the moment. I imagine the introvert's reaction to social distancing might be, "who cares? I've been preparing for this all my life!" But another response, surely, is "read a book". Articles are appearing in the papers here to that effect, with some interesting suggestions from writers about their favourites. The classics might almost come back in fashion given the way they are currently being pushed. Bill and I are setting ourselves various projects to use our time in a focussed way. Apart from which, it's wonderful to be able to while away hours "just reading"; and be guilt-free! (Actually, I rarely feel guilty over reading!)

And, as a person who believes in living ritualistically—marking moments with meaning—I find myself remembering with pleasure my mother changing for the evening, donning high heels and lipstick, drawing that happy line between the working days and pleasurable evenings. As an 'old polio', I may not be able to do the high heel thing, but swanning round in a long dress and lipstick, lighting some candles, and reclining among the sofa cushions with a gin-and-tonic in hand is a fine way to fend off the doomsayers of our current world.

Stay well. Stay safe.

With love to you all,

Elaine
23 March 2020

2
One Fine Day

Dear Friends,

I saw the bottom of the ironing bin this week. It wasn't at all interesting and I hid it immediately with things I didn't feel like ironing. It's always the same. Necessity and discipline take me and my iron a good distance but discipline fades first. I decide I can wear something else and that's it for that session. I have to say that this week's assault on my crumpled belongings wasn't really much of an archaeological dig. There were a couple of "oh-I-wondered-where-that-was" moments but no treasures discovered. In days long gone, when our children were little and life was a rush and we'd be moving around from posting to posting, I had one rule about the ironing basket. When packing-up time came anything discovered unironed and lurking at the bottom was ditched. I figured if I hadn't noticed for a couple of years it obviously wasn't a treasure and we didn't need it.

In a rush of blood to the head and more over-enthusiasm, yesterday afternoon I thought it might be the moment to clean the fridge. I have survived. In fact, it wasn't too bad, the odd spill here and there but nothing insanitary. Little piles of unidentifiable crumbs but what harm could they be? As a granddaughter once said to me as she thrust a cicada shell in my face, "Don't worry, Granny, it's dead"! So I took everything out and happily found no mysteries gently mouldering in back corners. On the other hand, there was one mystery. I removed all the various shelves and bins but one defied me. I couldn't shift it and there was no sign of anything having dried into a gluey mass to stick the thing in place. One end moved; the other wouldn't. Then the discovery: a piece of tape holding the bin to the door. "Ah," I thought. "That must be the original packing tape." Who would have thought? And why am I confessing?

Oh well, I have a clean fridge and a clean kitchen floor because I spilled so much water I had to do that job as well. It has to be said that, while it is easy to put these jobs off (and despite the packing tape I do clean the fridge!), it's very satisfying when they're done. Piles of neatly folded clothes and orderly wardrobes. It's called Virtue and it's matched only by admiring the gleam of freshly polished silver. Or getting up at 5.30am to go to the gym. The bliss-of-the-now for me at least is that gyms are closed. Too bad, so sad, but I am exercising at home and I love alarm-free mornings.

These activities haven't taken up much time this week, and certainly haven't been allowed to get between me a good book. I must tell you of this week's discovery. Bill and I are trying (and failing) to reduce our book collection by idly reading this and that and deciding what we don't want to read again. Bill is much better at being tough. I tend to read with a pencil and Post-it notes and am totally undisciplined about what I Just Must Keep! I've had a lovely time this week with a book published in 1947 (and republished by Virago in 1985) called *One Fine Day.* It's written by an English novelist and writer of wartime essays for *The New Yorker*, with the deliciously evocative name of Mollie Panter-Downes. Could she be anything but English with that name! As I've read her book, she has become for me 'Miss Mollie'. 'Miss Panter-Downes' is a bore to keep typing and repetition makes it somehow stuffy. 'Ms' just doesn't suit her, or her book; it's far too anachronistic and thin-lipped. She was married to one Clare Robinson but, with great respect to him and his ancestry, why would she call herself 'Robinson' when she could swan through life with her own delightful handle?

One Fine Day is set in the English countryside in 1946. The Second World War had swept away one world but whatever brave new world would take its place was still unclear. "The past . . . was pressed like a dry butterfly between the glass of Edwardian photograph frames," she writes; now uncertainty, grim realities, nostalgia and bravery stamped themselves on village lives. The novel revolves around the particular struggles of Laura, a middle-class woman born to a well-mannered world of servants and leisure, suddenly struggling with cleaning, cooking and an enormous garden. Both house and garden defeat her; her husband is polite and tries to be helpful and not peevish but the disorderly nature of this new world unsettles him and he flees daily to his work in London.