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Dan

by MaryPat Campbell

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’, Dan thought, eighteen years old with his university life ahead of him, living in one of the most exciting cities in the world.

At first the thrill of being in London was immense. Dan knew it was probably the worst time to start university, but having buried himself in hard work, his good results meant he was now signed up as an undergraduate at UCL. His room was on the fifth floor of a tall grey anonymous building near Kings Cross.

There were no friends to be made, apart from two other boys in the student flat designed for six. No societies to join, where he imagined stimulating, intellectual debate on wet evenings before heading off to the pub with his new friends. Now there were no friends to meet after seminars, and no pubs. Just sitting at his table by the window in his room, looking out on the drab Marylebone Road at the traffic and the slowly moving people drifting by, in smaller numbers than he imagined was usual. Dan sat in front of his laptop, downloading lectures, articles, timetables, he attended seminars via zoom & facetimes his sister & parents back home less often than he thought he would. There was no news, nothing much to tell them after his first week.

He took to wandering around London on his own, familiarising himself with the great city he had heard his mother speak fearfully about so often.

“Remember not to go out after dark,” his mother warned, “you need to avoid mixing with people, don’t go to crowded places.” He heard her fright and panic, and rolled his eyes, this was his Mum exaggerating as usual.

But discovering London for himself was crucial. Away at last from the claustrophobia of home with parents who had drifted apart significantly over the last few years, Dan felt a growing distance between him and his sister too. There wasn't much to talk about at home anymore, even with the four of them there.

Dan walked through almost all of the London parks. A favourite route was down to the river and along the south bank, walking east along the Thames, past Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and on out towards Greenwich. Elated, he had the whole city to explore and at last was beginning to feel like an adult.

But as the days and weeks went by, Dan lost his appetite, his fingers and wrists ached and he had trouble gripping things. He broke a mug in the kitchen one morning as he reached for the handle. The mug-full of scalding tea fell out of his grasp and crashed onto the floor. Dan was shocked and stared at the broken crockery as if someone else had dropped it. A couple of mornings in a row he couldn't get out of bed, turned the light off and went back to sleep again.

He began to worry about the aches in his shoulders and feet, his lack of grip and strength, and made an appointment with the university doctor.

"I would say, its pandemic anxiety," she said dryly, "its very common now".

She told Dan to go for more walks and learn to cook so that he could eat better and put on some weight. Dan wondered again what Dickens would make of all this. It was indeed the best of times, and it was the worst of times, feeling young and weak and isolated.

He started to think he was going mad. He might turn into a ragged young tramp walking the streets trying to exist in this desert of a place. Would he ever get a grip on himself and feel strong and able again?