

Shadows

by Caroline Horton created in collaboration with frontline NHS workers

The title is taken from 'Casting Long Shadows' - a report about the ongoing impact of Covid 19 on babies, families and the services that support them by Sally Hogg and Georgina Mayes for the First 1001 Days Movement and Institute of Health Visiting.

Joe stands in his red wellies at the water's edge.
He chucks another handful of frozen peas into the pond.
They dimple the surface.
A wee red-haired god in his red boots hurling down hail.
And again.
And again.
The peas rain down.
It's peeing down peas.
And he laughs all naughty glee.
And the ducks wish it was the noughties when no-one knew that bread gave them belly ache.

He aims his next fistful at a moorhen who skitters.
"Joe – that's not kind"
"It *is* kind" he says - and does it again – hurling his missiles with the full force of his four-year-old body.
"Ok let's go".
He yells – and stamps a red boot– "I *do* want to hit the ducks - it *is* kind – it *is*..."
"It's nearly teatime Joe - Mags and Mummy-Clare are waiting for us."
"No" the wee god shouts – "I'm not hungry" – "I don't want to go home".
A police siren shrieks along the park's boundary and he clamps hands over ears.
His body stiffens. He shakes his head from side to side in a – 'no no no'.

...
I crouch close – wrap my arms around his wee-person frame and breathe deliberately into his hair.
"It's ok Joe."
I breathe - I listen to the city - to the late afternoon – to Glasgow traffic – to birds - a passing push bike - to Joe snuffling into my coat.
I scoop him up.
I feel his breathing slow.

...
The March sunshine casts long shadows.

...
Four years ago - March 2020 – we had no clue what was coming.
And Joe – you were so wee.
And the weather was so warm.
And I was fine for the longest time.
We'd just pulled Mags out of nursery to save some cash – Clare figured she was home on mat leave anyway.
And every day through lockdown we came here to Queen's Park - Mags on her balance bike and you strapped to my chest.
Mummy-Clare got moved on from that bench by a police officer for breastfeeding you – I know - the nerve of the man – it was a man of course.

...
"Look – look at our shadows Joe – we're giants."
Joe sticks his hand in the air - and his shadow waves back.
"Hello" - he says – "Hello shadow"
"Race?" I say and Joe says "Go!"
We do - we go we go – along the pond, over the grass, past the playground, towards the gates.

“Mummy look - our shadows are coming too.”

The wee god gazes at these dark giants - their long legs all a-slant and their strange flat heads.

“Let’s bring them home for tea. They want to play with me.”

Suddenly Mummy Shadow pounces, roars and gobbles down her shadow boy, who shrieks and shouts “Again, again.”

And all the way back to the flat my shadow eats Joe alive over and over
To his delight and mine.

And it’s been fine for the longest time.

...

That night with the kids in bed Clare asks “Have you decided?”

“No – dunno – no.”

“You know it’s ok if you’re done.”

“Joe was throwing peas for the ducks and I was watching them sink – the peas not the ducks - they just sank – no ripples – like we live we die and what difference does any of it make?”

“You’re burnt out – that’s why the GP signed you off.”

“I’ve got our lockdown song in my head - *March, march, Ettrick and Teviotdale, Why the deil dinna ye march forward in order?*

March, march, Eskdale and Liddesdale,

All the Blue Bonnets are bound for the Border – and the steps – counting them in my head.

It used to make me feel like a warrior - while we tried to work out how to be health visitors when we weren’t allowed to actually *visit* anyone.”

“And you did work it out.”

“It wasn’t the government that saved us – it was people. Drs and nurses and HCAs and teachers and anaesthetists and hospital porters and supermarket workers and midwives...”

“And health visitors.”

“...all prepared to risk their own lives – our own lives - while those idiots in Westminster with their parties and their eat-out-to-help-out. Those politicians with their don’t test them send them back to their care homes and sorry so sorry that test and trace is a shambles and sorry so sorry about the PPE... I’m very angry.”

“Me too. You remember the night I snapped?”

“Yeah - May 2020.”

“And you got me help.”

“I should have noticed way before – I mean it’s my actual job to notice when Mums are struggling - you were thinner - more rigid – more fractious – the house more chaotic – you kept saying you weren’t a good Mum – that Joe didn’t like cuddling you.”

“So this is what I remember - at dinner the kids were noisy – Joe was eating beans one at a time - Mags was demanding cheese instead - and I snapped - I stood up – pushed my chair back from the table – put my hands over my ears and I shouted ‘Stop - stop it – make it stop’.”

“And you threw stuff - ”

“Yeah I did.”

“Just what you could reach – a plate – Joe’s beaker of milk – ”

“And I slammed the kitchen door over and over til the glass pane shattered. And Joe was crying and reaching his little arms out. And you and Mags were there all agog.

And as I started to hit my forehead over and over, you picked up the kids - one on each hip - and took them out of the kitchen.”

“They watched a lot of telly that night.”

“And you asked me what you could do.”

“And you were shaking.”

“And you told me you loved me - that you were so so sorry.”

“And you said that you wanted to die.

...

I think I need to stop.”

“OK. That’s OK.”

“What about money?”

“Haven’t you heard? Us midwives are horrendously overpaid – we’ll manage.”

“But Clare, all those kids – they’re getting missed – we’re missing them – they’re more and more invisible with these bloody phone calls instead of home visits to save time - and what about my mums...?”

“I know.”

“When I told one of them I was going on sick leave she was like ‘no way - no way - you can’t leave us’... I love those families.”

“Course you do.”

“They’ve got it so rough. And I’m - we’re - so lucky.”

“I know - but Covid ... it casts long shadows and the people in power – they’ve done nothing – nothing - to get us back on our feet.”

“Come on... they did clap.”

“Oh – yeah – true - they did.”

...

“They did clap.”

Silence....