

# Thresholds

By Rochi Rampal

## **A front living room**

Woman: Saturday afternoon. Kettle's boiling in the kitchen, and I'm waiting. The water's rolling and I can hear the bubbles, tirelessly going over and over.

Out my front window and across the street, her 6 year old dives into his front room with a balloon, his gold cape flapping behind him. He and other 6 year olds begin keepy-opping the balloon. A joyous tangle of capes and masks and stretchy costumes. How close together they are.

The water's still rolling and I'm waiting. I'm so tired. I want a cup of tea.

One of the children has a blue bolt of lightening across her t-shirt. Another, silver stars that run the lengths of his arms. Shiny gold wrist cuffs on another. Wonder Woman's deflection bracelets.

A mother catches her girl and wipes buttercream from her nose. Her friend dives in front of her to protect her. Others pile in. Mini Diana Princes and Peter Parkers and Clark Kents, sugared up and saving one another. I wince. How close they all are.

And I can still hear the kettle bubbling. Have I left the lid off? What happens if a kettle doesn't stop boiling? Their arms are all linked and their masks are wonky. I just want a nice hot cup of tea. Little fists clenched, arms up, 6 year old superheros to the rescue. And as the water rolls and rolls on a perpetual boil, I think to myself, "Who will save me?"

## **Hospital ward**

Woman: Wednesday night.

We stand around a ward bed. Me, nurse, physio, junior doctor. We all watch each other. Would we all recognize one other in the supermarket? I put on gloves. This is what we do.

Today I drove to the hospital, and parked on a side street far away. Engine off. Earphones in. And walk. I keep my music playing until the last possible moment before I start my shift.

A Thursday night. We stand around a ward bed. Me, OT, nurse. We all watch each other. The nurse checks her apron and reaches for notes. This is what we know.

But for the first time since her training her hand shakes as she folds down the sheets. As she passes back through the ward she visualises a flowing stream, forest leaves, streams of light, clear water.

Friday night. We stand around a ward bed. Me, SLT, junior doctor. We all watch each other. The junior doctor stares at the obs machine and she adjusts her mask. This is what we are here for.

As she hovers around the obs machine, the numbers on the display swim and blur. She wells up, and wraps her arms around herself, to remind herself.

## **A hospital staff canteen**

Woman: If things were different, if we could take breaks, we would quietly move around one another near the coffee machine. Tentatively, we'd pass one another cups, or the milk. But we look out of

windows and we stare at formica and we adjust blinds. We sit in silence and we watch the second hand on the wall clock.

### **The front living room again.**

Woman: Sunday morning. Across the street, the party balloons are still strung up on the front door. They bounce and flap in the breeze. I can remember the power of that doorstep. And all the others. Thresholds between Boldly-Out-Here, and Safely-In-There.

Thursdays, 8 o'clock. It was like armour. Friday mornings I had a spring in my step on the way to work. Awkward, but I felt a little bit brave.

But what now?

Now...Out there, it's trips to the shops, pub lunches, swimming classes. And her doorstep is just a doorstep.

I sip my nice hot cup of tea, and I watch her across the street arrive home with her 6 year old and shopping bags. He trips and cries. She pulls him close and wraps her protective bubble around him. I watch a plane streak across the sky, and I picture myself pulling on gloves, adjusting my mask. Two runners jog past and I imagine the junior doctor fastening an apron and the consultant fixing a face visor, and the jet fuel in the sky softens and slowly disappears.

### **A hospital staff canteen again**

Woman: To me, it doesn't feel like anything is over. It doesn't feel like post-anything. We still watch one another closely, over the tops of our masks. Yes, I think we would know one another in the supermarket. We ask ourselves: did I do a good job today? We still look out of windows and we still stare at formica. We sit in silence and watch the second hand on the wall clock. But we

smile beneath our masks too. And we well up for one another,  
and, and we wrap our arms around ourselves, bringing  
ourselves in close, together, all of us.