

STOPPED

BY CAROLINE HORTON

In front of the mirrors – that’s when I start to notice.

“They’re on about a statue or something” Neesh says. “They’ve sent round a survey asking for feedback. I told them I’d prefer a pay rise.” She coils her hair into a knot.

“Remember that statue we saw with Marta in Italy? The one with the bum.” Marta died in January.

“Michelangelo’s David?” I ask, rubbing E45 into the cracks in my hands. Neesh looks blank. “Why did he get a statue then?”

“He killed a giant” I say “with a stone from his sling” “Oh - fair enough” she says and heads for the door.

I tell her I’ll see her in the lab.

I imagine a crowd of statues surrounding the hospital. Each one 5 meters tall. Each one 6 tonnes of stone. Hundreds of friends and colleagues. Would we be naked like David I wonder. Bums out everywhere.

In the corridor one of the managers strides towards me and tilts her head sympathetically.

“You look dreadful” she says.

I open my mouth but she’s already gone.

I want to tell her I came in early because three of the team are off isolating. That it was still dark when I caught the B9 from the end of my road... that I have too many patients so I can’t get to my referrals. That I never leave on time so my partner eats dinner without me and the cat’s giving me the silent treatment. That I know I won’t complete today’s paperwork unless I sit at my laptop til midnight.

Instead I just stand there mouth dry, trying to swallow.

There’s a queue for the lift so I take the stairs - but half way down my left knee won’t bend. I grip the bannister - and suddenly I’m so cold. A panic catches in my chest.

Stumbling slightly, I make my way across the atrium -

They’ve stuck big transfers of birds taking flight on the windows.

Behind the birds, the sky is darkening to dusk and orange and dark blue.

Then my bag falls from my hand.

And I stop.

Am stopped.

My feet ankles calves knees thighs trunk fingers bum arms elbows shoulders neck face - Stone

Still

People flow past me -

Doctors and nurses -

Patients looking lost –

Some try to keep a distance - others bash into me.

A paramedic with a kind, tired expression steers his trolley round me.

I try to lift a foot – a leg - to reach a hand down to my bag. I stare out wide-eyed.

“Hello”

A hospital porter - early twenties - appears in front of me. “All ok?” he says, “I’m Mo.” I don’t move.

He picks up my bag and its scattered contents.

I still can’t move.

He looks at me quizzically then vanishes.

I watch the lamps in the car park flick on one by one.

Mo reappears holding a sack truck.

“This should do it.”

And gently and with expert hands, he tips my stiff frame forward then back against the metal. Then steers me out through the sliding doors to set me down under the ‘No Smoking’ sign.

“Should I call someone?”

“No” I manage, through setting lips

“Should I take you to A&E?”

I say “I think I’m turning to stone.”

“This is mad” Mo says “I want to write it – I’m a poet as well as a porter you see.”

The porters are always there. I see them everyday, dressed in the thinnest of the thinnest PPE – flimsy and cheap - wheeling Covid patients from the wards to ITU, then three days later to the mortuary, if they don’t make it through.

“You’re not ok are you?” he says.

And tears pour down my stony face.

“Let’s walk a bit” he says “I’ll push”.

Slowly and very carefully he wheels the sack truck and the tired statue through the car park.

A couple of teenagers bang on the window of their orange bus. Pointing at us and laughing.

Masks hung under noses.

I want to shake them - one by one - tell them they need to be careful – to take care - they need to think of their Nans.

We reach the canal. Misty. The banks of Acheron.

Mo turns the sack truck round and we stare back at the hospital.

At its inelegant concrete lumps.

The October evening sky is doing its best magic but the place looks like a dump.

“What is it you do?” he asks

“Covid research” I say
He says “Wow” says “that’s the most important thing
right now.” I tell him – “No. No it’s just my job”.
He says “You’re amazing.”
And I let his words float round me for a second.

I smell the canal’s metallic smell.
Its surface sparkles in the street lamps.
I imagine instead that it sparkles with silver fish.

The statue and the poet watch as a huge black bird – with a bald bony body and
feathered head the size of a car - settles herself on the roof of the hospital.
She shuffles about wrapping and rewrapping her tatty wings around the ugly
concrete. Like she’s trying to keep it warm, keep it safe.

The poet places five stones at my feet – says “Each one is a weapon and a wish”.

The monster bird flaps her wings.

The poet raises his arms
and his young limbs dance

Shapes of hope

In the dark.