

Camaraderie and Chaos: lockdown at the REfUSE Cafe

by Miriam Skinner, with Paige Walmsley

Author note: The following narrative has been stitched together from multiple days and events at the REfUSE Cafe. The original words of Paige Walmsley are woven into the text, and it was edited with input from our volunteers. Some customer names have been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals.

The kitchen is not big enough.

We'd thought it looked ample in the small white graph paper squares that comprised it before it was real. Someone had demonstrated in pencil lines how a person would be able to circulate the central island and easily reach the Holy Trinity of fridge, sink and oven. And we'd nodded: *yes, looks good*. The confidence of the lines was quickly rendered absurd by the footsteps that replaced them.

In any case, I'd found it hard to get my head around the two dimensional plans. They were fiction to me until they'd blossomed into people and places. It was Nikki who understood them; who could chart the journey of the white blocks, commanding squares into square feet and spreadsheets of people into a breathing community. I am theoretically the cafe's co-founder, but mostly my role is to cheer her on, drink tea and hear the life stories of those that pass through.

It's January. Our first week back on the Front Street.

'The one next to Chester-Le-Street Argos,' we tell people. 'It used to be Magnet.' It was empty for six years after Magnet removed its kitchens, but they nevertheless lay claim.

Customers fill the seats, in retreat from the rain – though after our third Christmas Day, in the company of 79 people who filled the space to its corners with gravy smells and out-of-key carols, the room feels quiet. A lone un-pulled cracker still lies amongst the toys in the play area.

It's ten minutes to 12.

Vegan Jo, the volunteer chef for the day, is passing out tasting-spoons of chicken curry. 'What does it need?' she asks.

'A slice of bread and butter to go with it,' Tattoo Dave tells her.

Big Dave, who is big only in relation to Tattoo Dave, comes hurtling through the front door. Jokes are made about how he could smell the food from down the street. 'Is that chicken curry?' he asks, gesturing towards the empty spoon.

He's here to take over from Mohammad who, for a double espresso, is happy to stand for hours cleaning pots and pans, never wavering. Big Dave grabs an apron, Nick adds an order slip to the board, Irene pins Tattoo Dave against the dishwasher as she reaches for a spoon.

'I'm flattered Irene, but I don't want to have your husband after me!' he jokes and she swats him with a dishcloth in response.

The passing of dishes and swapping of volunteers is a too-intimate waltz to the music of clattering pans and dropped cutlery.

'It's a good job we like each other,' Maz says, laughing.

Over the chaos in the kitchen, you can hear Nick at the counter, proffering the selection of hot chocolates he has chosen especially on his weekly trip to Whittards. We have discussed that he needn't buy them, that we're supposed to only use food that would have gone to waste otherwise, but we enjoy them anyway, and you'll rarely meet a gift-horse as kind and persistent as Nick.

Behind the kitchen sink is a polyvinyl splashback, telling stories in dry-wipe marker. Mohammed's morning washing up is documented by the Syrian-English lesson up one side.

'Atmanna an takona bikhair,' he says to Big Dave as they swap, repeating the phrase we'd learnt last week.

'At-man-ah-tak-ceaah,' Dave replies, adding Geordie As to the Arabic script until it stretches out of shape. Mohammed grins and slaps him on the back as though the phrases match.

The language lesson competes with Jo's request for a non-stick frying pan and a reminder from Ivan: 'You are loved!'

These lists have been forced to congregate together by the writ-large life philosophy of a volunteer who came only once, but made sure that his conspiracy theories on genetically modified corn and religion are forever remembered in permanent marker. They are gradually receding due to Maureen's persistent efforts with 'that pink stuff' she brings from home.

'Manspreading,' I joke with Nikki.

'Welcome to the cafe,' Nick says to a customer who is standing at the counter reading the 'pay as you feel' blackboard. They look panicked as they realise that they'll not only have to choose from the daily-changing menu, but also decide how and what to pay.

'Is there not a suggested donation?' they ask, foraging for a more predictable interaction, a more prescribed role between customer and server.

Nick shakes his head, shrugs, and passes them an envelope, satisfied that he's completed the interaction we've practiced in his training.

'Often people eat and then decide what they want to pay,' Nikki adds from over by the coffee machine. 'You can pay with time or skills too. Anything from plumbing to washing up. We're run by volunteers who are paying with their time.'

'Are you a volunteer here?' they ask Nick.

'I'm part of the family,' Nick replies, lifting Nikki off her feet to demonstrate. Our job coach from the Autism support group is sitting nearby and I briefly wonder whether letting their trainees pick us up makes our safeguarding look lax.

'Mim! Door!' Nikki says urgently, gesturing to where Jonesy – the only customer we've ever banned – is trying to get in, again.

Thankfully he's very drunk and is pushing repeatedly on the 'pull' door, giving me enough time to steer him away and bribe him with a flapjack to not come back.

'You shouldn't feed him,' says Delilah, who hides bread from the share-shelves in her handbag so she can take two loads. 'He'll only come back.'

Paige, our blue-haired barista, is distracting the oat-milk-papoose-mums with her latte art and organic blends, hoping they won't notice the furore and decide to visit Costa instead.

'A flat white, one shot, warm pastry' ... 'I'm gluten free and I'm allergic to tomatoes, are there tomatoes? But are they whole? I'm ok with chopped ones' ...

'Steak, no salad? Another steak instead of salad?' ... 'What have you got for my dog?' ... 'Vegan but with extra eggs? Does it come cold?' ... 'There's not a space next to Malcolm and I want to sit with Malcolm' ... 'Jonesy's back – door... Door!'

Nick rests his head on the counter top. The questions, all asked at once, have started to overlap like badly piled stacks about to topple. The competing demands clash together into white noise.

He puts his hands over his ears and tells Nikki, 'One. At. A. Time.'

'Take a minute, mate,' Tattoo Dave tells Nick, coming out of the kitchen.

Although he prefers tea, he asks Nick for a special hot chocolate. He knows they are his favourite to make and will provide much-needed meditation.

'It's a mind-fuck working here,' Tattoo Dave tells me at the pub, later. We're pondering over a fight he'd managed to prevent the week before by talking down an aggressive visitor who he'd usually have sided with.

'I fucking wept when I got home you know? My whole life I've been Dave, the guy who'll have your back in a fight, or get hold of gear for you. And now I'm good old Dave who'll keep the peace or look after the autistic lad.' He thinks for a moment. 'You know what I think it was? When the situation came up that's what I naturally did – calmed it down – but the real mind-fuck is that that's what you expected me to do. That's who you know me as.' He shakes his head in disbelief. 'That. Left. Me. Wounded.'

I'd read the same sentiment in an email from his probation officer.

'The space has allowed him to reconstruct his identity around positive activity,' she'd said. Although, personally, I rather prefer his telling.

'I would have your back if you needed it though, you know?' Dave adds. 'If the cafe had any bother, you could ask me and I'd sort it.'

'I know, Dave,' I tell him. 'We'd never ask you to though.'

'Wounded' is a Tattoo Dave-ism that was quickly absorbed into the cafe vernacular upon his arrival. Paige was wounded when her coffee rosettas came out bulbous. Maz was wounded when her panna cotta didn't set properly. Ivan was wounded when we announced that the wedding he was helping to cater would be vegan. Jonny and Anthony, the warehouse warriors, were regularly wounded by a HIIT class at the local gym.

The day the lockdown advice was dispensed and the cafe doors shut, everyone felt wounded.

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'Good luck at the cafe today. What a difference a week makes. Last Saturday it was so busy and now...', Maz writes on the group WhatsApp.

WANT BREAD? is written in chalk marker, slant across the glass-paned doors of the cafe. Below are crates sheltering the surplus collected from local supermarkets. Our usual bread-collectors have, perhaps, been by with their tartan shopping trolleys, because the crates are empty.

There is enough light from outside to peek through the windows of the cafe and see the empty chairs assorted into a pile in the corner; crates and boxes

scattered around the room and forgotten mugs left on counter tops. It appears as though it was left in a panic, though the warehouse, with the flood of collections that has accompanied restaurants closing, is more organised than ever.

The volunteer team meet through Zoom rooms, Facebook groups, emails, and baked goods left on doorsteps. One volunteer admits to feeling lonely and their confession is a precedent for the rest of us to make visible the solitude and sadness we'd otherwise have held tight to our chests. Vulnerability made normal. Volunteers, so used to helping others, ask for help.

It takes a few weeks to realign ourselves to new needs, and then the months are filled with making emergency parcels that wend their way around County Durham's villages in Fire Service vans. The members of the pared-down team do-si-do around each other amongst the warehouse shelves, selecting tins, juice and biscuits for the boxes, passing like repelling magnets.

The usual kitchen-waltz is replaced by an exaggerated barn dance. It's the same dance we're doing with neighbours and strangers on the street: weaving great arcs as we pass on our daily walks, balding desire-lines worn into the grass verges by considerate feet. They'll remain for a while, long after normality resumes, those tracks of our socially distanced detours.

We wonder how long it will take to unlearn the distance. To go back to our crowded kitchen without instinctively flinching at the closeness of others.

Paige makes up a box for 93-year-old Nora, who her mum cares for. She seeks out, amongst the tins, some Big Soups that she knows are Nora's favourite. Even in a worldwide pandemic, Nora still has her ways about her and wouldn't suffer cream of tomato, Paige tells us.

Nora receives the box in a twin-set cardigan with rollers in her neatly greying hair. Paige takes a photo and Nora becomes the face of the COVID-19 crowdfund.

Within a week the fundraiser has reached £6,000.

Paige and Nora cannot help but gush that, for a week, Nora flooded Facebook walls as a mascot of community spirit. She becomes our VIP box recipient and, after hearing during our volunteers' Zoom quiz that she favours dark chocolate, Nikki drops a large Easter egg round.

Some boxes are met by paddling-pooled children or children with rounded eyes from afternoon films, and others with desperation: parents at breaking point, coping mechanisms depleted. Delivery drivers are taught safeguarding procedures.

'You might be their only contact all week,' we tell them.

Some boxes are delivered to expensive detached houses where they order extra to go to relatives.

'Do they really need them, or have they just heard there's free food?' we find ourselves speculating. Then we catch our own judgement and fold it back. Because, of course, you never know.

It's the ones we don't hear from that we worry about. We call silent phones and send messages through grapevines that trail off.

'I keep thinking about the people we haven't seen, wondering who they're in touch with,' Nikki says. 'If anything happened to them, would we ever find out? We might just open up again and find them gone.'

As the months continue, she's proved right. Although the cafe's community have avoided COVID, a few are defeated by the loneliness it brought with it.

We are kept busy though. The box deliveries swell to the hundreds, and our days are scaffolded by the routine of packing and delivering.

Stefan breaks from his physics PhD twice a week to cycle over and slice the bulk-bought cheese wheels, which were intended for now-idle delis, into individual portions.

'Sorry I'm late. I had to keep stopping,' he says, parking his bike against the recycling bin. 'The cycle path was rammed with daily exercisers and I haven't quite worked out the walker-biker dynamic yet.'

'Minefield,' Anthony agrees as Stefan straps his helmet onto his handle bars and walks over to the hand-wash sink to sing his Happy Birthdays and change his t-shirt.

'The trick is to ping the bell at the earliest moment,' Anthony suggests. 'You've got to be close enough that they can hear it, but far enough away that they don't have to jump out the way to get the two metres. It works out to a 15-metre ping, I reckon.'

'Fifteen metres is standard, mate,' Stefan replies. 'I'm not a fair-weather pinger. I always give walkers a maximum distance.'

'What really? Fifteen meters all time? I must be a pandemic pinger then, I guess,' Anthony jokes.

'Ha. A pandemic pinger,' Stefan replies, laughing.

They begin packing the boxes whilst Nikki sorts freezers at the other end of the warehouse.

'How are you?' I ask, loudly enough for it to cross the two-metre distance and the sound of green boxes being stacked.

'Ah,' our new volunteer replies, shrugging, 'my dad's had a fall so it's been tricky.'

'Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry. That's must be really difficult at the moment,' I say. The sympathy feels odd, announced loudly and un-proximately over cardboard piles.

'I'm just worried about him going into hospital right now where we couldn't visit.'

'Awful,' I reply. 'I keep thinking about all the feeding and staying over we did at the hospital when my mum died. It must be a nightmare to not be able to go in.'

She smiles. 'I'm glad to be here to be honest. It gives me something to do that's not just sitting home worrying about it.'

We continue to add date-labels to frozen meals.

'Do you want to take some cheese home?' I offer, instead of the hug I'd like to have given. 'The use-by date's tomorrow and we won't get it all out in time.'

'Cheese would be lovely,' she says, and I place a wheel of brie at an equidistant point for her to pick up.

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There is an automatic cat feeder that lives in a chest of drawers at our house. We put it out when we go away and it electronically dispenses portions of cat-food at appointed times. We've forgotten how to re-set it, and have lost the instructions anyway, so just leave it to whirr round in its box in the drawer, rotating its empty compartments twice a day at 8am and 7pm.

'What on earth is that noise?' I ask my partner. 'Are the neighbours drilling?'

'It's that cat thing,' he replies. 'It's happened twice a day since we went away for New Year. We were just never here to notice it.'

Days are punctuated by recipes from Irene, foraging ideas from Ivan, and cake photos from Maureen. There are emoji quizzes, face masks sewn by our generous army of retirees, and messages of love and struggle. Big Dave suggests new walking routes to help others stave off the drum of depression that he's learnt to walk away from. Maz shares comedy poems, Paige sets up an online craft group, and Nick asks how long we'll have to wait for the cafe to re-open.

For me, days are bookended by the cat machine that I never knew about, rotating its stores of nothing. We notice it now.

We notice, too, the other things that happened with such regularity that we'd stopped seeing them. The daily kindness and connection which held us up; the shared sadness and purpose. It is the bamboo that our leaves climb, a mass of different plants rooted in different soils, but entangled and entwined.

Nick writes on WhatsApp: 'Once this coronavirus is gone for good, we'll be back to where we should be.'

With Thanks to Nikki, Jonny, Maz, Susie, Jenny, Michelle, Susan, Irene, Paige, Nick, Susie, Tattoo Dave and Big Dave, Vegan Jo, Maureen, Ivan, Nick, Kelsey, Caroline, Mohammed, Ronnie, Zulfa, Stuart, Matthew, Rachel, Michael, Jamie, James... and the many others who keep the cafe open.

In memory of the fabulous Sylvie, who is greatly missed.

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