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To my (future) grandchildren

Dear ones,

This is your Granny Elsbeth here doing a very old fashioned thing of writing you all a letter about how we used to live during COVID. You can call me Granny COVID if you like.

Maybe you are reading this in 2040, 2050 or even 2070 which will be half a century after the COVID-19 pandemic shook the world. Perhaps by the time you read this I won't be here anymore or I'll be too old to remember anything.

Today it's 2024 and already hard to believe it's more than four years since we first heard of COVID, but it's still here. In fact your Grandpa M has just had COVID for at least the second time and he is still coughing really badly.

During that time when the pandemic took hold in 2020 we were living in Hull. Your Dads were just teenagers at the time - 13 and 15 years old – ask them if they have any old photos and I'm sure you'll laugh at what they looked like, so different from the grown men you know with kids of their own. Some people say COVID was hardest for young people who couldn't go to school for months, couldn't meet up with their friends, couldn't play sports, weren't able to go to the cinema, didn't have exams and all the other things that had to stop in 2020 and 2021 during lockdowns. Have you heard of the COVID lockdowns? Well, let me tell you it was on the radio and on the TV, on our phones and we even got a letter from the prime minister by post to our house! (I think I might have kept that letter somewhere). Everyone was told YOU MUST STAY AT HOME to save lives and protect the NHS.

Well not quite everyone. You see your Grandpa M was actually working for the NHS in a hospital not far from Hull so he carried on cycling or running to work every day. In fact, we're proud of him as he was one of the many, many UK health workers who volunteered to be in the Oxford COVID vaccine trial. You see when this nasty virus COVID-19 first appeared in China, it very quickly spread around the world making people sick and lots of people were so ill they died; there was no cure or prevention except to try and avoid getting infected. Then lots of clever scientists started working really hard (yes, they were allowed to go to work in their laboratories, in case you are wondering, but under restricted conditions so it wasn't easy). The scientists were trying to make a vaccine that would work to stop people getting COVID, or if they did get COVID it would stop them being so poorly they would die.



Of course, lots and lots of people did die, but thankfully none of our close relatives or friends. I did go to a funeral of a retired work colleague who died of COVID complications I think - funnily enough at the funeral no-one really said what he actually died of. It was the only funeral I actually went to during that time. We were allowed unlimited numbers then so it wasn't in the early

days of the outbreak when only 15 people could be at a funeral. That was awful and imagine – people weren't even allowed to hug one another in case they might pass COVID on to someone else. Your Dads' godfather had to go to a funeral like that when his Mum died. She didn't die of COVID, but they couldn't have a big gathering to say goodbye and remember her until about a year later.

Anyway, you are probably wondering what it was like for your teenage Dads during COVID – sorry I started telling you about something else. Well, I guess as a Granny I'll have the excuse of being old and having a habit of getting lost when telling a story. So back to your Dads in 2020. Strictly they could go to school because a few children did carry on going to school every day even though schools were pretty much closed for months and months in 2020 and 2021. Mostly those children who carried on going to school had parents who were key workers which means their mums and dads had to go to work like in a hospital or in a supermarket because their workplace wasn't closed or they couldn't work from home. Anyway, the first day schools closed your dads went to school because their dad (that's your Grandpa M) was working in the NHS – it was March and they came home saying they hated it as they were made to sit on their own at a desk with their books and a computer and do their school work not allowed to talk to any other kids who were made to sit apart from them. There were a few teachers there but they just were kind of supervising not teaching. So after that we said ok you can stay at home so long as you get up everyday and do your school work following your timetable as if at school. We turned our big dining room into a home office and school room. Your dads sat at opposite ends of the dining table and I set up my computer on another desk at the side. We made a timetable to start at 9am after having breakfast. Your dads liked being able to stay in their pajamas if they liked and being able to drink a cup of tea while working. They both had a laptop – one loaned from school and one was an old workplace one of mine which I had to log into each day and it was bit slow.



We had a break at 10.30am for half an hour and they were able to go outside and skateboard on the driveway for a bit. Sometimes if it was cold I would run up and down the stairs in the house to get warm. We had a one-hour lunch break and then they did another hour and a half of schoolwork. Sometimes I had to print things like worksheets which their teachers had set them. Or I had to photograph their work with my phone so they could email it in to teachers for marking. Drumming lessons were a bit different. The drumkit was in the other room so we had to move a laptop in there and set it up to use Skype (a kind of video calling we don't even use anymore) or Zoom (which was new to us and we all got used to using during the pandemic). That way the drum teacher could see and hear him playing. One of your Dads even had a drum exam like that.

One of the tutors from school would phone sometimes to talk and see how your Dad was getting on. Mostly I think they did ok. I wasn't happy that they always were listening to music on headphones while doing their school work and sometimes I think they were watching videos when I thought they were studying. We were lucky that we had a big house and they had each other to play with. I was also working from home and could mostly do my work teaching students at the university online and stick to the same timetable as the boys. It was a routine. I guess we got used to it and just had to keep calm and carry on to get through each day and each week. It was a bit boring and mundane at times while the news on the radio of people dying was pretty scary. Sometimes it was exhausting too doing everything online including some evenings my monthly bookclub meetings and volunteering with Scouts doing first aid learning sessions on Zoom. I wonder if any of you grandkids are in Scouts now?

Saturdays were different. I was a volunteer already in Hull since 2017 when we had the City of Culture year which was an exciting time for the city. When the pandemic started Hull City Council asked volunteers to be willing to help elderly and vulnerable people who weren't allowed out to go

shopping - that was called shielding. Your great grandparents were in that age group. They had to stay really strictly at home for about three months or longer. You see if the elderly caught COVID being older and having other medical conditions they were more likely to die. So, on Saturdays I would put on my volunteer uniform and cycle to different people's houses to pick up their shopping list and money and then go to get their groceries from the supermarket. After a while I just did it for the same lady - Mrs G - each week and I carried on keeping in touch and visiting occasionally afterwards. I never went into her house until I'd known her for a couple of years even after the strict lockdown restrictions were eased. She would come to the door and I would be in the small back garden with my bike. I'd put the shopping on the doorstep, ring the bell and step back still wearing my face mask.

At the supermarket we had to wait outside in a queue all spaced out from other shoppers. That was called social distancing although your Grandpa M didn't like that term. He always said we should call it physical distancing, not social distancing. The space of about 2 meters between people was to stop the virus spreading from one person to another if they didn't touch, cough, shout, speak or breathe heavily near each other. Only one person per household was meant to go into the supermarket and children, as well as old people, were meant to stay at home. After a few Saturdays with my volunteer uniform on I was allowed to go straight to the front of the queue. I nearly forgot to say that we had to wear a face mask too and gloves. We also used disinfectant to clean the handles of the trolley and any shopping baskets we used. Inside the store we had to follow a one-way system up and down the aisles. In the really big supermarkets like the Tesco on Beverley Road some whole sections were closed such as clothes. Only essential things like food could be sold. I do remember though that they were still selling plants and garden things. I remember buying a waterbutt on one of my volunteer shopping trips. I used to do our own grocery shopping at the same time so it took nearly all morning and a lot of bags – or panniers too if I was on the bike. I preferred going by bike as it was just so nice to be outside. Sometimes I took a snack and would stop in the park for a bit on the way to the supermarket just to sit in the sun, see the grass and look at the sky and the trees.



On my way home after dropping off Mrs G's shopping I would stop by the house where one of my postgraduate students from South Africa was living with her baby. She had been planning to go back to her country in March 2020, but then all the flights were cancelled for months and she couldn't travel. She was basically trapped in Hull for about seven months before she got to fly back to Africa. So once a week I would stand at the end of their garden path by the gate from the street. She would bring her baby to the door and we'd have a chat in a socially distanced manner. Later on, we even had a little birthday celebration for her when people were allowed to meet up outside in small groups so long as they kept apart. We brought folding picnic chairs and sat on the pavement. It sounds crazy even now but there were rules, even though they kept changing. Mostly we just followed the rules as best we could.

I also used to do shopping errands for an older couple on Westbourne Ave near our house. I knew them from my book club. She had cancer so was really, really careful about going out as she didn't want to get COVID. Her daughter had a new baby in London and no-one except the parents ever got to hold that baby for months. It was hard. Really hard for some people like that.

So back to your Dads. I've told you a bit about home schooling. I think some kids didn't really do much school work during that time. We were at home but unlike other families we didn't bake

sourdough bread or have family movie nights. But I do remember there were shortages of flour one time and that the supermarket limited how many of each item we could buy. We couldn't go away on holiday or anything for a long time. So actually we saved money. By the end of May 2020 we were allowed to travel a bit further and as a family bubble we actually drove out of Hull. I remember on that drive your dads were actually looking out of the car windows (instead of looking at their phones) – I think it had been so long that we had all seen the countryside it felt new and exciting. We went to a place outside York where there's a little cycle track for mountain bikes. Your dads were keen on mountain bikes at the time. It was a bank holiday and a glorious early summer day. The meadows by the River Ouse were full of flowers. There's a big country house not far away which your Grandpa M and I cycled to. It wasn't open of course but lots of people were there sitting in little groups on the grass of the grand driveway having picnics keeping out of everyone else's way. It just felt wonderful to be outside and visiting the countryside again after months of lockdown in Hull.

Maybe you should ask your dads what they remember about COVID? They will probably have different stories to tell. Perhaps they will remember that in January 2021 when we went back into lockdown (again!) lots of people kept their Christmas decorations up for longer than usual to try and boost spirits and feel positive even though by then 100,000 people in the country had died. I wrote in my diary at the time about the names of COVID victims being read out on the radio. It was harder to be in lockdown in January 2021 compared with the spring of 2020 when it was a bit of a novelty and the weather was lovely. In January it was dark, wet and cold. Your dads spent time in the garage tinkering with bikes as it wasn't possible to go out skateboarding or bike riding much. At least the playgrounds weren't closed that time so they could go to the skatepark at West Park on better weather days.

I kept on going out for runs and walks and bike rides, but I really missed swimming as all the pools were closed for such a long time. When they finally reopened there were strict rules about lanes and timed sessions, wearing a mask in the building, using hand sanitizer, not showering at the pool and so on. I hadn't swum for so long that even though I thought I had kept fit during lockdown at first I couldn't swim for my usual half hour without being exhausted. Of course, I did eventually get COVID too but not until April 2021 and then again in April 2022. That left me tired and lacking energy for quite a long time as well. Funnily enough neither of your dads actually had COVID as far as we know. There were quite a few times we had to take one or other of them to a testing centre if they had COVID-symptoms like a sore throat. That was before we had home test kits. The drive-in COVID testing centres were set up in places like the Humber Bridge car park and there was a walk-in one behind the university on Inglemire Lane. I remember we had to take the boys' passport to show who they were. They didn't like having their tonsils and nostrils swabbed.



Later we had boxes of COVID tests we had to do at home twice a week once they were back at school. So every Sunday and Wednesday evening we tested. We did that for months. The test kits were free and we had to go online to report the results to the NHS. If they were negative the boys could go to school. A couple of times one or other of your dads were sent home for a week or so if someone in their class had COVID. Then they had to do their schoolwork online again from home. It was tedious, but those were the rules then.

Another thing we did together during the first lockdown was clapping for the NHS. This happened on Thursday evenings. At 8pm everyone came out of their houses and stood on their doorsteps or the pavement to clap as a way of saying thank you to all the carers, nurses, doctors and everyone in the NHS who were working so hard to care for patients with COVID (and everything else). I remember your dads and I vigorously banging saucepans to make lots of noise. Once the wooden spoon I was using to bang on the saucepan actually broke in my hand I was hitting it so hard! Lots of people put up things in their windows – especially rainbows. Your dads were a bit old for colouring by then but I crayoned a rainbow with the word *hope* and put it up in our window.

As a worker in the hospital your Dad got given meals at work which they didn't usually get. Also, they received lots of donations of things by people who wanted to help and say thank you to them. Shops started giving discounts to NHS workers and having special times when they could come in and do their shopping so they didn't have to queue. Some of those discounts are still there. Last time we went to the indoor ski place near Leeds he didn't have to pay.

One thing that was weird during the lockdowns was that the trains and buses continued running but were almost empty. This was so that key workers could get to work and if someone really HAD to travel like for a funeral then they could. I recall watching whole trains passing across the level crossing on Spring Bank just empty carriage after empty carriage. I didn't go on a train at all for 20 months. Also for many months I wasn't allowed to go to my office on the university campus until we stated to return to 'normality' in about August 2021. When we were allowed back there were lots of signs about reduced occupancy of rooms, having windows open, hand sanitizer dispensers installed, one-way movement in the corridors and suchlike. They put lots of tables and benches around outside on the grass and a couple of marquees so we could have outdoor meetings. Some of those signs are still there like the ghosts of COVID past.

By the time you'll be reading this the government COVID enquiries will have been concluded. There's been a lot of criticism of how things were handled and how more people died here than in some other countries. There were a lot of rules and the rules kept changing a lot during the different phases of the pandemic; but not everyone followed the rules including (especially?) politicians. One controversial government scheme was 'eat out to help out' during summer 2021. We went to eat out on this scheme for your Grandpa M's 54<sup>th</sup> birthday at a restaurant on Prince's Ave called the Crooked Skewer. To be honest I didn't like it, even though we got half priced meals. It was crowded and noisy. I think we had to leave our contact details for track and trace. The idea was that if later someone tested positive for COVID they would report all the places they had been in the preceding week or so and then all the people there who might have been infected by proximity by being in the same space at the same time would be contacted. Also, I think having been at home for so long we weren't used to being out in public places with lots of people.

In some ways we were better off than many families as we managed to all have a laptop, we could afford to keep the heating on when at home more, KCom who provided our internet lifted the download limits during most of the lockdowns so we didn't pay more for our internet bill even though we used loads more with all the online schooling and working remotely. We also had a small



patio garden, a garage and bit of outdoor space with a driveway. Having the railings to paint and the hedge to cut kept me busy and was also a chance to chat (keeping a few paces apart of course always) to friends, neighbours and strangers when they passed by on their walks for daily exercise.

I could go on and on I guess. I hope you've found it interesting to hear about how it was way back then in corona-times when your dads were young. I hope you never have to go through something similar. We never expected a global pandemic. Plagues were something we read about in history books – like the black death in London and the Derbyshire plague village of Eyam. In fact, it all seemed to happen quite quickly. It took us a long time to return to normal and even now more than four years after the start of the pandemic it's still around, COVID tests are for sale in the local pharmacies and one of my bookclub members has COVID this week. Maybe it's for the second, third or fourth time. No one hardly is bothering with wearing a face mask anymore when out in public. Even though hand sanitizer stations are at the entrances to lots of shops and public buildings they are mostly empty or ignored.

I am glad we all got vaccinated as soon as it was offered and have had several boosters since. Some people didn't believe in the vaccine, were afraid to have it, or believed conspiracy theories about it. It was exciting getting vaccinated for the first time. We all got called individually by age. All kinds of buildings became vaccination centres including the City Hall in the middle of Hull. I remember one of your dads being old enough to go alone to be vaccinated at the KC stadium in West Park. It was the first time he went for a medical appointment on his own being 16 or 17 years old then. Later I remember prodding him into a drop-in vaccination centre in the Princes Quay shopping centre for a second or third booster jab.

I wonder how COVID will continue to have an effect and how different your lives will be to ours who lived through corona-times?

Lots of love and big hugs to you all post-COVID generation.

Granny

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Blog post written by Dr Elsbeth Robson, Reader in Human Geography, University of Hull PI (2021-2025) *Living with Death - Learning from COVID* research cluster

This letter was written during the joint COVID-Incarcerations Creative Writing day in summer 2024.



