

Edited by Holly Power

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*Who are we
now?*

*A collection
of true stories
about Brexit*

*How the 2016 referendum damaged our families,
friendships and sense of security and belonging*

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SILENCED, HUNGRY AND FURIOUS **by Josephine Hall**

We're giggly, giddy, don't know what to do with ourselves. Katie and I are laughing so hard that eventually we fall quiet, silenced by lack of breath. We clasp each other's hands and back into a corner, looking around wide-eyed. The ceilings are so high, that I feel like a Borrower for a moment, until my gaze comes down to the normal sized staircase in front of me.

A staircase, wow.

Each time we catch each other's eye, we descend into another laughing fit. It's just too hilarious that we're in a castle right now.

Today is March 23rd, 2017. Twelve months ago, Katie and I (along with twenty-one others) had walked into 'Eden', a 600 acre site on the remote westerly peninsula of Ardnamurchan in the Scottish Highlands. Part of an experimental television project, we'd been isolated from modern society for a whole year, building our own homes, growing and foraging our food, caring for and slaughtering animals. We had survived as a closed community, completely cut off from the outside world. And now, the ten of us that had stayed until the end were here, in limbo land, a three day "decompression period" held at Glenborrodale Castle, before we returned to our everyday lives.

That morning, I'd woken up in the same sleeping bag that I'd slept in for a year, on the bed I'd made myself, in the home I'd also built with my own hands and lived in for five months. I'd burned the last of my logs in a homemade barrel fire, made some porridge and ate it with a spoon I'd carved last spring. Before leaving, I put out the rest of my dried oats for Mr Mousey - the mouse that had visited me every night.

And now I was standing at the bottom of a staircase in a castle.

A lot of mine and Katie's awkwardness comes from the realisation of how filthy we are, it's suddenly so obvious in this pristine, stately environment. Our hands are covered in little cuts, our nails dark with dirt, our hair is tangled and we really, really stink. This becomes even more clear when we're hit with the onslaught of forgotten clean smells, like furniture polish and laundry detergent. It's daytime now, and Glenborrodale Castle has big windows so the blinding shock of electric lighting will come later.

Although it feels like Katie and I may stay at the bottom of the stairs forever, giggling and afraid to touch anything, we do eventually make it up the stairs to join the others. What we all do first is what you'd expect - eat, drink, eat, wash and wash and wash, and eat some more. There's so much food everywhere, we can't turn anything down, can't get enough. Later, the psychologist will explain to us how our experience of hunger early on in the project will have lasting effects on our relationship with food. We may be prone to gorging ourselves and find it generally more difficult to ignore our animal feeding instinct than we had done in our pre-Eden lives.

“Everybody gather in the living room at 3 o’clock. We’ve got something to show you on the TV.”

The production team - or ‘Production’ as we call them - say and we do, it’s second nature now. It’s slightly strange to see the order being spoken by the lips of a human and not to hear it from the Voice of God booming across the sand dunes of Ardnamurchan, but it is done in their usual style at least - they give us a teaser and some time to gossip about it while lurking with their cameras. After all, they never know when a broadcast-worthy conversation might happen. Maybe it’s the alcohol going to our heads or maybe it’s Stockholm Syndrome, but we still actually think that Production might consider our wellbeing when deciding what our first experience of looking at a television screen in twelve months might be. Maybe they’re going to show us some clips from the show, or a montage of bloopers, or maybe it’ll be videos from our families.

Sinking into the long-forgotten and unbelievable depth and comfiness of a sofa, I try to work out whether this an especially large TV screen or if it’s really quite average and I’ve just forgotten how big they are. I look around at the nine people I know like I know nobody else, all now dressed in the plain tracksuits that Production have provided us with and all looking unexpectedly new after a proper wash. We look like we’re in a rehab clinic, and maybe we are? Production position themselves on the same side of the room as the screen and aim cameras at our faces, waiting for juicy reaction shots. I’m thinking about what sort of video message my family might send and imagine my Mum fussing over her outfit.

The video starts and it’s soon clear that this exercise is not intended to be fun.

FIRST THERE WAS BREXIT

The words flash up in huge letters on the screen, accompanied by dramatic music. It’s so bright, so loud, so fast, so surreal that it takes a few seconds to register that this is The News and not some drama or satire. The build up to the referendum flashes on the screen in short clips of news footage. When the now-notorious Brexit buses come on, a nervous splutter escapes my lips - because the campaign must have been a joke, right?

The video continues with clips from results night and selected news reports from the following weeks.

HATE CRIMES RISE BY UP TO 100% ACROSS ENGLAND AND WALES

The headline bursts across the screen, backed up by news clips and graphs. My heart jumps and my eyes dart across the room to Jane, the most politically passionate and also the only other BAME person in the room. There are tears in her eyes and she’s tense, I wish I was next to her. I wonder is it still safe to walk down the street?

My face is hot. It’s not just the horrifying news in front of me. It’s also the presence in the room of a man I lived with in Eden who repeatedly got drunk and hurled racist slurs and

general bigoted hatred around. My breathing quickens in the company of Production, who promised to protect us from violence and abuse but who failed to address his behaviour and would go on to protect him from publicity. Is the country now full of people like them?

They show maps of the referendum voting patterns across the UK, and it's not hard to spot Cornwall, the weather beaten, south westerly peninsula where I was born and grew up. It's blue, blue, blue with Brexiteers. It's not a surprise exactly, more of an instant visual representation of the othering I've felt my entire life.

LABOUR MP MURDERED BY FAR-RIGHT TERRORIST

The headlines come in flashes. We're unused to receiving information this way and it is a lot to take in. Fury is bubbling among the group. They pause the film and question us but we're silenced by the extremity of their approach. It carries on:

HOW FAR IS EUROPE SWINGING TO THE RIGHT?

Headline after headline of doom, terror and hostility that creates a picture of a cold and dangerous world. A year's news condensed into twenty minutes.

THEN THERE WAS TRUMP

The film continues, an onslaught of rumours and nightmares confirmed. It's the most visually stimulating way we've experienced anything for three hundred and sixty five days. By the end we are all speechless, silenced by our emotional responses, and Production do not get the reaction shots they hoped for. Shaken, we grab hungrily at the cigarettes they hand out to us like sweets - too dazed to question if this is kindness, a reward, or part of the experiment.

The next two days pass by in a blur of food, appointments with the psychologist, food, appointments with the lawyer, food, appointments with Production, and more food until it's time to go.

"Everybody, clear out your room and meet on the lawn at 3pm."

It's time to go home. Home to the little blue tip of the island where I'm not sure I'm welcome anymore. Or maybe I can save myself from a hate crime or deportation because I happened to be born here? But if my father had never come to the UK I wouldn't even exist - so what does it matter where they place their arbitrary lines?

It's time to go home. Home where I have to explain who I am over and over again when I'm not even sure myself. Home where I learnt to silence parts of myself to fit in and ensure others comfort before my own. Home where I'm Cornish with a capital ISH. Home where I'm mixed-race with a capital MIXED. Home where I'm a question before I'm a person.

It's time to go home and when I hug my beautiful brown sister hello, we breathe deep in silent relief.

