Coming Out of Isolation
by Jo Cotterill

Thea sat at her window, feeling the warm rays of the sun on her face, and smiled. Outside, the street was almost empty: only the delivery van bringing essential supermarket produce to customers broke the peace of the day. The birds had multiplied and spread during the lockdown – now the air was full of birdsong all day. The swans ruled the rivers, and dolphins had returned to the canals of Venice. Thea had seen it all on her TV.

Speaking of TV, it was time for the daily bulletin; the latest updated numbers. Thea reached for the remote.

The Prime Minister's face filled the screen; a face admired by some and loathed by others; a man who would never say the right thing no matter what the words. 'The numbers are down again,' he was saying now, 'and this is very encouraging. We are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. And whilst we ask everyone to continue in lockdown for the moment, we are finally considering the possibility of re-opening spaces and businesses.'

Thea stared at the TV, aghast. Oh no, no, no...

Her phone rang. 'Thea!' her mum squawked excitedly. 'Did you hear? It's nearly over! We're going to be able to go outside again! Things will return to normal! Isn't it fantastic!'

Thea's throat had closed with fear. Her stomach clenched. No, she wanted to say, no, it's not fantastic. Because in here, I'm safe, everything is fine. Out there – out in the streets, in the big wide world – I feel afraid. Some people love shopping, travelling, open spaces. Me – I can't bear it. I'm anxious even about posting a letter. It's nothing to do with the virus; I've always been this way. And no one has ever understood. Lockdown has been the most wonderful time of my life. No one telling me to 'just grit your teeth and get out there' or 'it's mind over matter; you're just not trying hard enough.' For once, I've been allowed to stay in undisturbed. For once, I am normal.

Her mum chattered on happily, but all Thea could think was: this is the worst news I've ever heard.