

Author's Note

The short stories you're about to read relay the experiences of members of the Democratic Republic of the Congo community group, a collective of asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow who organised themselves to provide each other with the support they could not find elsewhere.

Discussing the history of the community with Simon during our first meeting, it didn't take long for the COVID-19 lockdowns to find their way into our conversation. Simon is an activist for refugees and asylum seekers' rights, and a key member of the group. Being part of an already-marginalised community meant that the Coronavirus lockdowns placed members of his community in an even more vulnerable position – the people that the government was trying to sideline from public life in Scotland were rendered completely invisible.

During our first meeting, I asked Simon why he wanted to focus on their experiences during lockdown? He replied that it was their chance to see themselves again and put words to their experiences. Thirty of their members died during the pandemic, their group was splintered and unable to meet because of Covid restrictions, food vouchers were inconsistent and many food banks closed. It is – as he said – an opportunity to create an archive that centres them. 'Hopefully, these stories will inspire people into action. Things might not change for my generation, but my hope is that it will be better for future generations.' Hope is integral to the telling of these stories – it is why they have made it onto these pages.

Writing can form parts of activism, but it has its limitations. Rather than writing a didactic piece about the experiences of the DRC community, I focused on telling stories that would reflect the experiences of the community back to them. I didn't over-explain details they live with on a daily basis. These are stories for people with an already-established base of knowledge of the lives of refugees. If I had focused on broad informative storytelling that could be easily applied to vast swathes of the community, I would have participated in the erasure of the voices I am hoping to amplify. 'Keep it personal, explore, and ask me questions if there's anything you don't know,' Simon said. I asked Simon many questions during our short collaboration.

The focus on a narrow timeframe – March 2020 to September 2020 – meant that I could only explore certain aspects of the community's experiences. I couldn't talk about the difficulties they faced in getting work, for those who are allowed to work. The first question he's always asked in interviews, Simon reported, is "Where are you from?" If it's a phone interview, his skin colour doesn't betray him, but his accent does. It doesn't matter how many languages he speaks. His refugee status is always the final nail in the coffin.

The focus on this time means the stories don't celebrate the massive strides the community has taken to rebuild once they emerged from lockdown. What will be apparent though, are the difficulties they faced when reliving these experiences, and the trust they have placed in people by sharing such vulnerable stories. Giving someone a story portraying your most vulnerable moments can feel like providing them with a weapon, and hoping it won't lead to your undoing. Part of safeguarding was keeping the community members' identities safe; all of the names in these

stories are pseudonyms. It is the reason I am here, writing to you, asking you to listen.

Three stories from the waiting room

“Mama’s home!” the middle child yelled as Lydia opened the door and walked through.

Lydia’s middle child immediately regretted calling attention to his Mama, who didn’t look like his Mama anymore.

Lydia forced a smile before her face went blank. Her head was spinning from climbing the stairs too quickly. She had been in the hospital for three weeks.

At first it was just a bit of soreness, a mild fever, then a shortness of breath that was exacerbated by a persistent cough. As if on cue, the food vouchers stopped arriving. “I know it sounds crazy,” she wrote in the WhatsApp group, “but what if the Home Office knows that I’ve got coronavirus, and they’re just leaving me to die?” Then she thought better of it, and simply wrote “I’m just worried that my kids will catch it from me.”

That’s when the phone calls came, from Simon, from Pauline who offered to have the kids stay over with them, until Lydia felt better. “Call NHS 24/7” someone, Lydia didn’t remember whom, wrote in the WhatsApp group.

After two hours waiting for her turn to talk to someone who might be able to help her, Lydia’s mind was splitting in two that she could barely hear the voice on the line. Spots flashed in front of her eyes. She tried to explain her symptoms, but maybe her English was lacking, maybe she couldn’t hear the voice on the line asking her follow-up questions, or maybe she simply passed out from exhaustion, because when she next came to, she was lying on the couch, covered with all of the blankets her middle-child could find, shivering.

Uncle Simon was carrying Lydia’s worn leather bag, the one with the broken zipper. A polite child, Lydia’s middle child ran to grab the bag from Simon, who pulled the bag back and said “Go help your Mama.”

Lydia’s boy pulled her by the hand towards the sofa where she collapsed, her head hanging back as she breathed deeply. Simon grabbed a Sainsbury’s bag of groceries that he’d left outside the apartment door. The boy looked at the orange colour of the bag-for-life and realised what its appearance meant. There was no food voucher this week either. Sainsbury’s is the closest shop to them, but they don’t accept the food vouchers. This was the Congolese community group that gathered these supplies. The boy shook himself from his reverie, and these worries that he could do nothing about, and took the bag from Simon to unload the groceries in the kitchen.

Lydia and her children arrived to the UK in April 2020. Of course she had known of the virus and the restrictions before arriving. Still, Lydia felt like it should be some sort of relief to be somewhere safe, but nothing could have prepared her for the reality. *This is inhumane treatment*, she kept repeating to herself. Her only sense of safety and community was the Congolese Community Group.

Simon was the first person she met. He seemed to have intricate knowledge of asylum seekers’ system. Lydia naturally assumed that he had his papers sorted. First indication was that he spoke in public, advocating for asylum seekers’ rights. In

2019, along with other activists, Simon began the fight for free bus travel for asylum seekers. Parliamentarians were convinced, but the distance between people in suits nodding their heads and motions being passed into law can be immeasurable. A day pass on a bus costs as much as an asylum seeker's daily allowance. Without the right to work, if an asylum seeker has an appointment to get to they would have to choose between getting a bus to their meeting, or food. Simon had shown Lydia the video of him speaking at the podium. He was proud, and smiled as he revisited the memory of that victory, watching it on his iPhone. His infectious smile was proof that joy is possible – *maybe, once I get my papers*, Lydia thought. Second hint to Simon's status was his knowledge of the system. "Your BRP will arrive in a week, or two. If it doesn't, let me know and I'll write an email to them for you." Third was the time that he spent with his community, organising zoom meetings, translating news on WhatsApp groups for the community members, helping people organise food drives and transport. Surely, he must be in a better place to have so much time to help others. When Lydia asked him, "How long did it take you to get your papers?" he texted back, "I'm still waiting. Hopefully soon."

Simon had been waiting for sixteen years. When she read those words, time stretched out in front of Lydia, sitting on the couch in her small Glasgow council flat, as her middle child kept his younger sister distracted by offering drawing challenges. "Dessine un singe. Okay, et une girafe. Non, mais c'est pas une girafe! *Don't worry, on va aller voir une girafe au zoo. Hopefully soon.*"

"They should be in school," she said aloud in English, the sound of her own voice unfamiliar. Lydia had been making an effort to try and erase her accent. She knew that once she got her papers applying for jobs will bring questions from untrusting eyes. 'Where are you from?' Followed quickly by, 'Are you a refugee?' before they would even bother to learn her name. Without an accent, it will be easier, she told herself. But a refugee from an African country? She would be lucky to get the opportunity to flex the language skills she'd been working hard to learn.

A bucket of paint and a scraper were sitting below a wall with water damage from dampness that had gotten to the plaster, causing the paint to bubble and peel off. She had asked Simon for the paint. He tasked another member of the community to buy the supplies and drop them off at Lydia's flat door. That's what happened, the buzzer rang, then there was a knock at the door. By the time she opened it – she had been feeling out of breath and had a persistent cough that wouldn't leave her – the paint bucket, a used brush and a scraper appeared in a bag-for-life on her doorstep. The small bucket was as much as the Congolese community could afford. Once she's done with it, others will make use of what's left. Resources are scarce, and they have no recourse to apply for funding outside of what they get as direct donations, mostly from the local church. The person who dropped them off had already disappeared, rushing off to deliver food and medicine to other members of the group.

Watching her middle-child guide his younger sister's hand, drawing a giraffe in a cage with a miniature palm tree to colour the enclosure, Lydia said, "I should start repainting the walls. I need to get it done, mais bientôt."

“Un, deux, trois,” William counted, pushing the floor down, heaving his body upwards. The first set is the hardest, the body is still asleep, and isn’t ready for the effort to come. “Quatre, cinq,” he hissed between his teeth. It was harder to do push-ups than it had been before he arrived in the UK.

“*Now, my belly touches the ground before my chest does,*” he wrote to his sister back home in the DRC with a laughing emoji.

“At least you’re eating,” his sister wrote back. “I’m glad that the risk paid off, brother.”

“It has,” he lied. She’s got enough to worry about, William told himself.

In most of her messages to William, his sister narrated what she’s doing. “Your sister is going to the shops, William. Third shop today to try and find oil and flour,” before following it up with “Not all of us get government support and get to stay at home all day to get fat.”

William has been staying at home most days, following the Scottish government’s COVID guidance, at least whatever he’s read of the government guidance in the Congolese Community’s WhatsApp group. It’s the only available source of information he can understand.

“Six, sept, huit,” he counted, feeling his muscles struggle after a few days of consistent exercise. Simon gave William the phone number for a mental health charity, but William is still waiting for them to arrange to have an interpreter there. Simon offered his presence, but didn’t push it when William refused the offer.

William had another panic attack the night before. In his dream, he was swimming underwater. He saw the light of the sun tessellating on the surface, plummeting before him in shafts of light. A turtle swam into his field of vision, blocking out the light before it sank slowly down, pressing on William’s chest, dragging him far from the light, to the bottom of the ocean. Waking up, he thought his Somali flatmate was pressing down on his chest. William screamed and lifted his arms to push upwards to find nothing, but air.

William had his guard up after arriving in the UK, Simon could plainly see it. During the Community’s Zoom calls, William would be looking away from the camera throughout, only looking into the lens when he was speaking or being spoken to. So, when William asked Simon for help with his mental health, Simon knew not to push it, but offer what he can – a phone number. It was printed on a sheet of paper in French. William wasn’t the first asylum seeker to struggle with depression, and definitely not the first person from the Congolese community if this paper existed. It should have felt like a comfort, but it wasn’t – it felt like meeting his fate.

“Neuf, dix,” he stretched out his arms, feeling his muscles flex, until they were completely straight. His elbows clicked. Pause. Ten panic attacks in the last two weeks.

William was spending most evenings scrolling through the news on his phone. He couldn’t understand the BBC. The Guardian’s website was a bit easier, their

infographics helped, but whatever he understood didn't calm him. French news sites seemed to purposefully present a grimmer perspective on the UK. The graphs there showed exponentially increasing figures, at the tip of those graphs William saw the pixel where his life would neatly fit. When he showed the graphs to his flatmate, the man simply shrugged and said a phrase that William understood to either be: *what can I do about it? What can you do about it? Leave it to God*, or when he can't exercise, when he's spent a bit too much time following the news, or when his sister doesn't reply to his messages, he understood the phrase as, *we'll all die anyway*. It was a sliding scale.

"Onze, douze—"

A knock on the door. William grunted as he put his knees down, and lifted himself to his feet. He went for the door, grabbing the mask in his pocket and hastily putting it on his face before twisting the knob. He expected to see Simon, but saw a woman with a young child in tow. He had seen her during their Zoom meetings, but couldn't remember her name. That was the last time he'd spoken to someone who understood him. It must have been two weeks ago.

"Here's your food, brother," she said, handing over a Tesco bag. "Simon said you prefer pasta to rice, so that's what we got you."

He grabbed the bag and only then realised he was still panting from the effort of the push-ups. Trying to find something to say, to explain why he was struggling to breathe, he stumbled on his words.

"Am I the first person you talk to today?" she asked him, recognising that moment when a person has been submerged in their own dark world, and something pierces through it, forcing them out of it.

"No," he replied flatly, "I talked to my flatmate, but he doesn't understand me and I don't understand him. He's from Somalia, you know."

She laughed.

"You didn't ask me if I have COVID," William said, his breath evening out.

"If you did," she started waving a finger at him, "You wouldn't have been able to walk to the door so quickly after I knocked. Believe me, I know." She placed her hand gently on the back of the child's head, ushering her to the doorway. "This tiny soldier took care of me when I was sick, didn't she?"

"Of course, I did," the kid said, taking a break from chewing on her mask that's been sucked into her mouth. "Who else was going to do it?" Something she heard the grown-ups say.

William smiled. This kid now has to take care of her mother, and they have to take care of me. He was so used to being the one to care for others and fret over them, having others do that for him unsettled him.

"Okay, we have to go to do more deliveries," she said, looking up from her child to meet William's gaze. He didn't seem entirely there. She made a mental note to tell someone to message him later on today, or tomorrow, to check up on him. "I'll see you at the Zoom meeting, yeah? It's next Thursday. Honestly, we need to meet more than once every two months, it's too little."

William stared back at her blankly, before saying, "Yes, definitely."

"Say, *Bye, William.*"

"Bye, William!" the kid echoed, waving excitedly, righting her mask before disappearing down the hallway.

Closing the door, William took the bag to the kitchen, unpacked half of the groceries until he found the easy-peelers, took the net of orange fruit into his bedroom and lay down on the bed. His body felt heavy, his breathing deep, as if there wasn't enough air in the room.

He peeled a clementine, ate it in two quick bites, feeling the sweet citrusy taste fill his mouth. He held his breath and chewed, before peeling another. Two months since the last meeting, he thought.

"It's the high-blood pressure that keeps me from sleeping," Nicole said. "Every time I relax, BOOM! It goes up, just like that."

"Do you have enough food?" her friend asked on the phone. "I can pass by with something if you want? Maybe take the kids out?"

Food, food, food, Nicole thought. That's all everyone has been doing is giving us so much food that's filled up the fridge. The person who ate the most wasn't there anymore, surely they knew?

"No, thank you, honey," Nicole replied. "You've all done more than enough. I just need to rest now."

"How about I take the kids out then?"

"They don't want to go out," Nicole lied. "I keep asking them to, but the rain isn't very encouraging, you know." It was early October, the summer sun was long gone. The one peering through the window brought light, but no warmth. A false sun.

"I understand," her friend took a breath, knowing the moment was coming, "You know we can come and help you to go and visit—"

"Look, I have to go. My boy is hungry," Nicole spoke quickly, trying to fill the phone line. "Would be a shame for the food to just rot in the fridge, might as well try and get fat to survive the winter," she forced a laugh.

September usually brought uncertainty of whether they would be able to afford heating. With the death of her husband, there was no more uncertainty.

"Of course," her friend paused. "Nicole, you really should tell Stephane," she launched into her pre-prepared speech. "The longer this goes on the harder it will get. That's why your blood pressure is acting up and why you've been feeling so tired, if—"

"I know," Nicole snapped. "*I know,*" she repeated, drawing out the last letter, covering the silence she doesn't want to face, and putting a stop to the conversation she's been having for weeks.

The phone call came at 8.30 in the morning. Nicole had barely slept the previous night, her mind still in a haze.

“I’m sorry,” the voice on the phone said, “your husband passed away this morning.”

Nicole looked next to her on the bed where his impression should have been. The impossibility of the statement she heard was so easy to refute. All she had to do was point to the man’s body, tell them that they’re wrong, hang up and sleep. He had been in the hospital for three weeks. But no, the voice cut through the haze, this emptiness wasn’t temporary, but a new reality. The voice on the phone repeated the information a few more times to make sure Nicole understood what was being said. Words like ‘death certificate,’ ‘funeral plans,’ ‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ floated from the receiver to her ear. She was trying to remember his outline, file the image into her memory, but all she could see was an empty set of sheets.

The WhatsApp group was flooded with messages of condolences and support as soon as they heard the news. Everyone was offering help. The Congolese community’s concern for Nicole doubled when she didn’t reply to any of the messages. She stashed her phone in a drawer, put it on silent, locked herself in the bathroom and cried, so her kid wouldn’t see.

“Merci à tous,” she wrote a day later. “How am I going to pay for the funeral?” she asked flatly. “They said I can’t see the body, even before the funeral. Is that true?”

When her father had died in the DRC, Nicole had gone to see the body. She cleaned it, washing it slowly with a sponge, trimmed his nails, picked out his best dress clothes – a navy-blue pinstripe suit and white shirt, no tie – and cried over him. Family members and friends touched the casket, placed a hand on his chest and wished him peace. Where was her husband? Who’s caring for him? Will they know what to do for him?

Simon was at his volunteer work with Freedom from Torture when Nicole called him in a panic. She was struggling to breathe, her panicked gasps only allowing a few words to filter through the receiver. Simon could only make out a few words, dropped what he was doing, and got on a bus to get to her.

Her teenage son let him in. Nicole was lying down on the couch, her face in her hands, breathing sharp and shallow. Simon called her name. When she didn’t reply, he called an ambulance. Her son stood there, concerned and confused. Simon wanted to explain to him what’s been happening, though he suspected the boy knew.

Nicole’s boy went to stay with another Congolese couple, Melanie and George. A few days in, the couple noticed him doing rapid-fire push-ups in the living room early in the morning, before he realized that anyone else was awake, and in the evening, after he was done clearing the dishes from dinner. Melanie introduced him to another member of the Congolese Community Group, who took the boy to a nearby park. Together, they kept count through their exercises. William taught the boy to slow down, pointing out that if he kept up going through his exercise as if it were a race, he’d injure himself.

“Listen to this,” William flexed his elbow, producing a loud click. “No good. If you keep it up the way you are, you’ll weaken the body and burn yourself out.”

The boy listened, lowering his body slowly until the grass tickled his chin, his eyes still fixed on William. His arms shook, nostrils flared, mostly from the effort of holding himself back. He thought it was a challenge, that the slowness was more difficult, that it would make him stronger, but William just wanted to make sure that he would have his health.

For the four weeks he spent with the couple, the boy went with William to the park three times a week. Sometimes William would cancel at the last minute, then the boy would just go on his own, and imagine William’s eyes level with his, matching his speed. Without the people caring for him around all he could do was imagine their watchful eyes. On those days, he would go as slow as possible. To passersby he appeared like a cat, paws to the ground, ready to pounce, or flee. Some who were exercising nearby would give an encouraging nod, while others would amend their jogging path, or pull their dogs’ lead to avoid him entirely.

Twice a week, Melanie and George took him on food deliveries. He’d march up the steps two-at-a-time with bags of groceries. He met Lydia’s kids. “Stephane is staying with your auntie Melanie and uncle George,” Lydia said to them. They had stayed in the bed Stephane was in, when Lydia was in the hospital. He thought that he should be closer to them, as if they were siblings he’d never met. Their mother had come back, where was his?

Stephane couldn’t visit his mother in the hospital due to the COVID guidelines. He didn’t ask about his father. Melanie and George suspected he knew, but there was no way to find out what was on his mind without probing the issue, and they didn’t dare raise what Nicole still couldn’t face.

Nicole called Stephane daily, telling him that she was recovering well though her voice kept getting smaller on the phone until the day when her call didn’t come at all. He met William in the park, as planned. When he got home, to Melanie and George’s flat, his mother was there, on the couch. The only sign of her convalescence being the Digestive biscuits she was dipping into her tea; Stephane knew how she hated them. “An expensive choking hazard,” is how she described them, but there she was, eating them.

“There he is,” she said the words in English, as she had practiced. The plaque marking her husband’s plot had a cursive script. Simon had picked it when he was arranging for the burial with Glasgow City Council, but reassured Nicole that they could change it. It was a deceptively sunny day, the sun beat down on the grass, shaking it from its recent rain. The humidity hung in the air, ready to attack skin, eyes and bones.

“What do you think?” she asked Stephane.

Stephane leaned towards the stone, pressed his thumb where the script cut fine details, exposing the stone’s grain that flowed like rivers and tributaries, feeding a name that he had been afraid to utter this whole time.

“It looks good,” he said, before turning to Simon. “Thank you.”

“Do you want to say anything?” Simon asked the question, left it in the air, for either of them to catch. When the silence carried on, he added, “There’s no rush. We’ll come back again later to visit.”

Stephane wanted to speak, it’s not that he lacked the words, but what could he say? The tributaries in the stone overlapped, became muddled that he couldn’t discern their directions. An eddy, a maelstrom ready to pull him down. Thirty names inscribed into thirty stones for people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo since the first lockdown. What could he say that hasn’t been said before? He hid behind the veil of similarity. If others had experienced what he has, then surely this is unimportant, right? He shook his head.

“I’ll miss you, Gabriel,” Nicole said matter-of-factly, testing the words out.

Stephane’s eyes welled up, he drew a deep breath, his chest rising and falling. Simon hugged him. Stephane closed his eyes, he felt light in Simon’s arms, floating. His arms gripped Simon, he reached for the first words that came to his mind and spoke.

If for nothing else, he thought. The words will help me remember.