

# UNDER THE RAINBOW

VOICES FROM THE  
FIRST LOCKDOWN

*James Attlee*



SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK



# I

## ARCOBALENO

Where did they come from, all those rainbows?

First sighted in windows in Italy as the country succumbed to the crisis ahead of the rest of Europe, coupled with the slogan ‘Andrà tutto bene’ – ‘everything’s going to be all right’ – they spread to Spain and from there to the UK, in step with the pandemic: talismans raised against an infection that at the same time mirrored its transmission.

Bella Italia – you have given us so much. The food, the wine, the art, the music and now rainbows in our hour of need. As if one Italian rainbow had grown so big, expanded by all the defiant Italian optimism it contained, that it shattered into thousands of smaller rainbows, their reflections caught in the windows that surveyed our empty streets. But if we want to decode their meaning it is worth remembering Italy is not only the home of Dante and Ferrante, pizza and fashionista: it is also the power centre of the Catholic world. With that in mind, ‘Andrà tutto bene’ reads as a three-word summary of the story of another catastrophe, that of Noah’s flood, which began with a holocaust and ended with a candy-coloured arch – an arcobaleno – in the sky.

In the sixth chapter of the book of Genesis, Noah is told: ‘I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of



life in it. Everything on earth will perish.' To escape the same fate, the virtuous patriarch must enter the ark along with his family, representatives of the animal kingdom and a store of food sufficient for all of them.

'Then,' the Bible says, 'the Lord God shut him in.'

Divinely sanctioned lockdown. As it was in the beginning, is now, and, it sometimes felt as the months dragged on, ever shall be. Each dwelling becomes an ark, bobbing on a sea of uncertainty and fear, under a rainbow flag. House windows beam their homespun messages out to the world in much the same way Noah sent out a raven and a dove, looking for dry land.

The eventual retreat of floodwaters in the Jewish and Christian scriptures was accompanied by the world's first rainbow, both a promise and a kind of note-to-self, posted on the sky. 'Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds,' God tells Noah, 'I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.'

The message of that rainbow, then, was clear: no more destruction of every living thing, and that's a promise. The signs that have surrounded us these past months are more ambiguous. In each country their meanings shift to accommodate local culture. When it first appears in Britain, the rainbow carries the same simple positive message as its Italian cousin. Alice Aske from Somerset sets up a Chase the Rainbow Facebook group encouraging people to tape handmade rainbows in their windows so families can spot them as they take their permitted one hour's exercise; within twenty-four hours it has 65,000 followers. The activity, the *Sun* reports on 20 March, the day the nation's schools are shut down for the first time in the post-war years, is intended to 'lift spirits in the coronavirus crisis'. Elsewhere, the same day, it reports that the official number of UK cases of the virus stands at 3,269, the death toll

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at 184. These numbers, touchingly low from the perspective of the present, will unscroll over the coming months as a daily litany of destruction, our response shifting from curiosity to unease to horror to numbness as the toll rises by tens of thousands, exceeding that of any other European nation.

But it is only a matter of days before the feelgood rainbow begins to morph, merging with another potent totem for residents of the UK: the National Health Service. A rainbow in the window no longer merely says ‘Hello! Wave! I am Alive’, but instead becomes an expression of solidarity with the health workers who are putting their lives at risk treating Covid-19 patients. How and when this shift occurs is not clear – I hope to find out – but it is taken up by the public, the media and the government with enthusiasm.

We’re past midsummer, allowed out of our houses once more. It’s time to knock on some doors. I get on my bike and head for a nearby housing estate built of red brick in the 1920s, largely to house the families of workers in the local car assembly plant.

A man lowers the electric trimmer he is using to sculpt the already neat hedge in front of his house in order to respond to my questions. A large, neatly executed rainbow emblazoned with the three letters ‘NHS’ occupies a first-floor window of his property.

We’ve discovered that the lowest paid are the ones that we’re relying on and we’re still ignoring them, aren’t we, he says.

You can sit in an office and get paid far more than someone who’s doing a worthwhile job – that’s usually the way, isn’t it?

He shakes his head, slowly, struck by another thought.

There was that euphoria at the start about how kind everybody was, wasn’t there?

(I have a premonition he is going to tell it was misplaced.)

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But it's just that the bad uns aren't out and about at the moment, are they, the people that abuse things, so you're only getting the kind-hearted people. They're there all the time, but it's like everything in life, those who shout and moan the loudest will get heard and the people who just get on with it are sort of buried underneath, beavering away trying to do good.

His neighbour has certainly been doing just that. An older resident, perhaps in her seventies, she responded to the crisis with determination and energy. A Union Jack hangs from her first-floor window and a rainbow spans the net curtains downstairs. A notice is tied to her front gate, which is located at the junction of two roads.

FREE FACE MASKS

Any Donations if offered will  
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Community Assoc.

Thank You. Stay Safe.

She found the instructions on how to make the masks on YouTube, she tells me. She's made and given away around two thousand, so far. Beavering away, in her neighbour's words. She's going to stop doing it soon; masks are easier to come by nowadays, but to start with –

Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of family. But it's true; this woman played an important role at the beginning of the crisis. A front-line worker I know got her first face masks at this gate on her way to her job, which she was still going to, despite the lack of any protection, while the rest of the world shut down. I wander down the shorter street that leads from the gate to the park. A cul-de-sac, it is

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particularly rich in window art: as well as rainbows, I see an animal frieze, a Black Lives Matter poster, an entire window devoted to Extinction Rebellion. Conversations interrupted, continued in sign language. I will return.

Back on the bike, up the hill that always gets the heart going, slow down on a street of Edwardian terraces. I knock on a door next to a window decorated with a hand-drawn rainbow. It is opened by a woman, a girl of five or six peering out from behind her. I ask who did the picture, and why.

My daughter,  
the woman says.

Then, to the girl, do you want to tell the man why you did it?  
The girl picks up her mother's dress and hides her face in it.  
— Because you told me to,  
she says, her voice muffled.

This, it turns out, is a recurrent theme. A serious-faced man opens a door a little further along: his children are there somewhere in the background, but they are not invited to join our conversation. Why did his family create the artwork in their window?

It was a way of being able to express support to health workers and also an activity that got the children involved, stopped them getting bored,  
he tells me.

So partly it was for something to do but also so the children would understand the impact of the crisis, appreciate what the health workers are doing, have a sense of what's at stake.

No danger that education is on hold in this house during lockdown. The rainbow artworks suddenly feel less spontaneous, more a task that has been set.

I move on, through sun-baked streets I know would have been decorated with artworks two months ago but are now a gallery scrubbed clean. Builders are busy on scaffolding, fixing

roofs, giving houses a post-pandemic paint job, their conversations providing a quasi-divine commentary from above, gruff cherubim in a Renaissance painting.

I have developed a cycling technique that involves pedalling slowly while moving my head from side to side to scan each property from behind dark glasses. It provokes some suspicious looks, for understandable reasons.

My route is randomly generated, taking turns at corners as they issue an invitation, pausing to take photographs when doing so won't cause alarm. Taking a picture of the front window of someone's house could be considered a little intrusive – but the images are put there to be seen and today nothing is really seen until it is stored in our phone, so they cannot reasonably object, or at least this is what I tell myself. That is until I step into position in front of one such window and a woman runs from the alley alongside the house saying, hey, hey, what are you doing? What's your name? I've got children to think of . . . And I am reminded of the paedophile convictions that have made local news in recent months.

It is always a worthwhile ambition to get through a project without being punched.

I am scouring the streets of a small housing estate devoid of decoration until I spot a window of a bungalow completely blocked out with a frieze of photographs of the royal family. I can't ascertain whether these icons have been deployed to deflect the virus or merely to express an unquestioning feudal loyalty. I decide to step over a low fence for a closer look, but desist when I notice a small, elderly woman approaching me at speed. Without preamble we are deep in conversation. She is, she says, just going out shopping, but there's no telling what the weather will do. Had I seen that heavy shower yesterday? She'd just put her washing out. Oh dear, I say, and without further prompting she begins to talk about the way it's been the past few months. This lockdown has made people round here

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peculiar, she says. Some of them have even put up Christmas trees in their houses, to make themselves feel better.

This is a new one on me, but it has a certain logic; cut adrift from the chronological march of time, trapped in a seemingly eternal summer, perhaps forced to isolate at home with young children, why not declare it Christmas? It wouldn't surprise me if the government got behind the initiative to boost the economy, or if the front pages bore a picture of our prime minister dressed as Santa Claus. (I wasn't to know that a month or so later a back-bench MP would warn the prime minister that he risked being seen as The Grinch if social distancing measures weren't lifted by Christmas – furthering the descent of a certain branch of political rhetoric into infantilism.)

Have you seen that tree round there?

the woman asks me.

There's a tree round there, as you're going to the shop? It's got NHS and Christmas baubles on it and that. If my auntie was here – she done that in Wood Farm. Because when she lived in Wood Farm the council come along and put in these little trees, now they're great big trees, but she went out and put some balls on the little tiny fir trees at Christmas! But my aunt passed away a couple of years now. She was a bit comical like that.

I commiserate about the loss of her aunt, thank her for the tip and take off. And there it is, standing in a flowerbed outside a newish house at the edge of the estate, a monkey puzzle tree that's been hung with red, silver and gold baubles and little handmade notices covered in plastic. Other notices are strung along a line woven in and out of the railings. The tree, in all its spiny, prehistoric majesty, is almost as tall as the house. There is a rainbow in the window next to the front door. I ring the bell and it opens to reveal an energetic older woman holding a young child, who wriggles off her hip and comes outside, along with a dog. I compliment her on the tree

and she laughs good-naturedly.

We've got 'National Health We Love You' up here, she says, pointing to one of the notices, but it's faded a little bit. I still keep refreshing it every so often. There's lots still going on; the National Health doesn't stop, does it? The nurses and health workers and the doctors, we need 'em, don't we? The disease hasn't gone away, that's why we're all wearing masks and very cautious and everything, but hopefully if it comes back again maybe they'll know a bit more.

She works, she tells me, as a driver for the NHS, covering hundreds of miles collecting and delivering samples and bloods throughout the county. Was she trying to make her tree look like a Christmas tree, I ask her. She laughs.

That's me, I love Christmas – I'm the Christmas bod, I'm afraid. I have got a lot of grandchildren . . . I often thought about making it like a Christmas tree but it's such a spiteful tree – a monkey tree – you can't touch it, it just gets you. We keep cutting the arms off that go out past the fence because anybody walking past will probably sue us! And I don't trust people to be honest with you, she continues,

if I put fairy lights out there they'd probably be gone. But these balls, they were extra balls, so I thought they can go there. The wind was knocking them onto the floor and breaking them. I don't think people took them, you'd have a job to get them off. We'll have to cut them off one day, I think. And the signs I just made willy-nilly. I did think about refreshing them because the rain gets into them. I still might keep going on it!

Who made the rainbow in your window?

That was me, everything was me – we've got pictures from the grandchildren indoors, they've done their bit, but I'm a bit OCD probably!

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Back down the hill, enjoying the blessings of gravity and cool air, motion without effort always like an unearned gift. Another street, another door, three rainbows in the window. An elderly man opens at my ring, seems unsurprised by the arrival on his doorstep of a stranger with a notebook asking questions but decides to call his wife, who is better at people's names. Perhaps in her late eighties, she is sharp as a razor, the pandemic only one of many storms she has weathered.

There are three little girls who live across the road, she tells me, they're so beautiful, and they did my rainbows – and I think they're very pleased they did them, because they bring their friends to admire our windows.

What does the rainbow mean to her, I ask.

Support for the National Health Service was what I understood. I had some reservations about it. We went out on Thursday evenings to clap – it was almost as if there was a government conspiracy, to make us clap instead of pay them a proper wage, you know . . . This idea that we've got the most wonderful National Health Service and meanwhile we're going to get Serco to run most of it – but I didn't want to be ungracious, despite my reservations. I did hear that some health workers liked it, and if they felt appreciated, of course we should do it. There was something dramatically brave about their work at the beginning when there was no PPE, no protective clothing for them – that was really brave.

I notice that as well as rainbows the couple are displaying a plain green card in their window; in fact, there is one in nearly all the windows in this street, including those that are otherwise undecorated. What does it mean, I ask the woman I've been talking to.

The green notice shows that you're still alive – it means we don't need anything, thank you very much, she explains.

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We didn't need help because we've got family nearby. It was instigated by a man who lives across the road. He does a weekly newsletter and he also organises a weekly musical event; he plays a very neat saxophone himself and we have a singsong around him in the street on a Tuesday. It went on for many weeks and months but petered out with people going away for the holidays.

It sounds like you've got a well-organised and supportive street, I say.

It's very pleasant, very pleasant,  
she says ruminatively, a faraway expression on her face.