



## Connect four

*Friendship in the age of social distancing*

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Last December, I moved into a basement flat but before lockdown, I still hadn't met any of my neighbours. The nearest I'd come to having a conversation with one of them was apologising after I'd overheard our postwoman sigh "It's every day, pretty much," as she unloaded another parcel intended for me.

In March, I found myself taking up strange new habits. One morning, Joe Wicks was talking me through a burpee via YouTube when I noticed a man on the phone just beyond the end of my garden. Ours is a large building of six flats

and I still had little idea who my neighbours, including this man, were. Nothing changed until early April, when a furious-looking woman stopped me on the way back from the supermarket. She was irate that she had been woken up early that morning by – she thought – me taking a call in my garden. I had spoken to my mother's GP at 8.30am but this was a whole hour after Mrs Furious had been woken up. I explained that my mother was having a health crisis and offered to show her my call history. "Keep your distance. You must be more considerate," she said.

Exhausted by the bitter irony of this response, I burst into

*"As I cried by our building's entrance, a couple I'd only seen in passing flung open their door to see if I was okay"*

tears at the entrance to our building. My mum was suffering from a terrifying flare-up of a chronic pain condition and it had reached such a pitch that she could no longer communicate effectively with doctors on the phone. She didn't want to go to hospital, however, as she was at higher risk for Covid-19. What neither of us knew was that she already had the virus and it was attacking her nerves, which was why – in all probability – she was in such agony. I knew I would have to advocate carefully for her if she was to receive the care she needed.

As I cried by the entrance to our building, a couple I'd only seen in passing flung open their door to see if I was

okay. This was Aygul and Lukas – I later found out – and they brought me tea, persuading me that I would be safe sitting at a distance from them on their sofa. The next afternoon Lukas brought slices of an almond cake he'd made for us to share in my garden. I spaced out my garden furniture so that we could talk safely. Aidan – the man who had seen my burpee efforts – and his wife Ang waved to us from their garden. Ang was reading a Lisa Jewell novel, *The People Upstairs*, so I promised to lend her a Louise Candlish novel with similar themes. In this one, the neighbours actually come to blows – possibly not the most auspicious gift to kick off a neighbourly friendship.

The next week, after a morphine prescription for my mother failed to help and she stopped answering the phone, I called an ambulance for her. She had dangerously low oxygen levels and very likely would have died had she stayed at home for another day. I was given no reassurance that she would make it through the night, even in hospital.

After this, Aygul made feta cheese pastries for me, and Ang left a slice of carrot cake by my back door. There were more baked goods and book swaps to come. Gradually, my mother's condition improved and she could talk to me from hospital on FaceTime. After a hair-raising fortnight, she was discharged and could sit in my garden with me, chatting to my new friends.

It was strange getting to know anyone at a physical distance – when I worried that handing them a cup of tea might be endangering their health – but I'm delighted that I met some lovely people whom I can talk to on a daily basis, even now I can see my existing family and friends again. I learnt so much about my resilience during this period and my own ability to forge connections but I also learnt that it's possible for strangers – and I wouldn't have believed it before – to help you when you truly need it most. →