

Anchor

Four weeks in Norwich, what a treat. I have been granted a cottage, a little garden, and – across the street – a centre full of young people.

In front of my door is a sign. *Please respect our resident in the cottage.* That is what it says. Written in indelible chalk.

Hurray.

I am here to research, I am here to write, I get all the time and space I need to do that and everybody is going to leave me alone here.

I am so blessed.

But I cannot write when I am left alone.

Please, harass me, I say to the group of young people at the centre. They laugh. Writers, they come in shapes and sizes. You are so lovely.

I am lovely.

If only you knew.

I want to get started, and I want to do it now. Right away. The story of the girl and her lover is already firmly locked into neat text, all I have to do is continue writing. Here. Four weeks. In this peace and quiet.

I walk around the cottage, count the writing tables, there are three of them. And five chairs. The place is a paradise. Writing cannot but flow naturally here.

I stand in front of the large window; it is made entirely of frosted glass. I press my nose against it. No one on the other side can see me, no one will disturb me or bother me. The resident, she needs to be respected.

I don't want to be left alone.

You'll see. This book will not be written. Or only very laboriously. As usual, in other words.

Where are the days when writing was just delight? Why are there always so many questions and why does chaos always strike with every beginning, every sequel, every new version?

Why, for once, can't things just go easily?

My father would say: stop whining, child.

Correction. He wouldn't say that at all. My father would be perfectly sympathetic. He didn't like to travel and regarded any change as a threat.

But I am not my father. I like to travel. I dig the unexpected. And I will find them, the angles, the edges, the anchor my story needs to be written. And me. I need them, too. Or I won't write. And I can't really live without it.

Go out, is what my mother used to say: it's good for just about anything.

Been telling myself that for years. So I put on my shoes and walk down King Street. After fifty yards, on the right, perched on a low hilltop, is the little church of St Julian of Norwich.

Churches don't lie, my boyfriend says.

I walk inside.

On the front right is a hermitage; it belonged to Lady Julian.

Julian of Norwich is England's first female author and mystic. anchoress. She wrote the *Revelations of Divine Love*, in which she praised God's love as the love of a mother. In this place. For thirty years. One window through which she forked out advice to those in need, another window through which her food came in, and her stools went out. Thirty years.

One wonders why. In a single cell. For thirty years. And then she died.

Against the wall in the cell there are quotes from her work. I read about the world, about God who is all-loving, about hell that doesn't exist.

Fifteenth century, England, and hell that doesn't exist?

He said not "Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be diseased"; but he said, "Thou shalt not be overcome."

What a gift Lady Julian was to the people of King Street, the red-light district. Her district.

She was never canonized.

If I refuse to think in terms of heaven and hell, I will not be burned at the stake. At worst, I will be misunderstood.

My characters may make choices that even I don't understand, and if I drag them into the mud and let them struggle, it's not to punish them, no. That is what life does to us. Hell: I don't wish it on my characters. The end point from which there is no return. I refuse to leave them there. And that takes effort. Corners and edges and an anchor, it doesn't work without it.

Writing is never merely rapture. I'm not going to suddenly pretend I didn't know that all along, am I?

And what I also know.

I found my anchor a long time ago. Let corners and edges scour. Let the restlessness blow and bang.

We shall not be overcome.

Els Beerten, Norwich, August, 2022 (Translation: Stef Grondelaers)