

ON A GOOD DAY YOU CAN SEE FRANCE (2022)  
Preface by Raphael Mann

I found myself in Ramsgate more or less by accident... We had a baby, is what happened. My wife and I that is. Not by accident, but certainly with an element of surprise that we'd actually done it... We'd left it until we might have been too old, we thought... 'High risk', the doctors classified us as; but then there we were, with a baby human being to care for...

Until then we'd been living in London, on the Mile End Road near the tube station, in what would have been a council home for a couple or small family; two and a half bedrooms, living room, kitchen, bathroom; on the ground floor of a block, which meant we had a little garden too. Not bad. Handy location, certainly... If only we hadn't been sharing ours with between three and six other grown adults... At maximum occupancy we had two strapping Polish fellows sharing the box room, the one in the bed climbing over the one on the floor to get in... That was pretty normal in London... If you were a student, or there for a year or two of 'experience', or if you were some more permanent type of low-life like an artist or musician (guilty)... Fun for a while, but by the time you reach your 40s, getting tiresome; and when you turn out to be actually pregnant, starting to feel like a situation from which you need to escape...

So we did what any sane couple would do in that scenario, and panicked... Then we repaired to the Hanoi Cafe on Kingsland Road, and panicked over banh xeo and lemongrass tea amongst friends... Where could we go where rent was cheaper but wasn't too bad a place to live? I know...we could move to the seaside...! One of our dinner companions had just returned from a jaunt in search of cheap house furnishings around the neighbouring seaside towns of Ramsgate and Margate on the Kent coast... Quite liked it out there... Ramsgate's nicer than Margate he confessed (I can't agree or I'll lose Marianne half her book sales, but it's true)... Then our friend that runs the restaurant piped up

with, "My sister's got a place in Ramsgate..." ...and so we went out one windy winter afternoon to have a look...

Nobody had any better ideas; so after stopgaps in Limehouse and then Budapest (another story) we ended up in Ramsgate. For five and a half years, as it turned out... More or less by accident. And with very little knowledge of what the town was really like... A beach (grotty or scenic, depending on which direction you point your camera), a picturesque harbour with working fishing boats alongside private yachts, a very run-down but basically functional high street, elegant Georgian but decaying architecture... Decent fish'n'chips... Easy commute into London... And, on a clear day, you could see France (or from some angles, Belgium) from the cliff top...

I had very little inkling that we were part of a substantial social trend. An exodus of 'people like us' from the city. People unable or unwilling to keep pace with London's spiralling housing prices. People who'd had kids and found their living conditions to be substandard for raising a family. People working in 'creative industries' or with otherwise unreliable sources of income, or who had simply got to the point where they questioned why they were giving such a large of chunk of their earnings to somebody else, for the pleasure of living in a city that was rapidly becoming less appealing... In the approach to the Brexit referendum you could feel the streets becoming less friendly, less tolerant, less cosmopolitan, less of everything that made them attractive in the first place to most of 'us'... I grew up there, arrived as an eight year old boy and stayed for 35 years. Couldn't for a very long time contemplate living anywhere else... My best friend from school, a tube train driver on the Northern Line all his adult life, had just left town to commute in from Peterborough, almost 100 miles away up the main-line. It affords him a decent quality of life he couldn't achieve by staying in the city whose iconic underground trains he drove for a living...

As it turned out, Ramsgate was full of 'people like us'. Which made it for a time a wonderful place to be. I spent a happy few years pushing a pushchair up and down those hills between the local cafés,

meeting a rich array of interesting people with whom I often had much in common... For the first time since school days I was part of "a community". Which didn't just mean as it did in London that you're on first name terms with the guy at the launderette, but perhaps fifty or a hundred people you could stop and talk with when you passed them in the street, and who would look out for each other, support each other, make friends, get on each other's nerves and fall out, or stay at arms length, but ultimately still exist 'together'... Many of them were musicians as I am, many were parents of young children. There seemed to be interesting opportunities everywhere... I felt like I'd landed on my feet...

I soon wondered though whether I, who had been pushed out of the city I grew up in, had become part of somebody else's problem. Were we now the 'gentrifiers' that were ruining things for those that were there before us? It's difficult to feel like gentry when you're renting a shabby flat beneath a shop... It also seemed clear enough that 'we' were adding something positive to our adopted home. People were turning abandoned shop fronts into thriving businesses, they were renovating derelict houses, starting community initiatives, cleaning the streets, growing flowers, holding local festivals... Getting involved in local politics and fighting for the rights of the less fortunate... To the locals though we were 'DFLs' ; 'down from London'; incomers, that the epithet presumes, and hopes, will not stay long...

Ramsgate had it's own story of social change, before any of us DFLs descended upon it. A resort for the rich and famous (including the young soon-to-be-Queen Victoria) in the 19th century, and a popular holiday destination in the first half of the 20th. Elderly residents when I was there would tell you stories of ballrooms and fancy restaurants, a postcard picture of its glory days that seemed scarcely possible, contemplating it in cold and desolate 'low season'... The trend towards foreign holidays took the majority of seasonal business away... A revival of the town as a busy hovercraft and ferry port struggled to stay viable after the building of the channel tunnel... A shopping complex inland at

Westwood Cross, along with the general trend towards online shopping, hit the High Street hard... A policy of relocating inhabitants of London's mental institutions out to the area didn't help, without adequate care to help those people to manage that change...

Exacerbated by the general social depression brought about by decades of poor government, all of this left the town ripe for exploitation by Nigel Farage and his UKIP (UK Independence) party, based in adjacent Broadstairs. People were easily convinced that their troubles could be blamed on foreigners, rather than the politicians that had brought them about in the first place. EU bureaucrats and immigrants became all-purpose scapegoats... Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, which did actually have their interests at heart, was demonised in the media... Which set things up for an exaggerated ideological divide between the incomers, generally broadly liberal and pro-EU, and a good proportion of the locals who had been convinced to abandon traditional working-class socialist principles in favour of a new brand of populist nationalism... Even though all of us of course were actually victims of the same broader political agenda...

Unlike the 'gentrification' of formerly working-class London, driven by foreign investment and government policy, and thus entirely uncaring of the effect that it had on ordinary people, the DFL invasion of Ramsgate consisted mostly of people who were aware of these issues, and were concerned not to have a detrimental effect on the existing inhabitants... But of course for each family trading their poky flat in Brockley for a four storey Georgian house up by Ellington Park, it just seemed like a sensible idea; the only plausible option perhaps... And weren't the positive effects difficult to deny...? Until, inevitably, there were no nice big old houses left, and prices rose more steeply... Liveable property began to get scarce... From my perspective in the rental sector I could see this clearly... Over the five years I was there rent prices roughly doubled... I could ride with that for some of the way, but I could clearly see that on my musician low-life income I wouldn't be able to forever; and it was obvious that those worse off than myself were getting priced out of their hometown as a

direct result of the trend that I was a part of...

Enter stage left... Or perhaps that should be up through a trapdoor beneath the stage... Covid-19...

My own response to the first news of the virus was basically to batten down the hatches... It was comparatively easy for me. Possible at least. I was already working mostly from home. I had my little family for company. There were some hairy moments financially, but I managed to stay afloat, without having to do anything I considered risky... And my foremost concern was to avoid catching this new disease, knowing that my own immune system was compromised (a long story)... Ramsgate as a whole seemed to generally take the opposite approach... We were living below a small shop selling 'objet d'art' and bric-a-brac, and the proprietor chose to basically ignore the existence of the pandemic and carry on his extremely non-essential business as usual. Even when enforcement officers were eventually sent around to make sure regulations were being followed, he came in to the shop anyway "to paint"... And that seemed to be fairly typical of the attitude of the town... A sort of misguided Blitz Spirit, where the virus could be outwitted or faced down by sheer determination...

The virus of course didn't have much sympathy for those tactics, and needless to say many people were simply forced to carry on working whatever their personal preference, on account of inadequate government support. Meanwhile as the weather improved day trippers started coming to the area's beaches, making up for their missed holidays abroad... In any case I wasn't surprised to see the local area become the breeding ground for the notorious Delta variant...

Myself I spent most of 2020 and '21 in my bedroom behind the shop, learning to work remotely with my various clients and collaborators; and making nervous forays out into the world for fresh air and exercise, negotiating awkward encounters with people who seemed not to have heard the news that there was a deadly virus out there... A somewhat surreal year and a half of living an isolated existence that formed itself into a fairly austere but not unpleasant sort of routine, amidst all the chaos going on

in the outside world...

Meanwhile Marianne Dissard was out there on the streets, keeping a low profile but putting herself right in the thick of things, big old camera slung around her neck; shooting from the hip, sometimes literally, and filling my inbox with images as well as the vocal takes I'd expected... We were collaborating on an album; creating radical re-workings of songs from the '60s & '70s, which we'd tentatively begun before the pandemic, then let the thread drop, and which then took on a life of its own as a sort of musical commentary on what we were collectively experiencing... We continued recording, working remotely, through that 18 months, Marianne eventually uprooting to Tucson then Paris, back to Ramsgate, and we released half a dozen songs as we went; but meanwhile I could sense her focus shifting more towards her photographic work... It had for her, I think, a greater sense of urgency... The need to Do Something. To look the beast in the eye, wrestle with it; to move her body and feel alive; as well as to communicate her unique perspective on what was happening...

Marianne arrived in Ramsgate following a much older tradition than the social changes that brought me there. The lighthouse at the end of the harbour arm bears the legend 'Perfugium miseris', carved in stone. Latin for 'A refuge for those in need', the inscription originates from the aftermath of a catastrophic 18th century storm, reputedly the only fully-fledged hurricane ever to hit Britain, which inspired a re-design of the harbour to make it safer from the elements. In 2016 local artist Theresa Smith recreated the motto in giant photo-luminescent letters, which emerged from the water as the tide went out; a vital statement when boat-loads of refugees were aiming for these same shores... And around the same time Marianne also came in search of a port in a storm; embarking on the admirably foolhardy adventure of living by herself on a handsome wooden sailing boat in the harbour. Like so many things in Ramsgate, lots of romantic fun when the town's 'unique micro-climate' brings you a warm Mediterranean breeze; not so much when it deals you a North Sea gale, and you wish you had

better sea legs whilst battling ashore along the pontoon to a portalo in the middle of the night...

She and I struck up a fast friendship, playing cafés together doing Gainsbourg and Brel, and taking tea on her boat the Wendy Woo... And naturally she found an easy place amongst the local artistic community. But it's significant I think that she arrived by different forces than most of the rest of us, and from a different background. Ramsgate is a town of juxtapositions and contrasting extremes, and I think most attempts to portray it in photographs would show something at least of that character; but as an 'outsider', not only to Ramsgate but also the UK (and I think in many ways just an outsider, an observer, by nature), she has a perspective on what the town shows her that sheds a different and important light upon it. As soon as she began seriously to take photos I understood that she was seeing things that I hadn't seen. Humour or pathos or despair or defiance or an exotic beauty in things that to me were often ordinary, unremarkable; things I'd walked past and never noticed... I was in self-imposed isolation of course, and much of what she shot I was only seeing via her photographs; but she was also turning her eye to things that I did see on my daily walks, and hadn't seen in the way that she had seen them...

That difference, wherever it comes from, is surely one of the main things that can make a collection of photographs something precious. The realisation that there are layers of reality existing simultaneously and sometimes in contradiction with each other. The terrible depth of human experience.

For me it isn't an easy or a pleasant thing to look back on that time, when these picture were taken; for a host of different reasons. But I'm glad that somebody as honest and as perceptive and as open to possibilities as Marianne is was there to document it for all of us.