"How do we achieve meaningful social changes in the UK to tackle the climate crisis and develop a fairer society?"

Small Change

Cathy sighed as she spotted her reflection in the bus window. She attempted to recentre her parting to obscure some of the greys that were peaking through her mousey mop. She had meant to pick up some of that root touch-up but it was a five week month and keeping up with the rent seemed more important. *Better for the environment anyway,* she rationalised picturing the landfill tube and dregs of chemicals left within. She gave up on her futile styling attempts and instead focused her gaze on the chipped nail polish adorning her fingernails. *Why did she even bother.*

Georgie wouldn't have chipped nails or a whisper of grey anywhere near her head, Cathy knew that much. Georgie had suggested they meet for 'drinks' for their annual get-together but 'drinks' meant plural and there was barely any room in Cathy's budget for one of everything she needed in life, let alone plural of something that was over in a matter of minutes, so she rebutted with "a coffee" instead. Coffee is singular. If she was lucky, she'd be able to nurse one for the whole duration. At the inevitable toing and froing by the pastry counter, she could just claim that she was watching her weight. A half truth as Cathy had gained a bit recently but microwave ready meals seemed to be the only extent of cooking that she had time for recently with her two jobs, flat and children to contend with. She couldn't help but picture her friend- with her athletic build taking a luxurious afternoon preparing a mezze of delicious, organic wholefoods with a glass of merlot in her farmhouse kitchen, no doubt with an island as its crowning centre-piece. It occurred to Cathy how easily this image

was conjured up despite neither of them having ever actually visited each other's houses. Well, not since their Primary School days anyway.

They had become friends out of convenience more than anything else. They shared the same maiden surname and so were often paired to sit together in class. In their early days they used to pretend they were sisters, that was a fun game. The years came and went and when it came time to graduate to Highschool, Cathy was destined for the local comprehensive school. Georgie, or Georgina as she was still then known, hoped to do the same but her parents decided to send her to a private school in the city for the enhanced opportunities there. On their last day of school together the two girls promised that they would always remain friends. Cathy reflected that the word choice was a bit of a stretch but they had however met up once, sometimes even twice, a year annually since then. *It must be, what, over thirty years now.*

Cathy's trip down memory lane had accompanied her off the number 22 bus and round the corner to the proposed meeting spot when suddenly she was brought right back into the present with a shrill squeal of delight:

"Cath! How long has it been?", a statuesque woman with a suspiciously out of season tan gripped Cathy in a tight embrace but was still careful not to place her perfectly made-up face anywhere that might disturb its glossy veneer.

"Hiya Georgie", Cathy couldn't help but picture the clown from IT and snigger a little.

"Oh darling, it *has* been too long. It's Gina now, don't you think it suits me so much better?" Cathy couldn't help but agree with her, not about the name change but yes, *30 years of this*

had *been too long.* Their shared maiden name seemed to be where their similarities began and ended and even that had changed with the number of weddings 'Gina' had gone through over the years.

A little bell jingled as they pushed the door of the coffee shop open to enter a small room filled with mis-matched antique chairs and tables and old crooner music playing quietly in the background. It was a "cute, little boutique place" that 'Gina' had found on Instagram. The kind that only served soy milk and 'artisan' bread, whatever that was. Even the coffee-house elite of Starbucks and Costa were too pedestrian for her now. Gina rambled off a complicated order to a cheery, freckled twenty-something behind the counter. Cathy was struggling to process the long list of requirements, but the barista seemed to be in the know and quickly set to work.

"Just order at the same time and I'll get them both" Gina smiled.

"I can get my own. Just a white coffee please."

Suddenly, from her branded handbag, Gina produced a tall, sleek, silver flask- Gina in cup form. The Barista took it and held her free hand out to Cathy expectantly. After an awkward thirty seconds, Freckles cottoned on and retrieved a paper cup from somewhere beneath the counter before busying herself with the coffee orders.

Gina looked at Cathy with a mix of contempt, disgust and pity.

"Oh Cath, you really ought to invest in one for your daily coffees, so much better for the environment." She lectured, retrieving her fashionable metal thermos, now filled with fresh, hot coffee.

"…aren't these paper ones recyclable?", Cathy mooted as she fantasised about the luxury of a 'daily coffee'.

"Yes but single-use anything is an absolute no. There was a big social media campaign about it recently, didn't you see? All over Instagram."

Pointing to a long shelf beside the till, the barista interjected:

"Excuse me, if you'd be interested, we have a wide range of reusable flasks avail- "

"No thank you…I..I have one at home." Cathy interrupted having glanced up at the gleaming shelf full and rationalising what percentage of an 8-hour shift one would cost. She avoided Gina's eye.

"Would you like a receipt?" the barista asked, undeterred, having now processed their respective contactless payments.

"No, that's fine, thanks." Cathy replied. Gina nudged her approvingly and nodded, saying:

"Now you've got the idea, Cath!"

They continued their conversation as they sat down at a bistro table that was decorated with a posy in a jam-jar. Gina flourished her phone, latest model naturally, and pulled up the website for the campaign she had been referring to. The slogan was "Small change for big change- every little helps". Its mission was about promoting little steps each day towards a greener, more sustainable way of life. There were apps available and big events all over the country being planned to help spread the word and encourage action. There was a special focus on collaboration within communities and "helping your neighbour" out by sharing new ideas, responsibilities and approaches. There was an emphasis on education and distributing information to those who would otherwise be unable to access it. Cathy delighted at the

colourful marketing and seeing some of the photographs of real people working together. She found it a heartening thought in today's insular world. She was amazed at the range of options and suggestions that would be free and relatively simple to implement, even in her own busy life. She made a mental note to look up some of the articles she saw flashing by her eyes as Gina scrolled down the webpage; things like "50 free ways to a more sustainable life!" and "Greener not meaner!".

"That's what this is all about. Small changes. Every little helps."

Cathy reflected on whether the ends should justify the means. She knew that Gina's sudden interest in the environment was due to its current popularity. She would follow this trend as long as it was fashionable and then ditch it for the next one, like when her 'dip-dye' evolved to 'balayage'. Cathy could see that at least this trend was positive and without Gina spreading the word, Cathy certainly wouldn't have come across this on her own.

After this uncharacteristically interesting debate about climate change, the conversation made the inevitable decline into the same predictable territories as always: Gina loudly explaining her current love triangle; Cathy's deliberate vagueness over her working life; Gina's perspective on fashion, the soaps and holiday destinations that she had recently visited, prompting Cathy's patented glazed eyes and nodding head combo. Just when Gina suggested they ordered another round of coffee, Cathy explained that she had better be heading off.

They left the café with an appreciative nod towards the barista who was busy cleaning the copper coffee machine. After a short walk to the tiny pay-and-display carpark nearby, Gina

produced a chunky set of keys and pointed across to her gleaming, black, gas-guzzling Toyota with a satisfying BLEEP and flicker of headlights:

"This one's mine! Is yours nearby…or do need you a lift anywhere?"

"No, no mine's just a couple of streets away…but thank you."

Cathy and Gina parted ways with an air-kiss from the latter.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Cathy turned the corner and walked straight past the bus-stop. She felt like walking home today instead. She could probably choose to walk a bit more often if she was being honest with herself. She reflected on the conversation the two had shared in the coffee shop. She knew that although big things like Gina's expensive cups and social media campaigns might be out of the reach of her time and budget, she could still try to make some smaller changes. *Every little helps after all.* After a few hundred metres she felt an imposing shadow envelop her and the purr of an engine interrupt her thoughts on what to make for dinner when she arrived home. Gina's car window rolled down to expose a Cheshire cat grin and a pair of designer sunglasses that were as black and shiny as the vehicle surrounding it.

"Sorry to frighten you! Just popped back into the café and got you a little something."

She extended her perfectly manicured hand through the massive window and offered something wrapped in a brown paper bag.

"Oh no, Georgi…I mean, 'Gina'…I really don't…"

"SORRY? I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" Gina faux shouted as she revved the running engine a series of times with pure glee erupting on her face.

Reluctantly, Cathy examined the brown paper bag in her hand and opened it to find a shiny, cherry red, reusable coffee flask.

“Small changes, Cath! Let’s not leave it so long next time!”, Gina looked down her sunglasses at Cathy and winked as she set off down the road leaving a muggy cloud of exhaust fumes in her accelerating wake.

Cathy stood there stunned. Initially she wanted to run after her and return the unexpected gift. Cathy didn’t need her friend’s charity and even if she *did* she certainly didn’t want her to know that. She stared down at the receptacle in her hands. *Every little helps*, she reminded herself. It was a gesture, albeit misguided, and at the very least she could bring it with her to their next meet-up together even if realistically that would be the next time that she would even be able to justify a coffee that didn’t come from her kettle and a jar of instant. She thought about what other ‘small changes’ she could make. Social media definitely wasn’t her thing but she did find the look of that campaign interesting. She could look it up on the computer when she was next at work and try to glean some tips. She remembered that there was a ‘Green Team’ at one of her jobs. Perhaps she could join that. It would be good to talk to other people and share ideas. She couldn’t quite believe that it was Georgina of all people who had lit this fire inside of her. She would have to repay her somehow.

Cathy smiled to herself as the perfect answer came into her mind: *I’ll save up and buy her some exhaust filters for that ridiculous car.*