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Apocalypse Sooner or Later

How I Disappeared Down the Rabbit Hole

Dale Lately

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In 2021 pro-Trump protesters finally stormed Capitol Hill convinced of a stolen election. In the same year an 'anti-vaxx' movement emerged across Europe and America. Why do people increasingly inhabit different realities? Why are fringe and apocalyptic ideas now normal? I went 'undercover' amongst society's conspiracy theory outcasts in search of answers. But as I did it made me investigate questions about the sanity of my own friends and family – and even myself...

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Prologue

In the spring of 2020, with the country teetering ever closer towards lockdown, I nipped up to my local Lidl supermarket one morning to stock up on supplies. By the time I arrived there was already a small crowd of people waiting patiently outside for it to open. Through the glass windows a couple of the workers watched us. One of them sipped from a flask of tea.

I accidentally caught the eye of a woman beside me, who was leaning against her shopping trolley and pushing it back and forth as she suppressed a yawn.

'It will open?' the woman said, indicating the Lidl.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I hope so.'

'They say all of them will close,' she said, in an accent I couldn't place. 'The supermarkets. Shops. do you think it's true?'

I glanced doubtfully at the Lidl, and behind it the massive Morrison's and the Homebase. 'I don't think so,' I said.

She didn't reply. We fell to silent over the roar of the traffic.

'People still need shops,' I added, as if further explanation might be needed.

Another man, who was standing near us, turned to join the conversation. 'Already you can't get anything,' he said, in a thick Turkish accent. 'I've been everywhere for my family. And no milk.'

'No flour,' agreed the woman.

A conversation developed between the two of them, in which they detailed the things they'd been unable to stock up on. 'Bread,' said the man sadly, shaking his head.

'Vegetables. And milk.'

The woman breathed in.

'Jesus,' she said, 'is coming.'

She said this with a solemn nod of her head, as if this was what she'd expected all along. I glanced at her. There was also a strange kind of smile on her face, as she stood pushing her trolley back and forth, as if she was half joking, but perhaps not completely.

I was about to ask the woman what she meant by this – or what the lack of flour or bread had to do with it – but at that moment the doors to the supermarket finally swooshed open and we began to sidle in.

I had to admit, it *was* a bit worrying. There were no croissants, donuts, or other sugary treats; the bakery shelf looked like the bakers had gone on strike. Massive empty gaps filled the shelves. If you wanted to purchase thin air, there was a lot on offer. I thought back over my entire life, and realised I couldn't ever recall coming to a supermarket and not being able to buy bread.

'It's what they predicted,' said someone.

I turned to see the man I'd met in the queue gazing at the shelves beside me.

'Who predicted?' I said.

'Them,' he explained. 'They predicted everything.'

Gently, we moved on from the shelf containing the pastries. 'They said there would be a Flood,' the man continued as we gently moved around the supermarket. 'And Fire. There say there would be Plague.'

We slowed to a stop before the Condensed Milk.

As my eyes scanned the shelf I thought about what the man was saying. There *had* been floods; in fact I was still assembling an insurance claim for damage to my tiles in a recent storm. A few months before the news had been full of devastating fires across the Amazon and then Australia. Still, I couldn't help thinking that somewhere on Planet Earth there was always going to be a natural disaster if you looked for it.

'Maybe,' I said cagily.

The man gazed intently at the condensed milk.

'Maybe the virus doesn't exist,' he said. 'Maybe imaginary.'

'Sorry?' I said.

He pointed out that the government was in the process of rolling out 5G, the new internet bandwidth that had made headlines after it was revealed that the controversial Chinese-owned company Huawei would be involved.

'What was wrong with 4G?' the man said conspiratorially, as we reached the fresh fruit aisle.

'Or even...' and his eyes flicked from side to side, as if he was being watched, '3G?'

He left a long and dramatic pause.

I was intrigued, and wondering if I had an answer to his question, but my attention was divided because I was also scanning the store trying to remember which aisle had the toilet roll. 'Why would China try and take over our phone network?' I asked.

He angled his head upwards.

'Mind control agents,' he said. 'Chemtrails.'

We'd reached Dairy Products. The man stopped at the shelf and nodded to himself, slowly.

'You see?' he said.

'What?' I asked, intrigued.

He gave a grim, knowing smile, and then indicated the shelf.

'*No milk,*' he said, almost in a whisper.

We gazed at the shelf. I made a grunting sound, and we continued to survey the empty shelf, as if mourning a lost friend. To be honest I wasn't sure if it actually signified anything, but I didn't want to undermine the moment.

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When I got back home I went online and looked up '5G phone masts'. It seemed my friend from Lidl wasn't the only one who seriously suspected that phone masts were distributing the deadly virus. There were quite a few conspiracy theories flying around: one that China was using Covid-19 as a cover to influence our communications, or that a New World Order of billionaires had engineered the pandemic.

'What a stupid theory,' I thought to myself.

I didn't have a problem believing that governments could intentionally spy on or even massacre their own citizens. They'd done that many times in the past and in some parts of the world were still doing it. But I just couldn't bring myself to believe that they'd do it through something as unreliable as phone networks. In my experience Britain's telecoms masts could barely even cope with distributing telecoms signals, never mind a biological agent.

However ridiculous the theory might be, however, it didn't seem to be going away – I kept seeing examples of it and other conspiracy theories: that China was manufacturing the virus; that there was some all-powerful global elite set to profit from sales of a vaccine.

I tried to imagine all Britain's telecoms engineers – the people who presumably installed these diabolical weapons – being in on this vast conspiracy. I pictured them going back to their families in a semi-detached house somewhere after a hard day's work enacting a global conspiracy of bio-terrorism. Would they still kiss their wives after plotting to murder the population? What would they say to their kids?

This was the problem with conspiracy theories, . Once you began to imagine that there was some vast, sinister plot, then you also had to explain how the ordinary people were coaxed into participating in it. Who mopped the floors? Who installed the Wi-Fi? If

the phone companies really *were* manufacturing bio-agents then at the very least you'd expect some kind of interruption to the service.

I glanced at my phone. It was having network problems.

Putting this out of my mind, I made myself a cup of tea and then rested my back against the kitchen counter, glancing out of the window at the murky skies. In truth the man and the woman I'd met up at the supermarket intrigued me. They'd seemed so sure of themselves, so convinced of their beliefs. In fact – and this was what really seemed odd to me – believing these awful things actually seemed to make them feel *more* secure. It was as if they took some strange kind of solace in knowing we were all doomed.

Why did the people outside Lidl believe what they did? And how many people out there shared the same kinds of views – believed, in some way, that it was all a lie, and that dark, secretive forces were trying to control us?

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This is a book about the things people believe and why they believe them.

Over the past few years I've noticed a tendency in the way people talk about the world. People have always had strong opinions, of course. But it's seemed to me that in recent years there's been a trend towards describing reality in wild, apocalyptic terms, ways that have little to do with reality. After Britain voted for Brexit in 2016 for example the people who supported Remain weren't just unhappy. They were convinced that the vote had been 'stolen', or that people had been manipulated by evil, powerful algorithms; award winning articles appeared claiming that millions voters had been 'brainwashed' because the campaign for Leave had taken out some targeted advertising on Facebook. In the same year, Donald Trump won the US election, leading influential columnists and pundits to claim right throughout his presidency that the election had been 'hacked' by Russia (rather than the more worrying notion that people had actually voted for him).

Important people – politicians, journalists; news presenters, celebrities – all seemed increasingly addicted to describing the world in sweeping apocalyptic terms. Never mind what *was* happening, it got even worse when they started describing what *could* happen. Some believed that life on Planet Earth was about to go extinct. Some believed that a country like Britain was under 'invasion' from a few hundred migrants who'd crossed the English Channel in dinghies. When he was faced with the prospect that Britain might vote to leave the European Union in 2016, the European Council President Donald Tusk had warned that Brexit could be the end of Western civilisationⁱ. The then Prime Minister David Cameron even suggested that it might provoke 'World War Three'.ⁱⁱ

In the end, nuclear Armageddon was somehow avoided by Britain pulling out of the Single Market – but it did strike me as quite remarkable that apparently quite high profile people, even ones in charge of running the country, seemed increasingly prone to wild, apocalyptic claims. In the rightwing media, there were a number of influential commentators who genuinely appeared to think civilization was on the brink of collapse because some universities were adopting the use of alternative pronouns. It was an interesting question to ask how robust civilization actually was if it could be destroyed by a grammar choice.

These visions were all very different. They came from very different people in very different places. Yet there was one thing that united them. All of these visions imagined some dark, unassailable foe – Islamist terror, migrants, global warming, algorithms – that always seemed to remain rather imprecise and loosely-defined. The danger appeared as some vague and dark force, beyond the work of any one individual or human being. 'Waves' of immigrants were crashing against the shore, we were told; but who were these people? Surely they had names? The spread of Islam in western Europe was a threat to civilization, apparently; but nobody spelt out why an entire neighbourhood would collapse into chaos just because someone opened a Halal butcher. When blogger after blogger predicted the collapse of civilization because of immigrants

in dinghies or alternative pronouns, they were a little hazy on exactly how this would happen – let alone give a timetable.

The most extreme of all the doom-mongers was the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion, which staged protests all around the world and claimed that all our children would ‘die in the next 10 to 20 years.’ⁱⁱⁱ But the supporters of Extinction Rebellion still applied for jobs, and got mortgages, and went on trying get their kids into a nice school. Did they do these things even while genuinely believing that in a decade or two everyone would be dead? If so what was the point? You got the impression that even the end of the world wasn’t quite as important as good school catchment area.

We were living, in other words, in a kind of perpetual limbo; we might be nearing the End Times, but these End Times seemed to take an awfully long time to get here. It wasn’t so much ‘Apocalypse Now’ as ‘Apocalypse Sooner or Later.’

I didn’t know back then that some of these dystopian visions would actually start to look remarkably accurate – that they wouldn’t just be describing something that could happen, but rather describing something that was happening outside our streets. But even as 2020 quickly gave way to some rather *real* scenes of horror, I became increasingly fascinated by a whole range of new fantasies I was seeing unfolding. On the one hand scientists across the world were spouting wild predictions of an unprecedented human catastrophe, a new Black Death that would take the lives of billions. But at the same time a movement was unfolding on social media and on the streets that saw the real source of the apocalypse in the governments themselves; they saw dastardly global conspiracies and manufactured viruses, plots to cull hundreds of millions of human beings, paedophile rings that were run from pizza restaurants, and an apparent plan by the founder of Microsoft to put a microchip into everybody’s brain. Perhaps it was just me, but I couldn’t help feeling that the level of debate had become a little extreme.

All of this felt rather bizarre at ground level. But in truth, it didn’t feel *that* bizarre to me – or not half as bizarre as you might have expected it to. The truth is, I’m no outsider to strange beliefs and alternative opinions. In fact if it wasn’t for conspiracy theorists I wouldn’t actually be here.

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Born of a Lie

Back in the late 1940s, a bright and studious young man of about twenty from a Jewish-American family in Pennsylvania began to think about his future. He had won a scholarship to study in England at a prestigious university, and was deliberating about what he should do – and where he should do it – upon graduation. His father, a local businessman running laundry services, was heavily involved with the trade unions and carrying a reputation for Marxist talk. This had attracted the attention of the Subversive Activities Control Board run by US Senator Joseph McCarthy, a platform for hunting out sympathizers with communist Russia by enacting a system of witch-hunts, secret courts and blacklists.

Back in the 1940s US Senator Joseph McCarthy began hunting out sympathizers with Stalinist Russia – a place of witch-hunts, secret courts and show-trials – by enacting a system of witch-hunts, secret courts and show-trials. McCarthy was prepared to fabricate entire plots, conspiracies, documents and testimony to get at what he saw as the truth. This included persecuting innocent people, obtaining forced denunciations and perverting any objective idea of ‘justice. McCarthy took the truth so seriously that he was prepared to lie to get at it.

One of the families McCarthy’s committees investigated was the Jewish laundry businessman from Pennsylvania, which helped to encourage his studious son to marry someone in England and continue his future there. That man was my grandfather, and that is how someone like me came to be writing these words.

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I’ve often wondered what might have happened had my grandfather not been born just at the moment when American society was gearing up for the worst witch-hunt since the Salem trials. Had he not felt the shadow of the McCarthy era looming over him, would he still have settled in England? Perhaps my grandfather might not have been quite as resolute in setting up a new life in England, meeting my grandmother and settling down to have the children that would one day lead to me. In the strangest way, I owe my very existence to a conspiracy theory. I also owe my existence to an idiot, but then the two are often interlinked.

Perhaps it's not so very surprising then that I've always maintained a healthy scepticism towards things I'm told.

If this was my only connection to the world of wild and paranoid ideas, then it wouldn't be worth commenting on. But in fact extremism has affected me throughout my life. No less than three times have I been the near victim of major terror attacks – one which ended up with a colleague getting taken hostage and one that killed a flatmate of mine. Extremist ideas, in other words, have dramatic consequences.

And it doesn't stop there. I've seen violent riots and neo-Nazi protests motivated by hate-filled conspiracy theorists; I've been targeted and attacked by people with rather frightening views on deporting Muslims or 'repelling' migrants. But even in my own social circle there are less obvious examples of the spread of quite extreme ideas. In recent years I've seen moderate, liberal friends of mine casually voice ideas that I've found shocking: I've seen them casually recommend that we should overturn national votes because they didn't like the result, or ignoring the votes of millions of people because they couldn't be trusted to know what they were voting for. I've seen people who called themselves socialist spread anti-Semitic images that originated with the Nazis and Extinction Rebellion protestors claiming that we need to use stronger measures to reduce human population. In short, perhaps everyone could probably do with relaxing a little.

The truth is, it wasn't just my grandfather whose life was affected by conspiracy theories. My maternal grandmother was herself the product of a rather different cult – one we now associate with gas chambers, racial purity laws and barbed wire fencing. I'd grown up in a home environment where strange ideas were uttered every day and wild conspiracy theories seemed normal. Over time that grew worse, until I was having to deal with mental health teams and release forms to allow the people who'd brought me up to be admitted to mental hospital. I'd parented my parent. My mother was afflicted with serious bouts of mental illness. *Her* mother was afflicted with serious bouts of mental illness. Many of her siblings were afflicted with serious bouts of mental illness.

Perhaps it wasn't surprising that I sometimes seemed to have difficulties dealing with reality.

But this was still early 2020, and that's why I want to start this story at the time I met my two new friends outside Lidl – and what happened afterwards. I was about to realise that sometimes the nightmares that afflict people aren't just nightmares. Sometimes they can feel very real indeed.

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The Roof Falls In

It was a couple of days before lockdown was declared, and I was concerned about my dripping roof.

I realise this wasn't what I was *supposed* to be concerned about. For weeks the news had been full of a frightening new virus – one that was apparently unusually infectious and had the power to cause massive harm. It had started at the beginning of the year with the occasional report of cases of pneumonia in China. The mentions had become more and more frequent, and then they'd been talking about Taiwan or Singapore. Then they were talking about places I'd been to: northern Italy, France, Spain. Nightmare images had begun to seep out through the news. We saw soldiers patrolling the streets in full hazchem bodysuits; entire regions locked down with roadblocks manned by the military. Everyone seemed to agree that this was going to be a pandemic, and a bad one.

I didn't doubt any of this. But to me personally the roof was a lot more urgent. It had been damaged in a recent storm and was letting in rain over my cooker. My kitchen now felt like being in an outdoor campsite. For a variety of reasons – none of them related to a pandemic – the builders had arranged to come and take a look, then cancelled. Then they'd arranged to come and take a look again, then cancelled again. I was trying to get them on the phone in order to come and take a look again before they cancelled. I was also thinking of getting new builders.

During all of this outbreak I happened to be working in tourism, in a job grandly called 'tour director' which meant taking coachloads of Americans around some old castles and telling them things I'd looked up on Wikipedia. Much of the job centred around the rather unexciting task of phoning ahead to restaurants to inform them about gluten allergies. It just so happened that my company had booked me to do a tour of Ireland and Britain that was supposed to be happening in a couple of days' time. This meant that even as the news filled with rising death tolls and enforced quarantines, with roadblocks patrolled by soldiers and hospitals overwhelmed with the virus, I was obliged to maintain an email correspondence with several school group leaders about whether any of their students might exhibit a potential nut allergy.

I was starting to get a strange feeling. The news read like something out of an apocalyptic sci-fi movie, and yet in order to maintain the email correspondence and book ahead for the tour – the payment for which I felt I could rather do with, given the building work on my kitchen – I had to operate as if the pandemic were just a mild annoyance, a winter 'flu season that had just got slightly out of hand. And it wasn't just

me. All the other tour directors had to do the same, as did everybody in our tour company; so did all the school group leaders, and most people in the tour industry too – the hoteliers, the chefs, the flight bookers, the airline staff, the insurers, and just about everybody else in a vast industry employing millions of people around the planet, all of whom relied for their survival on pretending that what was happening wasn't happening.

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I wondered how many people around the world were in this situation. When you thought about the sum total of human activity – all the plans, events, bookings, plane tickets, and a million things besides – there must be an awful lot of people in the same slightly weird situation as me. On the one hand, we had to assume that this virus wasn't too bad, because our jobs depended on it. On the other hand, everything was pointing to some sort of slowly brewing catastrophe about to sweep the world. In order to function we effectively had to assume both things were true, and switch between them as was convenient. But of course they couldn't both be true. There was a term for this: *cognitive dissonance*. My head was starting to creak with too much dissonance.

The hotels and restaurants continued to accept my bookings without any comment.

The news wasn't getting any better. More and more images of places around Europe resembled quarantine sites. There was something deeply unsettling about watching places I regarded as holiday destinations – sun-kissed piazzas in Milan, beautiful hill towns – now resembling something from a sci-fi movie. In the Italian town of Bergamo hospitals were apparently overwhelmed; the scenes from the news suggested mayhem.

I'd managed to get the builders on the phone at last, and they'd promised to come round the following day. That left me with just two more days until I was supposed to fly to Ireland to meet the Americans off the plane. Yet everywhere I looked seemed to be in a state of total confusion. With the news suddenly full of stories of impending Armageddon people began building mountains of Baked Beans, bread, toilet roll; there were stories about imminent food shortages and impending mass starvation. I made a special journey to the enormous Asda near the Etihad Stadium in my city. Huge queues had formed, desperately clutching sundry items as they trickled through the checkouts. Face masks were appearing on the mouths of the shoppers. Shelf after shelf lay empty. As I walked over to the pasta aisle I heard a man near me on his phone.

'There's no rice, no pasta, no baked beans,' he was shouting into the phone. There was anxious buzzing on the other end.

He stamped the floor. 'I just *told* you, there's no fucking pasta,' he snarled. I stepped away from the man. For some reason I was quite glad I wasn't competing with him for the last packet of pasta.

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After the near-scuffle for the pasta, there was something that felt rather insane about this situation. Could this tour still go ahead? Could I lead a contented school group around some Irish castles even while roads closed off, soldiers quarantined towns and ordinary families fought one another for pasta? I wondered what had happened during the Spanish 'Flu of a century ago. Surely there was some level on which lots of people – especially in spa resorts and luxury hotels – had simply had to pretend that what was happening was not in fact happening. While medics turned up with stretchers to take away the dead, waiters still served cocktails and canapés, cleaners still plumped pillows and turned luxury eiderdowns, secretaries pored over bookings. It seemed insane. It *was* insane. But what else were you going to do?

I emailed the school group leaders about dietary requirements. Some of them were being slow in their response. I wondered if they were watching the news about Italy too.

Seeking a little light relief, I dropped in on my friend. Tom ran a bar and events space and the night I dropped in he was sitting with one of the promoters trying to work out whether a night they had planned was still going to go ahead or not. On the bar someone had placed a big cardboard sign saying 'Cleaning Station' alongside a squeezey bottle of hand-spray. Somehow, I didn't think it was going to make all that much difference against a deadly pandemic.

Tom looked pained. They'd sunk lots of time and effort into booking the whole thing.

I asked him what he thought about the virus.

'All I know is, something'll have to give,' he said.

Tom showed me a diagram on his phone. It was an animation involving a load of innocent looking cartoon balls.

'It's exponential growth,' he said. 'If it just doubles every day from the first patient zero, at first it's nothing. Even after a week, it's just a few dozen. But after a *month...*'

He shook his head.

'Exponential growth,' he said darkly.

He clicked on the animation. It began with a load of white balls peacefully bouncing their way around inside a square. There was one red ball on the edge, but the red ball, Tom told me, would turn any white ball red.

I watched them all slowly bouncing around. Nothing seemed to happen for a while, then I noticed there were now two red ones. After another few moments, there seemed to be several more.

'You see?' said Tom grimly. 'If the government doesn't do something now, there'll be a massive pandemic.'

I glanced at the screen of his phone, where a few dozen balls – a sizeable proportion of the total – were now bouncing around, quickly turning more of the rest red. 'I'm not sure that actually proves all that much,' I said.

'Just look at the animation,' Tom said glumly.

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That night I couldn't sleep. There were rumours on our company Facebook group that some of the tour directors in Italy and Switzerland had had to spend forty eight hours sitting in quarantine. They'd even posted pictures of themselves, along with glum-looking school groups. I wondered how being party to a spell of forced confinement guarded by people with guns affected their end-of-season rating.

The cognitive dissonance had reached such proportions that I could feel my brain hurting – a grinding of gears as two mutually contradictory hypotheses bumped together. I just couldn't square the two worlds. Would armed guards in full hazchem bio-suits greet us as we filtered down from the Stena Lines passenger lounge on our ferry crossing from Belfast to Cairnryan? As the soldiers pointed their guns in our faces and led us into our sealed quarantine cells, would I still be phoning ahead to the restaurant to cancel?

At what point, I wondered, did you actually stop caring about gluten allergies?

I wondered if this was how religious fanatics or political extremists felt sometimes. Perhaps part of the reason they looked mad was that they were buckling under the weight of trying to convince themselves of two mutually contradictory things at the same time. You learnt about constellations that were billions and billions of light years away, compared to which our planet was a tiny speck of rock floating in an almost infinite void, and yet you also thought the whole thing was created by a big man with a beard. You learnt in geography that plate tectonics over the molten magma at the earth's core created seismic activity, and yet you also believed that the reason an earthquake happened was because two teenage boys in South Carolina having sex with one another. It must be hard work.

I rose early the next morning. A hotel I'd booked had emailed me back asking if we were coming or not in light of the global pandemic. One of the school leaders had emailed me to ask me what I thought about coronavirus. I didn't have any idea *what* to think about coronavirus.

I tuned in to the news. Ireland had apparently just closed its schools right across the country to respond to the emergency.

'You might just have to bear with me on this one,' I emailed the school group leaders. 'It's kind of an evolving situation.'

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The kitchen roof was still dripping.

It was now getting dangerously near my pasta, my rice, and a pot of vegetable stew that I'd left on top of the cooker. Because of the time it took the rain to work its way down the covering of the roof, there was a time delay between the moment it rained outside and the moment it rained in my kitchen.

Luckily the building firm had finally managed to find out where its builders were, and had sent a couple of men round to finish the job. As one of them scrambled onto the roof the foreman told me that their other work had been slowing as fear about the pandemic was spreading. He was a burly man with a gap tooth and as he stood there explaining this to me I wondered what happened to someone like him who made his money doing things like kitchen extensions for people with nice homes in the suburbs. Did people still order loft conversions in the midst of a global crisis? Did they still re-do the patio.

'It's fucking weird,' said the foreman.

He was standing outside on the street watching his boy finish up. Smudgy late afternoon light filled the skies. He told me that his son-in-law had suddenly had to cancel his wedding in Wales and nobody knew what was happening. 'He got the call last night,' he told me. 'It's all just...'

He paused, and tailed off. I got the feeling he was about to say he thought the whole thing was a load of overblown nonsense (perhaps phrasing it slightly differently) but I also got the feeling he didn't really know *what* to think – that he was no virologist, that there was a chance they were right, that this really was the worst thing to hit the world for centuries. I guessed his age as about fifty. His breath had cigarettes on it. He'd be the kind of person this virus liked to target.

I got an email from my company that the tour of Ireland was cancelled. By this stage there was no chance of it going ahead. I didn't think there was any point in messaging the school group leaders; it was strange that after all these communications I'd probably never see them now. Instead I went out onto my street and looked around. The early spring light was starting to fade and wisps of hazy light had filled the sky. In the terraces around me lights were twinkling on as people returned home, put the kettle up, watched the news. I wondered what they were thinking right now, what they were talking about. Were they scared? Did they think it was all a hoax? The cold of the evening started to bite and yet I stood out there a little longer, taking in the damp air and its tinge of petrol fumes, and breathing slowly as the soft light faded around me.

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Can it All Be True?

I was in a strange position. On the one hand I was delighted to have a kitchen roof that was fixed. On the other there was a global pandemic which looked like it might wipe out huge numbers of people. I generally like to think every cloud has a silver lining, but in this case even I had to admit that the overall picture wasn't great.

There was a strange atmosphere in the air. As I looked over my terrace – the usual back gardens, the trampolines for the kids, the neighbours I never bothered to talk to – I wondered what on earth they were all doing. Were they panicking? Were they watching TV? Not for the first time, I'd get that split sensation: trying to combine abstract knowledge of a looming apocalypse on the one hand with a mundane, everyday street scene that looked identical to any other day. Our evolution hadn't prepared us for anything like this. We were adapted to respond to easy visible threats, like a lion. There was no preparation for abstract charts and exponential growth and animations featuring bouncing balls.

In fact there was panic all around the world. My own problems trying to reconcile different realities were being repeated on a much wider scale elsewhere – especially when the various faiths (who'd claimed for thousands of years to be the authority on the subject of death) were now revealed somewhat uncomfortably as potentially causing death, or at least more death than was strictly needed, through their mass gatherings. I read on the news that Orthodox priests in Georgia had started blessing the streets of the capital Tbilisi with holy water, as if they were awaiting some kind of Second Coming. American funerals were now being conducted by video link.

Even the Taj Mahal had shut down, I noticed.

Unsure what else to do, I made a cup of tea and scrolled through my phone to see if I could make any sense of what was going on. It would have helped if there had been any consistent message from the government or the media, but instead the whole country – and the people supposed to be running it – seemed to be unclear about what was happening. The news was full of shaming stories about people who'd gone out and panic-bought to stock up on food. (It occurred to me that one of the *reasons* people had gone out and panic-bought was because of the stories of the media, but whatever).

I heard a rumour from somewhere that even Isis had put any terrorist acts they'd previously had planned on hold.

I thought of all the people out there in my city, even on my own street, stockpiling pasta, with their mountains of tinned and dried food. The extreme version of

these people were called 'preppers', and I'd read about them; they were the kind of people who built bunkers and rented lock-ups in the desert filled with ammo as if they were re-enacting *Mad Max*. I couldn't help feeling a tinge of smug superiority. It all seemed a bit over the top to me. That kind of thing might feel plausible in a desert compound in Utah, but not elsewhere. Try as I might, I couldn't imagine a violent shoot-out outside the Morrison's.

I sipped the tea thoughtfully. After the builders had gone I'd done some tidying up around the kitchen, including sorting out the food cupboards. I have a somewhat obsessive tendency to buy in substantial volumes of things I like – beans, long-life milk – and stack them in neat rows. Now as I looked around my *own* kitchen – the tinned beans, the mountains of Ryvita crackers, the carefully curated shelf of condensed milk – and realised that in many ways my own habitat probably would have struck an outsider as that of a prepper. In fact anyone glancing at my shelves would think I'd been looking forward to the end of the world for a long time.

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My father rang ten minutes later.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

I explained about my work getting cancelled and feeling worried about money. But I added that I felt fine in terms of my health, and couldn't feel any of the symptoms. There was a pause.

'Are *you* okay?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, I'm fine.'

After the initial hesitancy our conversation continued. My aunt was apparently terrified of the virus, which was understandable as she had a range of chronic health problems and was in one of the riskiest categories. Even my father worried me slightly; he'd developed lung problems in recent years and was starting to feel his age.

'Weird, isn't it,' he remarked.

'I know,' I agreed. 'It's really fucking weird.'

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To get over how weird everything felt I decided to take my laptop to a cafe and try and do some writing. Now that I was officially out of a job I had that strange feeling of suddenly finding myself with some spare time. My phone screen and the TV news was full of panic and confusion, but outside it was beautiful spring weather. The city was

conspicuously quiet. I cycled around but every single café I came to seemed to be either closed or about to close.

Eventually I found myself working on my laptop in the student refectory on the edge of the university, the only place I could still find open. It felt odd to be in a place that I regularly used, despite not being at university (they had cheap coffee and plug points) even at a time like this. There were some free newspapers by the counter full of grim reports of the spread of the disease in China and Italy. In here, strangely, I felt comparatively safe; there was just something so boring and normal about this cafe I couldn't imagine it being the site of some killer disease. I reminded myself that was ridiculous; the virus didn't care whether I felt at home or not. Still, they did have nice coffee.

My father had mentioned that my aunt was worried about the disease so I decided to give her a call and see how she was.

'Are you in a café?' she asked immediately, with a hint of suspicion in her voice.

'Well, sort of,' I said. 'It's actually a university.' I hoped this would get me off the hook.

It didn't. 'You need to go home right now,' my aunt snapped. 'Being in public places at the time of a global pandemic is extremely irresponsible.'

I looked around the refectory. On the table beside me a bunch of young Italians were all laughing at something. A couple of girls who looked like they might be Chinese – and recently returned from visiting home – were at the opposite table.

Perhaps my aunt had a point.

To relieve my tension I stopped in at my gym, but it was ghostly. There were almost no users and almost no staff. Every wall-mounted screen was displaying news headlines, which were all about Covid: more masks, more soldiers, more hazchem suits.

As I cycled home I saw two ambulances tearing down the street. I wondered where they were heading to in such a hurry, but before I could speculate any further they'd turned off and raced westwards, their sirens wailing into the evening air.

*

An odd feeling was growing on me. I knew that the lockdown was coming, I just wasn't sure when and where. The cycle route took me through the residential part of the student area and you normally saw herds of young people heading this way or that, but today everything felt weirdly empty. As I cut into the dark, unlit cycle path I felt a deep foreboding descending on me as I contemplated what was happening. All over the world countries were closing their borders, shutting their shops, banning people meeting in public. Planet Earth was shortly to close for business. I remembered that quote prior to the outbreak of World War II when they'd talked about the lights going out over all over Europe. Now the lights really *were* going out.

I stopped at Tom's bar on the way back. A small group had huddled in a shadowy alcove at the back to enjoy a final drink before the pubs all closed. I couldn't help thinking back to those films I'd seen about World War II, with ordinary civilians sheltering down on tube platforms and muttering grim words of encouragement to one another. There was a sense of heroism about all that. But how heroic was it to drink right now? Or to even meet anyone?

Somehow I didn't fancy a drink myself. Dean – the other guy who ran the bar – was serving that night and gave me a nod. I asked him how he was feeling right now.

He shrugged. 'We were going to close anyway,' he said. 'It's got to be done.' But his voice didn't sound all that resolute. A guy I knew with an alcohol problem nodded as he tipped a pint down his neck.

By the time I reached home the Prime Minister had announced a national lockdown.

**

The Real Thing

When I was younger I once developed a fascination with the end of the world. Partly this just a result of being raised in West Yorkshire. I grew up in the isolated outpost of a small town nestled among the scarred, blackened, gorse-coated hills of the region. Social life was on the sparse side. In fact the place was so isolated that after an Armageddon event people probably would have become *more* sociable. there'd always been something a little millenarian about this place. Back in the time the North West was a landscape of cotton mills and belching chimneys, people had clung to faiths: to new, powerful, esoteric religions like Quakers and Baptists and the itinerant open-air preachers of the 18th and 19th centuries. John Wesley and George Whitefield had stalked these hills. Non-conformists had established chapels here. If you climbed onto any of these hillsides you'd see tombstone after tombstone for children and child workers of four, five, six; victims of cholera, malnutrition, workplace accidents. Perhaps it was no wonder that in tough places people seemed to need to cling to some kind of faith.

I was lucky enough not to be sent into the mills to work as a child. Yet looking back, I can't help wondering if this apocalyptic fixation was something to do with the landscape around me. There was something enthralling about watching ordinary locations – a shopping mall, a city street, a school or hospital – become places of mortal danger. There was something about those cold, dark valleys that made you contemplate the end of the world rather more often than you might expect. In fact halfway up onto the hillside – when all you had was the thin snake of the road that cut up through the valley and the odd house or terrace – it would have been hard to tell the difference.

As I grew older a sudden dangerous pandemic or a radiation leak started to weigh in on my mind more often. My mind buzzed with those nightmare images of quarantine: tower blocks now patrolled by armed guards, military roadblocks at the corner of quiet suburban streets, a shopping precinct transformed into a place of terror. I tried to imagine what that would look like – a pandemic, say, that swept across the world like a scythe, as human populations fell like chopped corn before it. How would it feel to be on the ground during such an event?

My imagination fizzed with scenarios: the town overrun by some nightmare event, a flood, a nuclear strike fifty miles away, an attack of chemical warfare. I loved watching exploding fireballs and metal twisted in huge crashes. I particularly enjoyed imagining my high school engulfed in flame for some reason.

So when in 2020 the news itself started to look a little bit like some of those movies, the truth is that it didn't actually feel all that strange to me. The truth is, I'd been mentally preparing for this for quite some time.

*

The trunk road near my house was almost silent.

The area around it was an unpopulated wasteland of closed pubs and boarded up houses. Beyond it the steel cliff-face of the city centre rose up in the distance, the towers no longer speckled with lights. The streets were empty. My neighbourhood felt ghostly. There was barely a plane in the sky. I saw the odd resident – swaddled, most of the time, in a facemask – but they shrank away, disappearing around a corner. It occurred to me that Britain probably hadn't been this quiet since the Second World War.

The lockdown had been in effect for over a week. Nobody knew when it was going to end, or what might lead to its relaxation. The government was paying wages. The news was saying that we'd be arrested if we went out more than once per day for exercise. It all sounded like something from an authoritarian state, but in fact the reality on the ground felt like the opposite: not so much a military dictatorship as an abandoned fairground where nobody had bothered to turn up to maintain the attractions.

Now that I was officially unemployed I could no longer afford to heat my house, so to stay warm I'd go out on jogs around my neighbourhood. I got a strange ghostly feeling as I did so: the streets were eerily quiet, even the little council estate where there were usually kids of all ages hanging around. In some ways it resembled some of those deserted scenes from all those sci-fi movies I'd watched. But what struck me at the same time was how ordinary it also seemed. These were the same grey, slate-roofed terraces, the same children's playing grounds, the same badly-parked cars I always walked past. But the people had disappeared. The only signs of life were the odd dog-walker or someone rounding the street in the distance, faces obscured by a mask, while the houses looked on silently, their occupants hiding inside.

*

I became addicted to Facebook. My day began with a morning scroll through everybody else's lives: I somehow wanted to connect with others living the same scenario as I was living. The picture was confused. Some were hysterical. Some were using images like 'police state' to describe what we saw around us, but I thought this was over the top – it was really more of a ghost town: everyone frightened, everything shut, everything silent. All the shops except food and medicine were closed. Nobody was allowed to move around the country. There was nowhere to move *to* anyway – no bars, no cafés, no

museums, no malls, no offices. I had to call my phone company at one point to cancel a debit. I was put through to Egypt.

There were now queues stretching around the block outside my local Lidl, and a tough-looking security man standing guard at the entrance – so I ventured into the centre for the shopping mall. The scene was dreamlike. Lights beamed triumphantly down on shuttered shops. The indoor streets were utterly deserted but for the slow shuffle of a single guard half a block away. Beside me a pair of escalators, still functioning for some unexplained reason, carried thin air slowly up from the ground floor to the upper floor. I realised I might well be the only human being in the building.

There was something odd about how tranquil it all felt. I knew nothing of what was actually happening in hospitals, but from the news I assumed they were wall-to-wall with Covid cases, bodies piled up on stretchers, vans taking corpses to crematoria. And yet my own city was more peaceful than ever: silent streets, empty pavements, noiseless shops. The grumble and mumble of the escalators mingled with adverts playing on a massive TV screen. why was the TV still playing? Who were the adverts for? It was as if humankind had suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth but forgotten to turn the lights off.

The expensive pastry shop was still open. I could think of no rational explanation for this either.

It was starting to get dark so I exited from the mall but lingered on in the streets. Not since the wartime Blitz, back when my grandmother was a girl, had a city been so mournfully silent. Entire streets were empty. The clomp of an occasional jogger's shoes were the only thing that broke the hum of coolant fans on streets that normally pumped music into the night air. I stood on a junction and looked a full quarter of a mile down the road before I saw a pair of headlights. In the distance, tower block hotels that were normally booked to capacity were now empty concrete shells, floor after floor of windows cast into darkness, with only the thin light of an emergency exit snaking its way up the corners of the building.

*

When I reached home everything felt emptier still. The street was empty, the house was empty, the neighbours were silent. All the windows were lit up but few people came out except to get into their cars to drive away. It suddenly struck me that I'd never come as close to this to feeling truly isolated. But for a single friend in the area I didn't know anyone. Was this how it felt when society broke down? Empty, silent streets, with everybody too scared to go out? Would it get to the point where I'd no longer go out at all?

I told myself I was being theatrical.

To relax myself a little and reconnect with the world I made a cup of tea and checked Facebook. Then I remembered why I actually preferred *not* to connect with the world, and tried to put my phone away. But by this time I was hooked. Half of the people

in my social circle seemed to be angry at being locked down. The other half seemed to be angry at the first half for being angry. Everybody seemed pretty confused however; confused about what the virus was, how dangerous it was, what was going to happen. Some people were obviously scared. I began to hear the phrase 'New World Order' and 'Great Reset' floating around, and wondered casually what they referred to.

It was late. I put the radio on and listened to the national death toll, which was now being announced nightly on the news. It had been climbing steadily from March, as they'd said it would, doubling and doubling: from a handful to a dozen, from a dozen to thirty, from thirty to a hundred. Now it was approaching a thousand. Maybe Tom had been right about the bouncing balls. I thought of a thousand people, innocent people, who'd never have died if it hadn't been for this virus. A thousand lives, many more families, spouses, children, friends, loved ones.

I resisted the temptation to Google 'New World Order' or 'Great Reset'.

Suddenly I didn't want to go online. It wasn't that I was worried at what I might find there: more whacky beliefs, conspiracy theories, the things you always found online. The problem was that it was dark and I wasn't exactly feeling brilliantly happy or secure right now, and – here's the difficult bit to admit – I was gullible to stuff like this. I wasn't worried at what I might find online. What really worried me was that I might start to believe it.

**

A Good Imagination

When I was in my early twenties I decided to move down to London for university. I'd already delayed going for several years, and had found myself drifting away from society, from my peers. But on reaching the capital the gap became a chasm. I found myself adrift in a vast and lonely human ocean, a sea of millions and millions of human beings, all in their own tiny worlds, their own bubbles. Society seemed tougher here. Nobody spoke in public. Every journey was filled with the silence of thousands of strangers all lost in their own thoughts. If a person could go mad, it was here.

I foundered. Lacking even the relative comfort of family I found myself swamped by awful depression and isolation. The winters were especially tough. I had that feeling of permanently drifting, of not really achieving anything, or working towards anything, apart from a degree I didn't really care about and then a series of light, casual jobs that paid little but demanded less.

But there was something else as well. Plenty of people drift. What I was experiencing felt like something stranger, perhaps more worrying. I don't know what true madness feels like. But I do know what it feels like to feel part of your brain that was previously anchored to the ground to come off its moorings a little. Sometimes – and I had no idea when it would happen – a feeling would come over me. It was perhaps more of a suspicion than a feeling, almost a conviction, and it ran like this: *none of this is real.*

It's difficult to explain. I knew, logically, that the feeling was wrong. of course it was real. It was all *too* real. Yet some part of my brain that should have reduced the messages of my senses into a coherent, easily-interpretable reality evidently wasn't quite working as it should. Late at night I'd often get what I can only describe as a sense of splitting, as if different parts of me were silently coming apart, like vinegar in water or a knot untying itself. I remember nights where I'd ride across London's night buses in a slow, meditative haze, as if I wasn't really there, but was instead in some possible future or alternate reality, surrounded by the silent shadows of other passengers. Sometimes this feeling could be fascinating, the way a psychedelic trip is fascinating. Other times it was just strange. Drunk, drifting, on a dance floor somewhere, I'd sometimes have to repeat the following words to myself: *You are a person called Dale, and you are in your twenties, and you are here, in London, and this is your life, even though perhaps it's not exactly the one you might have dreamed about.*

All. Of. This. Is. Real.

In years since I've read a lot about out-of-body experiences. I've dipped into the literature on schizo-affective disorders and I've read up on some of the terminology that allows some people – often otherwise rational, even intelligent people – to start believing strange things. Some people casually call this 'going down the rabbit hole'. I assumed this was a reference to *Alice in Wonderland*; the difference was that when Alice went down into her rabbit hole she met mad hatters, talking rabbits and other interesting characters. When people did the same in real life they tended to start getting obsessed about paedophile rings or sectioned under the mental health act. It wasn't quite as fun, really.

I'd quietly teetered on the edge of madness. But somehow I'd never actually fallen in; I'd never been sectioned, never been diagnosed. I'd never been detained. But at the same time I always felt that that possibility was there – that at any time if things got a lot worse, perhaps I *could* tip that way somehow, and it was only because currently I was holding things together that it hadn't happened. The threat was always there somewhere in the background. I had the feeling it probably always would be.

*

I thought about this now as I listened to the radio and tried not to look at the comments in my Facebook newsfeed. If I was so susceptible to crazy ideas myself, how come I'd never truly, properly fallen for a conspiracy theory? I remembered after 9/11 and the subsequent Iraq War being fairly suspicious of the official narrative on both counts. But I'd never fully subscribed to the wild speculation of some people. I thought the truth was probably murky, but wasn't that always the case? Especially with powerful people?

It occurred to me that if I had actually fallen for a conspiracy theory, truly fallen for it, I wouldn't actually be aware of it. To me it would seem like the truth, like something blindingly obvious; the more I thought back the more it further occurred to me that while I'd never been all that interested in 9/11 or the moon landings – the five star icons of the conspiracy theory world – I *had* always believed that society was largely a stitch-up dictated by the rich and powerful, that governments and corporations would generally make sure that ordinary people were kept in their place, that the world economy generally functioned in order to benefit those at the top. Was that a conspiracy theory? Or was it just astute political analysis?

An envelope had landed on the doormat. I'd picked it out and put it on the kitchen table where it sat before me now. I knew the handwriting of the address on the front. I stared at it for a while. Then I made myself another cup of tea.

Then I got up, stroked my chin anxiously, and put it to the bottom of the pile. Afterwards I put some more stuff on top so I didn't need to think about it.

**

Strange Ideas

It was around this time that the attacks began to happen.

They were isolated events, here and there around the country: small arson attacks on telecoms masts and communications infrastructure. There was no kind of message to explain why any of these had occurred, but it seemed likely that this stemmed from the 5G conspiracy theory.

The masks unsettled me somewhat. It was one thing to talk to a couple of people outside my local Lidl whose ideas frankly seemed a bit barmy. But it was quite another when some of those barmy ideas actually got translated into violence. Although such attacks were unlikely to make much difference in the overall scheme of things, it was the intentions behind them that were more worrying. Clearly some people felt that the evil conspiracies behind phone signals were threatening enough to be met with force.

Still feeling somewhat anxious, I decided to bring the subject up with my family. We'd started having occasional Zoom calls since the pandemic began, and they took some getting used to; my brother, for example, appeared as a pyramid stretching away towards the ceiling of his flat, due to the way he'd placed his laptop, with a giant slope of a body culminating in a distant face.

I mentioned the attacks on the masts. My brother remarked with disbelief on how people could commit such pointless vandalism while the world was reeling from a pandemic.

'It just makes no sense,' he complained.

I knew what he meant. Still, I thought to write it off as senseless was probably a mistake. People weren't just attacking any object; they'd chosen something with obvious meaning to them.

At this point, my grandfather – a handsome and twinkly man in his nineties framed by silvery hair – stepped in.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'it boils down to a different way of seeing things.'

My brother asked him what he meant.

My grandfather smiled. He had this way of being philosophical in almost any situation, of rising above the hurly-burly of world events. This was the same grandfather who'd once emigrated from Joe McCarthy's America and watched the rise

and fall of Stalin's Soviet Union, so perhaps something like this seemed fairly light by comparison.

'Perhaps these people aren't being stupid, exactly,' he explained. 'Perhaps they're just running off a different kind of evidence. Perhaps, according to their own way of seeing the world, bombing phone masts makes perfect sense. In fact, in its own way it's actually logical.'

My grandfather explained that he'd been in the US recently and had talked to a friend who wrote about things like this. 'He's got a word for this,' my grandfather told us. 'He calls it *cognitively different*. You know how people are no longer disabled, but "differently abled"? Well, these anti-Vaxx people, and phone mast people, aren't mentally *disabled*. Their brains are... differently abled. Their thought processes just run along different rails.'

My brother and I considered this. I wondered about the kind of people who would burn a telecoms mast down; 'cognitively different' was certainly a novel way to describe them. As far as I could see a substantial amount of the world was increasingly 'cognitively different' these days; there were cognitively different people who thought that doctors who wanted to inoculate your child against harmful diseases were actually psychopathic paedophiles, or that former president Barack Obama was actually a terrorist because his middle name was 'Hussein'.

The family call ended soon afterwards. Hunched over my kitchen table where I did all my calls, I felt inexplicably apprehensive somehow. To get a bit of fresh air I popped my head outside. The evening was fading but it was still light; people seemed to be obeying the instructions to stay indoors on the whole. I looked up and down the street in the fading evening. I'd never bothered to get to know my neighbours before (I'm not the sociable type) and it suddenly struck me that here were all these people I didn't know, living right beside me. The street was a place where casual vandalism was common and the most frequent communication from my neighbours was a frosty stare. I got the sense that many of them didn't like me very much; I wasn't as keen on them as keeping my front yard tidy. In the past this had never bothered me all that much, but now I couldn't help feeling there was something a little bit almost threatening about these stares, about the silence; something a little eerie about all these people hiding indoors, where everything would be sorted for us, sooner or later, apparently.

*

I began to feel more uneasy still as the days passed. The pandemic was obviously having a mental effect on people, and driving some to extremes. But it didn't explain why we'd reached a state where people were attacking inanimate objects.

Once upon a time I'd thought that conspiracy theories were just the slightly barmy notions of a little niche of society; there was the 'Flat Earth International Conference' in 2019, for example, which planned to charter a ship for a 'Flat Earth Cruise' with restaurants, swimming pools and perhaps even an artificial surf wave. There was only one problem: the ship's navigational system was programmed for a

round Earth. 'Ships navigate based on the principle that the Earth is round,' a former cruise ship captain told the *Guardian*.

I'd laughed at this one. But this felt different. It was one thing to believe that the moon landing was faked or that Elvis was still alive, say, – but it was quite another to believe that a highly infectious virus didn't exist, or that a lockdown was really a conspiracy to control the population. Once you started believing *that*, then your beliefs were more than just things you thought. They started to define the things you did. If millions of people refuse to socially distance, wear masks or even eventually refused to take a vaccine, should one be found, then it could hamper any attempt to destroy the virus. People could die as a result of these beliefs.

I wondered how this pandemic would seem to conspiracy theorists. They often talked of a New World Order, of a population controlled and contained, locked in its houses while giant corporations influenced their minds through digital screens and governments worked out how to inject their populations. But as far as I could see, that wasn't just a conspiracy theory now. It was what I saw around me every time I opened a window.

I looked up the 'New World Order' on Facebook. Apparently it was 'a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda', according to Wikipedia, which was conspiring to eventually rule the world by using lockdowns, 5G phone masts and facemasks. It had to be said, it didn't seem to be doing a very good job; our government was chaos, with policy conducted on the hoof in response rather than in anticipation of the virus. I read that the New World Order was to be 'implemented through a dramatic coup d'état by a "secret team", using black helicopters, in the U.S. and other nation-states to bring about a totalitarian world government controlled by the United Nations and enforced by troops of foreign U.N. peacekeepers.' Frankly, compared to the chaos we were in, it sounded rather a relief. At least *someone* was planning to run things.

The attacks continued. A little later I heard that around sixty masts had been set on fire; some of these masts were parts of vital infrastructure that supplied the signals for care homes or hospitals.

*

Why was all this happening? Did the country not have enough to cope with at the time of a pandemic?

Feeling myself going stir-crazy, I decided to contact a friend who knew a thing or two about conspiracy theories. Adam – a mixed-heritage Asian and Scottish man in his early thirties – had admitted to me in the past that he couldn't help himself from being attracted to various fringe ideas. He'd spent hours and hours watching YouTube channels which endlessly challenged the official story on things like the moon landings or 9/11; he seemed particularly preoccupied by billionaires and elites of various kinds – sinister cabals of Zionists, Illuminati, tech giants – were apparently controlling the world through various sinister means, pulling the world's strings. But unlike some of the people who watched these videos (or set fire to phone masts) he was also intelligent

and thoughtful. For this reason, I was intrigued to know how Adam was actually feeling now there really *did* seem to be a global crisis and a national state of emergency declared.

Adam was standing in his back garden over his vegetable patch when I arrived. Bearing in mind everything that was happening, he was actually looking pretty good – slim, handsome, with his hair tied back in a ponytail. He was enjoying the warm spring weather, he told me, and had decided to get into self-sufficiency gardening. Just that morning he'd taken delivery of a thousand litres of cut-price compost and was looking rather pleased with himself.

Adam popped open a couple of beers and offered me a garden seat. He was shielding to protect his unwell mother, so we had to sit a few metres apart while a neighbour did twenty feet away did weight-lifts. I asked Adam how he'd been. He told me that everything was a bit weird right now and he'd been finding it hard to motivate himself sometimes. He'd got into the gardening, apparently, in order to shore himself up against the potential collapse of civilization.

'Who knows what's going to happen, Dale,' he told me, nodding gravely. 'But if there's some sort of final, Big Collapse... I'll definitely have a head start.'

I nodded. I wasn't always sure what Adam was driving at.

'What do you mean, a Collapse?' I asked.

Adam shrugged.

'The world economy's going down the tank,' he said. 'I don't know where it's going to end up, but I think we're heading for big trouble. There's going to be shortages, riots, soldiers on the streets.'

At this point Adam's girlfriend – a fashion designer who designed made-to-order boutique clothing which she sold on Etsy – came down to join us. As we chatted for a while I got a sense that both of them were finding it rather strange. Adam told me that he'd gone to the park opposite one day only to be told to move along by a policeman. 'I was sitting alone on a bench, and he said I'd been there for an hour already,' he told us. 'I asked what difference it made and he told me to stop arguing.'

Since they could both do their jobs from home, neither of them had even ventured into the city centre since the start of lockdown. I found this rather strange in itself. Their flat was pretty central and it was only a couple of miles away; did that not feel rather constrained, sitting here in this little garden?

But then I got the sense that they rather enjoyed the garden. 'The Collapse,' said Adam mysteriously, as he gestured over at the earth he'd been laying all afternoon. Adam seemed to feel coronavirus might be the thing that the elites had all been waiting for. He said there might be forced vaccinations, wars, riots; he could picture the army getting involved to keep the peace.

'We've been buying seeds,' explained Jane.

I wasn't sure if self-sufficiency gardening was really certain protection against an extinction event, but out of politeness I nodded and made admiring noises about the compost.

On the whole Adam seemed pretty much as I'd expect. But there was also something surprising about the whole thing. Over the years he'd struggled – perhaps on account of a rather mixed-up childhood – from various addictions, depressions, and emotional low patches. But right now he actually seemed in his element. In fact Adam actually seemed a lot more at peace with himself in the midst of a global pandemic, when *all* of the news sounded like some weird horror movie, not just a few videos on YouTube, than he did under normal circumstances. Perhaps extreme situations suited him.

We stayed out for a couple of hours until it began to get cold. 'There's some fucking strange times ahead, Dale,' Adam said, darkly, as the afternoon sun dipped behind a building and the scene was suddenly full of shadows and evening cold. 'Strange times ahead.'

We sat for a moment, contemplating this in sombre silence, before his neighbour set down his dumbbells and leaned over to his phone to put on a song by Guns & Roses.

*

As I rode away I cycled up the street past the local Polski Skleps, vegetable shops and kebab takeaways. Almost all of them were open: shopkeepers of various kinds were going about their business, packing boxes, shifting crates, unloading vans, while the takeaway buzzed with steam and heat. Whatever apocalypse was slowly unfolding in the heads of the rest of the city – the rest of the country, even the rest of the world – these people didn't look very bothered. I couldn't help thinking that even if the Big Collapse Adam was talking about did happen and soldiers went out on the street these people continued to live and work, opening up their takeaways, loading their vegetables. When you were concerned with taking deliveries on time even the end of the world didn't matter all that much.

*

A few days later another friend got in touch with me. Lauren was a psychotherapist in her early thirties who worked with troubled teenagers. I'd seen her here and there over the years at various local events on the more Whole Earth end of

the spectrum: dance nights, wellness sessions, yoga classes. She knew me as someone who wasn't afraid of voicing a controversial opinion.

Lauren messaged me online and said she had something to discuss.

'Is it about coronavirus?' I asked.

There was a pause in the reply.

'We should talk,' Lauren said.

**

Everything is an Illusion

'It's all bullshit,' Lauren told me confidently. 'Covid doesn't even exist.'

I gazed at her levelly across the grass.

I was rather taken aback, to be honest. I'd expected some kind of criticism of lockdown, of the merits of the government's strategy on the Covid crisis. What I hadn't expected was outright denial. Lauren was a qualified psychotherapist with years of experience and a position of authority. She even had a PhD.

'Right,' I said, hesitantly.

'I dunno.' Lauren took a swig on her flask of tea. 'What do *you* think?'

We were sitting on the edge of a reservoir near my house, where a few people had met up to enjoy the beautiful spring weather. We were keeping as much distance from one another as we could but discussions were still possible.

I shrugged. 'I don't really know *what* to think, to be honest,' I said. 'The situation's so confusing.'

She nodded. A family near us were letting their kids play with a puppy and the shrieks of laughter carried over the warm air.

I asked Lauren why she thought Covid was a conspiracy. She told me they'd had someone in the family die recently – an uncle she'd always got along with – who'd been in poor health for years with a lung condition.

'He suddenly got worse, and they had to rush him to hospital in an ambulance,' she told me. 'But it was too late. He was dead on arrival. All the family who were nearby had come and we were all waiting outside. Then the nurse comes out and tells us that they're putting Covid as the cause of death.'

She waited for my reaction. I nodded.

'We weren't having any of it. We're not stupid. My mum was like, "He didn't die of Covid, he's had bronchial pneumonia for years and that's what killed him so I don't know why you're pretending it wasn't." They were like, "It's probably easier to just put Covid on the death certificate." What the fuck does *easier* mean? They kept arguing and we kept refusing.'

She shook her head at the memory.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘They put bronchial pneumonia,’ she said. ‘It’s all bullshit. All of it is.’

*

That was when Adam began sending me links.

They were all of a similar type: the virus wasn’t real; the truth was being suppressed; the figures were fictitious. Some of them bordered on the extreme – they claimed that the government was trying to poison everybody, or cull the population using 5G phone masts.

Lauren was doing the same. There were lots of links to sites I’d never heard of – ostensibly news sites, but things that really looked more like personal blogs, plus endless threads on various social media platforms. It all revolved around similar ideas: the world was in the grip of a sinister cabal of people who had manufactured the Covid crisis in order to seize power. The word ‘Plandemic’ was bandied around. So was ‘Scamdemic.’ Perhaps there wasn’t anything left to rhyme after that.

Most of this struck me as absolute tosh. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe governments were incapable of evil – western democratic governments had famously tested chemical weapons on their own citizens just a few decades ago – but I just couldn’t credit them with being that organized. Neither President Trump nor our own Prime Minister Boris Johnson were exactly good advertisements for devious planning. Boris Johnson could barely even brush his own hair.

I was very fond of both Adam and Lauren. They were both highly intelligent and creative people. This was what made it strange to hear them both coming out with ideas that I found not only whacky but verging on the extreme sometimes. I’d seen lots of legitimate criticisms of the government’s handling of the Covid crisis, but simply denying the existence of the disease seemed to me to be going a bit far. After all, thousands of people had already died from the disease, and many more had had horrible experiences of catching it, some of which had left them permanently affected. I wondered if Lauren should perhaps talk to some of these people before declaring them part of some dark conspiracy.

The odd thing about this was that I didn’t think either Lauren or Adam were lying. What unsettled me was that they actually *believed* this stuff. For all their intelligence, both Adam and Lauren both struck me as people who got a little carried away with an idea sometimes. Lauren, for example, distrusted non-GM food and ‘western’ medical science in general; did this mean she was more disposed to see the health service as an instrument of oppression?

I didn’t doubt the truth of her experience with her uncle, but I wasn’t sure this was proof of a diabolical plot. It seemed more likely that the hospital management was probably banking on accessing extra emergency funds if it declared enough Covid cases. This itself was worrying, but it wasn’t worrying on the same scale as, say, governments

manufacturing viruses in order to kill their citizens. There were a million mundane reasons to dismiss before you started reaching for whacky explanations. Perhaps the reason people sometimes preferred conspiracy theories was because quite often the truth was simply boring.

Around this time I happened to pass something taking place in my neighbourhood cemetery. Funeral services had been banned as part of lockdown restrictions but this one seemed to be widely ignored. I could hear loud music and shouting coming out. Puzzled by what was happening, I stopped and asked a couple of youngish guys what was going on.

'It's a funeral,' said one.

I asked who'd died. He pointed to his T-shirt, where the face of the deceased was displayed.

'Thanks,' I said.

It turned out the deceased was a popular local 38-year old man who'd been killed in a motorbike accident. Earlier in the day every nearby council estate, it seemed, had spilled out onto the street to commemorate the passage of the hearse and procession, which wound its way slowly – with a lot of honking and cheering crowds – into the graveyard.

I had a look around. The whole thing resembled a street party: throngs of people, dressed in shorts and T-shirts and carrying cans of lager, worked their way up the street outside the cemetery against deep throbbing beats coming from cars. It was hard to imagine that anybody here cared much about social distancing.

Under normal circumstances none of this would have been all that remarkable. It was a rough, lively area, the kind of place where street parties did break out from time to time in good weather. But right now it seemed like a mirage. Everywhere else there were non-stop announcements and media campaigns to reinforce the feeling we were living through the biggest catastrophe in human history – signs everywhere saying 'GO HOME', politicians telling us to 'save lives' and not to 'kill granny.' But these people didn't even seem worried. Few were wearing masks. I didn't think that any of them actually wanted to expose anybody else to risk. But at the same time they weren't prepared to go to any special lengths *not* to do so. I was starting to get the feeling that different sections of society seemed to be living in completely different worlds, bound by completely different laws of risk, infection, consequences. It was as if they lived in a different world: one where Covid was a distant, vague and shadowy kind of thing, like global warming or financial corruption in the stock markets, rather than something that might actually affect their lives on a day-to-day basis.

That was what struck me. It wasn't that these people were on a march to deny the existence of the coronavirus: they just didn't really care all that much about it.

I went home and tried to get on with some work, but found I couldn't concentrate. The crowds at the funeral kept weighing in on my mind. Why was there such a gulf between them and the general public at large? In the very next postcode – a rapidly gentrifying area with an increasingly middle class population – the local Facebook group was full of people posting about the terrifying dangers of the coronavirus. Yet in the rougher parts of the city, like this one, people were much less concerned. It wasn't unique either. I was hearing of illegal raves to break lockdown restrictions.

As evening fell I decided to go back to the cemetery and see what had happened. Even as I approached things felt very different. A tense silence had descended over the place: the throbbing beats of the afternoon had gone. The air was thick with barbecue smoke. I slowed on the rise above the graveyard to see what had happened.

I'd heard rumours that there'd been a shooting of some kind; the whole place had been cordoned off and was being guarded by police officers with their arms folded. As I approached one of them looked up at me.

'Go home,' he said.

Politely, I asked him why.

He stiffened.

'I'm telling you,' he said, 'to go home.'

I could feel myself pricking up. All I wanted was a little information on what was happening.

'I'm just asking why,' I said.

'And I'm just telling you,' he snapped. '*Go back that way.*'

His colleague – a large, burly man in full riot armour – stepped slightly towards me. There was something aggressive in the air, a sense that force would be used very shortly.

I decided to stop arguing. Instead I turned and walked away, making my way beneath the rain-spattered underpass. The police watched me go, stolidly, not moving from the spot.

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Inconvenient Deaths

There was something about the experience outside the cemetery that shook me a little. It suggested that not everybody was on the same page about this virus – that there were pockets of dissent or alternative beliefs here and there, an underbelly of something darker that might erupt at any moment.

It was at this point that Adam sent me another message. ‘My post stating that half corona victims had now recovered is against community standards for some reason,’ he fumed. He told me the post had been removed.

He wasn’t the only one. I was seeing more and more people on Facebook complaining that the site was either removing their posts or simply stopping them from being shared. There was a new term for this: ‘shadow-banned’. It was a kind of censorship, but far cleverer – the algorithms did all the work and the person being censored might never even be aware of *being* censored. One friend had had his posts blocked for posting about the World Health Organization and the danger of untested vaccines.

I could feel my feelings about the lockdown faltering a little. As bad as the virus was, I didn’t think it was worth losing the right to express alternative ideas. Surely it was legitimate to make criticisms of pharmaceutical companies in line to produce a Covid vaccine, or the World Health Organization? The WHO had faced accusations of corruption and links to Big Pharma during the Swine ‘Flu outbreak of the late 2000s, stories covered at the time by mainstream media outlets. Were we supposed to avoid discussing that now? Where did that end?

I remembered the images I’d seen of the beautiful towns of the Lombardy Region in northern Italy when the virus first appeared in Europe – towns like Bergamo, with masked doctors peered over patients; hospitals were suddenly full to overflowing. I remembered the images of patients on stretchers waiting outside in the corridors. Yet I was having a hard time squaring any of this with my daily reality. When I ventured outside I saw no hazchem suits, no soldiers, no stretchers. I saw the odd ambulance but the streets were largely quiet.

I began to feel my own certainty waning. The premise for shutting the whole of society down had been that the disease was a danger to the population. But what if Lauren was right and the figures were being inflated? If our fear of the disease was based on rising death tolls, what did it mean if those death tolls couldn’t actually be trusted? How many more non-Covid deaths were being recorded as Covid?

My mood was darkening. There were rough edges to the picture I found a little disquieting. I had unanswered questions in my head and nobody to ask them to.

So I decided to speak to my grandfather again.

I phoned and told him I was having trouble making sense of it all. My grandfather said he thought the whole thing was a massive over-reaction. I said that I'd felt pretty scared watching those news clips of northern Italy.

'Bergamo had a flu season a few years ago and its hospitals were overrun,' my grandfather scoffed. 'Didn't even make the papers.'

My grandfather had actually lived in northern Italy so kept track of events there. 'Hospitals overrunning happens all the time,' he said. He explained that the region had an ageing rural population and their health provision wasn't great. 'Normally it doesn't even make *national* news, let alone international news. It's only now we're treating it like it's the end of the world,' he added.

My grandfather was one of those people who was proudly sceptical about everything. He was even a little unsure that some of the predictions made about climate change by activists – like the idea that humankind would be dead in a couple of decades – were really all that sound. Yet my grandfather wasn't some madman in a bedroom. He was also a highly respected philosopher of science, I reminded myself. He'd even had a piece published in *Nature*.

We carried on talking for a while, during which my grandfather mentioned that much about this virus and the global situation puzzled him too. Although he thought the conspiracy theories were nonsense, he admitted to suspecting that there were probably deeper currents beneath all this – the interests of large nations, superpowers, major corporations. The idea that the virus had been manufactured in a laboratory in Wuhan, for example, seemed fanciful. There was no proof for it. Yet that didn't mean the idea was completely impossible either. An emerging superpower like China was more than capable of doing weapons research that might involve biological weapons; after all, the US had tested such weapons before, and other countries were no doubt doing the same. Was it completely impossible that some experiment had got out of control? Why was there such a lengthy state cover-up before the Chinese authorities even admitted the presence of the virus? Why did they persecute journalists who originally broke the story?

As my grandfather talked I began to get an uneasy feeling. I could sense the solid ground beneath us starting to slip away – what they called going down the rabbit hole. Once you believed it was even possible that the virus was manufactured, what else did you believe? Once you believed that various world leaders could lie to their people, didn't that mean everything could be a lie?

All the same, I didn't want to dismiss my grandfather entirely. 'He's been published in *Nature*,' I thought to myself. He even had a Wikipedia page.

'It's very interesting to look at the places which have come out well from the virus,' said my grandfather.

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'Go on, think about it.'

He listed some of the countries: Japan, New Zealand, a couple of others.

'They're all within the Asian-Pacific trade region with China,' my grandfather explained. 'Now that China is expanding its trade horizons, it needs a network of powerful countries to interact with. Like an Asian version of the EU. It's just an interesting coincidence that these are precisely the same countries as the ones that have survived Covid and are now uniquely strong on the global stage.'

There was a pause while I mulled this over.

'Well, what does that mean?' I asked.

'I don't know,' said my grandfather. 'I'm just pointing it out.'

I nodded. I didn't feel that anything very much had been resolved.

'Right,' I said.

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It wasn't just locally the cracks were starting to appear, either. The international news seemed increasingly insane. As the Coronavirus spread around America, President Trump seemed to be losing his mind. The situation was worsening by the day but in the face of a coherent response, Trump launched increasingly deranged tweets that seemed to be endorsing things he'd read on the internet, including one suggestion that people should perhaps drink disinfectant^{iv}. He also launched a series of tweets calling on the people of those states to 'liberate' themselves by demanding an end to the lockdown. It was as if the United States government was asking people to rise up against the United States government. As far as I could see, Trump was now at war with his own country.

At one point it was on the news that Trump had appeared to suggest at a press conference that people should perhaps inject themselves with bleach because it might stave off the coronavirus.^v Shortly afterwards he announced he was going to be doing less press conferences.

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While I was mulling all this over I continued to make odd trips to my city centre to do my shopping. Things felt tense, slightly militant. With all the shops and bars closed, the majority of people there were either drunks or rough sleepers, or police who had nothing to do except stand around and stop anyone interacting. There were also things I couldn't explain in the unusually clear skies above – helicopters buzzing overhead, even what looked like military planes. At one point a Chinook helicopter was seen over my city^{vi}.

Carrying my shopping out of the city centre supermarket I saw police rounding up a couple of homeless guys who were sheltering in the mouth of the shop facades. I slowed as I walked past. The police were bunched in a tight circle, questioning the men. I could hear shouts coming from somewhere, and the sound of something being broken. There seemed to be a lot of police.

I glanced over but one of the police looked my way. I wasn't wearing a mask and suddenly I wondered if I might myself be stopped. I walked on hurriedly. A couple of the Tactical Assault Unit big, armoured police vans stood by. It seemed a rather extreme response to what was just a couple of drunks. I wondered what was going to happen to them. I didn't know why, but I felt uneasy, and I couldn't shake the feeling even when I got home and listened to the death toll on the evening news.

I didn't know it then, but things were about to get a lot stranger still.

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Chapter Synopsis

The structure of the book takes place over the course of 2020 – with flashbacks elicited by the major themes of that year: Covid, Trump, terrorism, etc...

Mother and I

My own experiences of mental illness

From youth I've been no stranger to whacky ideas. But as this was happening the world itself was going mad...

Let the Night King Kill Them All

My first peek down the rabbit-hole

As Covid developed I saw various millenarian groups growing around me – all based on conspiracy theories that divided the world up very obviously into Good and Evil.

Choose a Side

A growing storm

Intrigued by the rise in Covid conspiracy theories, I began infiltrating some of the anti-lockdown protests – but in the process accidentally getting sucked into the ideas myself...

They Are Lying to You

What does it mean when the most powerful man in the world is a conspiracy theorist?

It didn't help that it was being fuelled by some people in power. As President Trump threatened to ignore the election result I tracked down the new wave of rightwing extremists in the Qanon movement...

Save Our Children

My brushes with the unhinged

In the run-up to Trump's 2020 election bid a group sprang up spreading rumours of elite paedophile rings. Who were these people and what was motivating them?

The New World Order

Armageddon gets personal

Vaccinations, lockdowns, paedophile conspiracy theories were rife as anti-lockdown rallies spread across Europe. In Berlin protestors compared themselves to victims of Nazi persecution like Anne Frank or Sophie Scholl, wearing Stars of David and holding up signs reading "vaccination makes you free". Yet simultaneously they were also rehabilitating the oldest hatred of all...

The Lizards Take Over

The return of anti-Semitism

Conspiracy theories were giving the left fresh chance to recycle the anti-semitic material of the far right. I spoke to people concerned – which made me reevaluate my own family history...

Me and the Nazi Youth

All about my grandmother

I realised I had a very dark family connection with cult ideology – one which would lead to gas chambers and concentration camps. But this kind of extremism wasn't just historical...

Judgement is Upon Us

The dangers of extremism

Having survived a number of terror attacks I decided to set about exploring the role faith had. But I found that mainstream religion was as nothing compared to the new secular creeds...

The End is Nigh (again)

The rise of the doomsayers

Millenarian groups, Extinction Rebellion, eco-catastrophists: a rejection of scientific progress was going mainstream – and human beings had to face the possibility we weren't as immune to our bodies as we'd thought...

The Great Contagion

The year the earth caught cold

As 2020 became the year of Covid a state of alarmism sometimes clouded rational judgement as normal hospital treatment was suspended and sick patients were ejected into care homes. But a new anti-lockdown movement would prove to be scarier still...

Microchip the Masses

The growing anti-vaccination movement

An 'anti-vaxx' movement was growing – with dangerous implications in the midst of an epidemic, with Russian disinformation and care home staff refusing to take it. I made friends with Britain's care community to see why *were* some parts of the public so distrustful of government.

Tear it Down

Conspiracy theories go live

Urged by paedophile conspiracy theories, pro-Trump protesters finally stormed Capitol Hill in 2021. What does the future hold now the line has been crossed between fact and fiction?

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Marketing Strategy

Summary

How I disappeared down the rabbit hole – and back again...

Urged by paedophile conspiracy theories, pro-Trump protesters finally stormed Capitol Hill in 2021. This was the culmination of an era of dangerous ideas and conspiracy theories – with corona, Trump and terrorism fanning the flames.

Apocalypse Sooner or Later charts the events of 2020 and 2021 to explore the extremism in my own family background. Fascinated as to what prompted the ‘anti-vaxxers’, I spent time with protestors against lockdown and other breeds of conspiracy theorists. But along the way I was reminded of something closer to home – the madness that lies in my own background...

What’s Unique about this Book

Plenty of people have written on the subject of fake news and conspiracy theories. But few have actually *been* the product of conspiracy theories.

Rather than simply regurgitating broadsheet articles on events *Apocalypse Sooner or Later* takes a personal, often light-hearted view of the whole thing, bringing to bear my own psychology – and family history of madness – in an attempt to explore just how people come to regard the extreme as normal (laced with self-deprecating humour). When the world is already beyond parody the funniest and wisest thing one can do is just observe it.

Style

I’ve attempted a deliberately lighthearted style that avoids too much Guardian-speak while still making a stab at complex issues: ‘Jon Ronson by way of Adam Curtis’.

Marketing Rationale

According to the *OED* ‘Conspiracy theory’ was one of the most used words of 2020, reflecting that there is widespread concern over exactly what constitutes

disinformation. In an age of delicate public health and vaccination programs public trust is more important than ever, which makes a book like this socially important.

On a wider level we live in unsettled times. sales of *1984* have doubled since the Age of Trump while Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has been selling at 16 times its normal rate since late 2016. During the Covid 19 crisis – as American cities burned and the president hid in a bunker – public anxiety regarding public information and the abuse of power shot through the roof.

But all of this is just part of a general picture in which anxieties about society and civilization ride high – from Greta Thunberg's best-selling books to *This Fragile Earth. Apocalypse Sooner or Later* hopes to capitalise on this.

What I Bring as an Author

The events of Capitol Hill set the world on fire. Yet in place of blanket condemnation a more interesting question is: *how did we get here?*

Far from a dry discourse on conspiracy theories, this is an earthy, very involved personal memoir of madness – with a close-up look at whacky believers of all kind, including those in my own family. My background has helped me transform what can be a somewhat abstruse topic into something all too real...

Why Now?

Trump may be over but conspiracy theories as politics are here to stay (he secured the 2nd highest vote in history). Questions of truth now occupy a central position in our democracy: disputes over them may even prove dangerous.

The articles I've written on some of the book's issues have elicited healthy responses and substantial numbers of retweets as well as mentions in other media like *The New York Times*. Mathew D'Ancona – author of a recent popular book *Post-Truth* – promised a credit to the book. Trump's attack on democracy, ongoing terror attacks and the rise of the right across Europe have made these issues more relevant than ever.

Possible audience

- Fans of Jon Ronson's bestselling *The Psychopath Test*
- Anyone concerned about the growing polarization in western society
- Female-slanted market for New Age thinking
- Male-slanted market for 'Truther' and rightwing fantasy
- Those worried about the threat posed by the Capitol storming – and the crossing over of fact into fiction
- Students of cults, sects, extremist groups
- Students of conspiracy theories and the Psychology / Sociology behind them
- Any lay people interested in the history of madness and delusions

- Browsers of the Politics, Sociology, Culture / Media Studies or Smart Thinking sections of bookstores
- Anyone who's ever wondered: *Are things really as they seem?*

Word count: 80,000.

Author Bio

Freelance writer and cultural commentator. I've written for *The Guardian* (leader page, print/online), *VICE*, *Slate*, *Big Issue*, *OpenDemocracy* and many others. I'm a featured writer with *New Internationalist* magazine, have produced a series on new media for the *Baffler* magazine mentioned in the *New York Times* and a blog for the *Huffington Post*. My own blogposts have garnered up to 80k views. I've also been published in various book anthologies, run a live spoken word night featured in *The Times*, and regularly participate in various conferences both academic and otherwise. I'm currently based in Manchester.

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/09/is-david-cameron-right-leaving-eu-brexite-increase-risk-war>

ⁱⁱⁱ

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^{iv} 24/04/2020

^v 24/04/2020

^{vi} <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/chinook-salford-airport-military-helicopter-18052926>