PRISONERS

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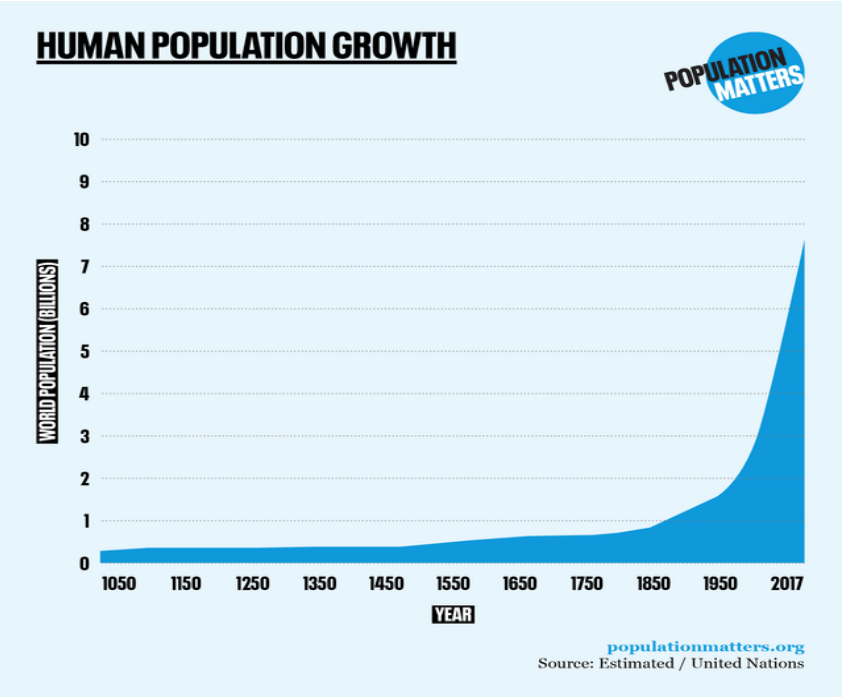


Author's Introduction:

Before you begin reading this or are instantly put off by a few graphs and pie charts, please remember this is a novel. It is about the effect of human overpopulation on a young man living in an overcrowded and increasingly troubled mega city in the year 2050 and of his meeting with his uncle, a University Professor of Biology. The Professor, a long-term advocate of pro-active human population control, is serving a sentence in an open prison related to his strong, some might say extremist, beliefs.

No-one can forecast with any accuracy what the world will be like for young people in thirty years' time. If anything, the story is meant as a warning and if it touches a nerve and leads to serious global discussion on a solution to overpopulation it will have served its purpose. Overpopulation is, after all, the cause of most modern human problems from climate change, environmental damage and loss of wildlife to conflict and mass migration, though the connection is rarely made for reasons which one can only assume are sensitivities about the subject and a total lack of viable and morally acceptable solutions. However, as the Professor says throughout, to have ignored the connection and not to act is a failure of political leadership.

Prisoners is an updated and revised version of my previous novel, 'The Cage', with statistics and images available in 2019.

I am extremely grateful to my biologist friend, Doctor Alex Waller, for his comments and advice and to UK-based organisation **Population Matters** for the use of some statistics and comments. www.populationmatters.org

If the continued growth of the human population disturbs you, I would recommend supporting Population Matters in its ongoing efforts to highlight the problem.

"Too many people living in unsustainable affluence is at the heart of our problem. We need a system which recognises that the untrammelled consumption and environmental recklessness of the rich world cannot continue, meaning those of us who live there now need to radically change the way we live (including choosing small families). We also need a system that recognises that making more people affluent by translocating them in their hundreds of millions from poverty to the same unsustainable lifestyles already enjoyed by too many spells disaster."

(Population Matters, December 2018)

Personal comment:

It took humanity 200,000 years to reach one billion people and only 200 years to reach seven billion. We are still adding an extra 80 million each year and are headed towards 10 billion by mid-century. Believe it or not, for those of us who've been around a while, this sudden increase in numbers of people in just ffty years is very noticeable. It partly explains why I now live in rural Thailand!

PRISONERS

"You've got a visitor, Professor. It's a young man who says you won't recognise him."

The pale, elderly, grey-haired man in the black prison tee shirt, had been sitting, deep in concentration, staring at the flat screen on the wall of his small cell when *S*am McIlroy knocked and entered. He looked up.

"If it's another young media upstart wanting to write a piece of pure fantasy about me turn them away, Sam."

"It's not one of those, Professor. He's too young. He says he's your nephew."

Superintendent *S*am McIlroy, in his grey uniform and single row of colourful ribbons jangled the keys hanging from his belt and rested a friendly hand on the old man's shoulder. "That'll be a first, won't it? A family visitor?"

"Does he have a name?"

"His name is Carl."

The Professor removed his glasses, thought for a moment and then nodded. "I remember Carl. I've not seen him since he was a toddler. He must be, what, eighteen or nineteen now?"

"Around that age I would say." Sam grinned. "Nevertheless, he looks respectable."

The Professor sighed. "One from the loins of my young foster brother, Stefan. I lost count of all the others he was alleged to have spawned and abandoned over the years." He paused. "A huge disappointment to my mother who adopted him, Sam. After my father's death she tried very hard to help him make something of himself. His biological mother was an addict, a Russian immigrant but my mother thought she saw something in Stefan worth saving. It was all to no avail."

“I didn’t know that, Professor.”

“Procreation without responsibility, Sam. Our greatest weakness.”

After three years at Forest Hills Open Prison, Sam McIlroy knew this prisoner well but he would often spring new surprises.

The Professor, as he’d always called him, was hardly a danger, though. Over the months, they had talked for hours either in the cell or during walks around the prison grounds. Whatever the weather, eleven fifteen was the time Sam would turn up outside Cell 36 to find the Professor ready and waiting. *“Cold and raining again, Professor,*” he might say. “*Put a sweater on. I’ve brought you a plastic raincoat. You’ll look lovely with the hood up.”*

And the normally intense and serious seventy-five-year-old prisoner and ex-Cambridge University Professor of Biology would smile, find his old, grey sweater and follow Sam to the side gate. There, they might just stand, breathe the less sanitised air, watch the rain or, on brighter, drier days, stroll beside the perimeter fence. They often walked in silence because the Professor rarely talked these days. The other prisoners found him too serious but, when he did speak, Sam would always listen and nod and try to understand.

As for other, uninvited visitors, he would refuse to meet journalists or anyone else seeking interviews. *“Why should I meet them?”* he’d say. *They wouldn’t dare write something that agrees with me for fear of losing their job.”*

Indeed, the evidence was all around.

Restating his old warnings that trying to reverse the nebulous matters of climate change and CO_2 levels without addressing the fundamental cause of it all, human overpopulation, had become pointless. It was the never-ending problem of economic migration and refugees, of worldwide unemployment, urban violence and social breakdown that had become the new talking point. And who had warned that overpopulation would also be the cause of that?

There were a few who had understood and still had the courage to whisper, *“He was right, you know,”* and history might one day show Professor Harry H. Richardson in a quite different light. Meanwhile, though, his character was set in stone.

Harry Richardson had been an outspoken and unwelcome critic of politicians, religious leaders and many other high-profile attendees especially those at international conferences who said their bit for the cameras and then departed. To many of them he was an extremist and best ignored. That he had then committed a crime and was locked up, out of sight and out of mind, could not have been more welcome.

The morning was cold and grey and as Sam waited for the Professor to pull on his sweater, he cleared a space amongst the clutter of books and papers on the table, leaned on it and peered at the screen on the wall. “What’s all this then, Professor?”

"Statistics.”

It was always statistics, tables, graphs and pie charts with the Professor.

“South American human population growth from 2000 to now, 2050,” the Professor went on. He pointed at the screen. “The green line shows what the numbers might have looked like had they listened and acted and not ignored the facts. We had passed self-sustainability long before even I was born but there was still some lingering hope back then.”

The Professor used words like sustainability a lot and Sam now understood its meaning. He lifted his glasses onto his nose and looked more closely. “So, in 2020 it was 436 million but now it’s 507 million. Is that right?”

“Correct, though it excludes Mexico which would add another 165 million of course. The point is it could have stabilised around 400 million. That was still unsustainable but we might still have had some wildlife and forest left and more jobs and a better quality of life for the poor majority.” He tugged on his sweater. “And don’t forget, Sam, that several million left their birthplaces and migrated north after the troubles. History tells of the tragedies that occurred when millions were turned away.”

Sam shook his head. “You’re depressing me again, Professor.”

“My apologies, Sam, but you’re a good listener.”

“Well turn the darned thing off and come and meet your nephew. Walk with him around the perimeter fence if you like. But no jumping over, OK?"

Built around 2020 on the higher ground outside what had once been the city limit, Forest Hills Open Prison was mainly for those convicted of professional misconduct – financial fraud, corruption and so on. The Professor was an exception. No-one had ever doubted his professional integrity. It was just that his deeply held views had led to an act that breached the law, though some thought that locking him up for so long merely reflected the Judge’s own deep prejudices.

The view from Block 9 may have been what the more enlightened urban planners of thirty years ago had imagined. It was not unexpected that the population would increase dramatically and that the city would need to expand accordingly. Back then, everything had been in crisis - the housing crisis, the schools’ crisis, the health service crisis, the drugs crisis, the immigration crisis and, of course, the crisis of overcrowded prisons. New towns and cities with all the facilities and services expected by an ever-demanding public were proposed. Some were still on the drawing board.

Besides the financial investments, the big problem in building millions of cheap houses, more hospitals, schools, roads and new prisons was space. No-one wanted to live where there wasn’t easy access to food, water, publicly funded services and every other modern comfort expected in the twenty first century, so there had been only one answer - to sacrifice the precious green belts, the fields and the woods and cover them with brick and concrete.

Regulations had never required convicted law breakers to be granted panoramic views of open countryside. The only stipulation was that they were kept apart from law-abiding citizens. Back then it had not been deemed acceptable for the innocent masses to be forced to live directly opposite a thousand criminals. But the lack of space meant things needed to change. Regulations were made less rigid so that public sensitivities could be ignored and cheap housing for the masses had moved to right outside the prison gates.

Calling the area Forest Hills might have been accurate once but it was now totally inappropriate. Instead of overlooking a steep and wooded valley, the prison looked down on an ever-expanding jungle of concrete, brick, plastic, glass, a matrix of streets and highways and crowds of people. The only mature tree left standing in the prison grounds was an old horse chestnut.

“It is like a petri dish,” the Professor had once described the city’s expansion. *“Instead of colonies of bacteria, we have people, but the result will be the same. Like bacteria, they will multiply and entirely fill the dish.”*

And when an architect had criticised the comparison, the Professor had felt obliged to respond. *"No need to panic, sir,"* he'd written, *"Let nature take its course. Once everything is used up all the bacteria will die."*

The reply had done nothing to improve the Professor's reputation for saying the unsayable.

Sam led him out into the grey, cold, dampness of open air to the Administration Block where, before them, lay the familiar view. On the horizon stood the dark outlines of high-rise apartments shrouded in grey, winter mist. Over the perimeter fence was the public road, the maze of terraces of cheap three storey houses and the western terminal for the city's community transport where lines of red, articulated buses stood recharging batteries. Before them, lay a thousand square kilometres of sprawling urban development that had once been glorious green countryside.

"A giant termite's nest, Sam. A colony of millions," the Professor had once told Sam. "*Are they content to live like insects?"*

Sam always liked the Professor's descriptions. *"Aye, it's a lot, Professor. Much too crowded. We can't see them from up here but they're there somewhere, in amongst the concrete."*

The Professor took a breath and listened.

The lungs no longer breathed air filled with the toxic fumes from two billion carbon fuelled cars and motorcycles These days it was the ears – the constant whine and hum from several billion electric engines, generators and reactors that went largely unnoticed except to the Professor. He winced at the low drone that hit his ears. "It's bad this morning. Can you hear it?" he asked Sam. "It's the low cloud and wind direction."

Sam stopped and listened. “Aye, it’s nothing, Professor. Ignore it. It’s your old ears.”

“Nonsense, Sam. Constant high and low frequency background sound is often not heard until it’s switched off. It affects concentration but no-one will deal with it because it’ll put costs up. Meanwhile, it elevates stress levels and blood pressure. Constant background noise worsens symptoms rather than leading to habituation.”

“Aye, you’re a mine of useless information. Professor.”

“Maybe, but everyone, especially politicians, has selective hearing, Sam. They hear what they want to hear. Unwelcome facts make politician’s jobs harder so they ignore them.” He stopped, put his head on one side and listened to the low frequency drone that Sam seemed unable to detect. “You know what I think it is?”

“You’re the scientist.”

“There are two frequencies this morning, one deeper than the other. It’s the wind direction but I think the deeper sound is the electrical sewer lift, reverberating along the tunnels and resonating on the sewer hatches.”

“Aye? Well, I’m darned,” Sam said still trying, unsuccessfully, to hear anything.

“Did you know the city pumps over a trillion litres of sewage a year, Sam? Hundreds of billions of litres of it are spilled or leaked and it’s getting worse. As with so many other problems that go back years, public finances can’t cope. We need new sewage treatment technologies but it’s another failure of foresight, of not considering the effects of cramming more and more people into small areas.”

“Dear Jesus.”

“And praying won’t help, Sam. It’s our fault not God’s.”

The Professor scanned the hazy view, listening also to other, more audible, noises rising from the city. He looked towards the houses behind the community transport station. Whatever their past opinions about living opposite an open prison, renting a house on a road with a grass verge was now a notable achievement. What had once been a small 7th century Anglo Saxon hamlet with a pond and village green on the edge of the forest worth, according to the Domesday Book, twenty shillings, had grown into a city of over two million people.

Just a hundred years ago, ninety percent of the population claimed to be locals, born in or around the city. Fifty years ago, the numbers of locals had barely changed but they now represented only fifty percent. New arrivals, migrants and refugees accounted for the other half. Now, in 2050, the city’s population was a

complex mix of many nationalities squeezed into congested, urban areas close to services and amenities and their own cultural familiarities. Moving to bare mountains and deserts to start again had never been an option for those who had fled homes to seek shelter, schools, hospitals, water and food elsewhere. Neither was it convenient to live in the ever-contracting rural areas unless you could afford it.

Meanwhile the world's forests had been cleared to grow their food. In less than a century, the Amazon rainforest had been reduced by fifty percent. Entire forests in South East Asia had been slashed and burned to grow palm oil. African forests had disappeared to produce food and non-essential luxuries like chocolate. Years of digging for raw materials had left vast, barren landscapes that without water and time would take years to recover. Now, even the depths of the sea were being mined leaving huge areas of scarred but invisible evidence of human activity. But whether it was chocolate, oil or vegetables for western hypermarkets, profit for the wealthy few had always been the driving force. The majority, the poor, just did the work and stayed poor.

Forest destruction - Thailand

The Professor shook his head in dismay.

Scattered amongst the vast housing estates were the hypermarkets, schools and health centres. The older and bigger dwellings had become the care homes for thousands of elderly and sick and the cramped living rooms for the unemployed. Today, driven by the chilly, wind blowing from within the city's dark depths it was the hum of thousands of electric vehicles - trucks, buses and trains - that the Professor could hear above the hum of the sewage lift.

Then, without warning came another sound - an outburst of deep, loud, thumping music from somewhere within the housing estate opposite. To anyone close-by it would have been deafening. Even Sam heard it this time. "Jesus Christ."

The Professor stopped for a moment. Even from the prison grounds the thumping bass beat that reverberated on the chest cavity was painful. To anyone closer it would have been a health risk. No wonder their sense of hearing was going.

The Professor winced. “They have become an alien people, Sam.”

“Alien, Professor?”

“I no longer recognise my fellow humans. In just fifty years thy think differently to me. They behave differently. Their ways are strange to me. They have rejected the normal standards that once kept society strong - the bonds that come from neighbourliness and community. I am getting old but I fear for them. I fear for you, Sam. Once it would have been antisocial to deliberately make such a noise in such a confined area? There have always been minor disputes but there would still have been a mutually understood modicum of respect for others. But to deliberately force others to hear such noise? It’s not civilised, Sam. It’s deliberate aggression.”

Sam stood alongside. “Aye. Someone’s probably turned up the volume to drown out a disturbance nearby. It’s safer than intervening but it could turn nasty.”

The Professor looked at Sam with pity. How could he accept and dismiss it as if it was normal behaviour? But that is what it had become. It was a fact of life. In the cities, street violence and aggression had become normal It had started with unruly teenage gangs roaming the streets. Knife carrying and stabbings were a sign of juvenile power and influence. Guns were prized above all. Teenage and pre-teenage violence and disrespect had become normal and failure to understand and deal with it meant it had become normal behaviour amongst adults. The cause? It was confinement, the close proximity, the lack of easy access to open space, the impossibility of moving away. Mutual tolerance had become a thing of the past but, of course, the Professor had been castigated for comparing such behaviour to caged rats.

“*They are caged and fenced in like animals. They no longer breathe the air of freedom but the stench of proximity and confinement*,” he had written.

Sam, though, accepted it as normal. Sam had a room in the three-storey block that was the prison staff’s accommodation. Men and women together with all the modern facilities expected by those working for the public service – cheap, mass produced food and drink and cheap 2050-style, round the clock entertainment to distract them from reality.

The Professor sighed. “Lead on, Sam.”

They arrived at the administration block and Sam led the way to the visitor’s area. There, sitting in the corner, leaning over the arm of a small sofa with his

head in his hands was the Professor's visitor. "Over to you, Professor," Sam said quietly. "Have a nice chat."

Carl didn't seem to hear them but continued to sit, rubbing his eyes as if regretting he'd come. He was wearing a thin, grey, short-sleeved tee shirt. A black jacket hung over the back of the sofa. He sat upright and then stood as the Professor approached.

He was a good-looking young man but with a build that showed, as was the tendency of his generation, he might one day become overweight. He looked pale and serious as if he didn't get much exposure to sun. His hair was light brown and had been cut short at the sides in the modern way with a fashionable growth of soft stubble.

There was a polite shaking of hands, some words from the Professor about the long time since they'd last met and a joke about how much he'd grown. Carl merely nodded faintly and looked nervous.

"So, you decided to brave the prison gates to see me," the Professor said trying to relieve the awkward, glances he was being given.

Carl nodded again and said, "I have some questions, uncle."

"Questions. I see. Shall we walk and talk outside? I do enough sitting down. A stroll around the perimeter fence, perhaps? I'm allowed an hour and a half if I'm lucky. I hope it's not a long list of difficult questions."

There was a lengthy and thoughtful pause but no answer so the Professor tried to help. "Personal matters? Professional questions? Where do you live and work?"

Carl looked at his feet. He was wearing grey, canvas trousers, the bottoms pushed inside a pair of army-style boots, glossy, jet black and currently

fashionable, but he seemed uncertain, not just about his questions but his reason for coming. He pushed a hand through his hair.

“Nice boots,” the Professor said as another distraction. “Made from recycled plastic, I believe. Are they comfortable?”

“They’re OK.”

“Good.”

There was another pause. Carl fidgeted.

“Is that your jacket? I suggest you put it on. They overheat this place by around ten degrees but it’s cold outside.”

Carl retrieved his jacket and pulled it on as he followed the Professor to the door.

“So, what questions?”

Carl sniffed, nervously.

“I might be a convict, Carl, but I won’t bite. If it makes you feel more at ease, I suppose you could even call me Uncle Harry. No-one’s ever called me that before. Do you want to tell me more about yourself? You were about two years old the last time we met.”

Carl seemed uncertain whether he wanted to say anything about his life now. They were walking at snail pace, a speed that seemed to match Carl’s thinking time. He sniffed because sniffing was a habit whenever he was unsure or nervous about something.

The Professor waited. Carl stopped walking, sniffed once more and then opened his mouth. "A long time ago….” he said slowly and quietly before stopping once again.

“Yes?” the Professor said to encourage him.

“A long time ago, when people were cold or hungry or sick or homeless or depressed who did they call on for help?"

To others it might, perhaps, have been an unexpected first question. It sounded pre-planned, but it caused the Professor no apparent surprise. Neither did he need to consider a reply. He removed his glasses and pointed them at Carl. “Are you cold, hungry, sick, homeless or depressed, Carl?”

“Not all of those,” Carl replied vaguely.

“But perhaps some?”

A faint sign of confidence emerged. He nodded. “It is some of those.”

“Do you want advice? Help?”

“I just want to understand.”

“We all seek to understand, Carl. I’ve been trying for more than seventy years. What in particular do you want to understand?”

“Everything, uncle. Where, for instance, did people of long ago go for help?”

The Professor nodded. "The people of long ago relied on each other, Carl. Who else was there to call upon? They might have prayed to their mystical God for release from their problems but their lives were very short and very hard. Like all other animals, survival and reproduction was, just as it is now, their only real purpose.”

Carl nodded as if that was the reply he’d wanted. The Professor waited, studying the serious, young face. “Why do you ask?”

"But how could they suffer like that?"

The Professor nodded to himself. This was no ordinary call for help or advice. It was the word ‘suffer’ that confirmed it. Dismissing human suffering as being mostly man-made had been one of those subjects that had got the Professor into trouble. Carl’s questions had already become provocative.

"I am already thinking, Carl, that you are not visiting me out of a sense of family loyalty or because you feel I might be in need of a moment’s companionship,” he replied. “I think you’re here to provoke me into repeating the sort of things that once got me into such serious trouble that I eventually found myself in this place." He paused. “Am I right?”

Carl’s worried face relaxed a little more and he smiled faintly as if caught out. "I’d still value your thoughts, uncle."

"So why start with such a deeply searching question?"

"I want to know why you once said it is necessary to suffer.”

The Professor nodded. “If you know that I said that then you must also know why.”

Carl seemed taken aback. “You were a Professor of Biology, uncle.” He sniffed. “A biologist is supposed to respect all life, all living creatures. How could you say such a thing?”

The Professor took a few, slow steps before stopping. “What makes you think I lost my respect for life? Was it something you read about me? Something written by someone who had no wish to understand me?”

Carl frowned.

“It is precisely because I respect life that I said what I said and wrote what I wrote. I think you need to look more carefully at what I meant. What is now commonly defined as suffering was once the only way of life. There was no alternative. Even now, in 2050, there are still some remote tribes and societies that live as they did a thousand years ago. Would you say they are suffering?

All animals, humans included, face a constant struggle to survive. Is that suffering or is that the way life is?”

Carl, seemingly unsatisfied, kicked at a stone that lay beside the pathway. The Professor saw it for what it was.

“During the last century,” he continued, “Our popularity-seeking politicians, desperate to get re-elected, decided they needed to show pity and to exhibit deep feelings of caring for those less fortunate than themselves. So, what did they do? They decided to describe the normal, daily struggle for survival as suffering. That is what I was pointing out.”

"That is not all, uncle. You wrote much more than that about suffering."

"Yes indeed,” he agreed. “I wrote and said a lot about the subject and I tried to redefine it because the word had lost its significance through overuse and misuse. Those politicians and religious leaders who, themselves, knew nothing about poverty or hardship had found that using words like suffering, poverty and destitution were useful for their purposes. They rolled easily off tongues, were widely understood, pulled at heart strings and could be made to illustrate, with all the emotion they could muster, that daily struggle and hardship was suffering. Suffering was therefore an unjust infliction on the powerless."

"But what better word is there?"

"For an individual whose life is not at risk but who is finding it difficult to contribute and pay his or her way, then a more appropriate, single word might be hardship. They are finding things difficult but they are not suffering. Struggling to overcome hard times is an essential part of what it means to stay alive. Struggle and hardship are what every living thing from an amoeba to a human must cope with in order to be strong and to stay alive. Removing the need to struggle will eventually remove the survival instinct. A creature that no longer has to struggle becomes weak and soft and vulnerable to outside changes. The outcome is death. The entire species is wiped out.”

“But humans are different.”

“Not at all, Carl. The controversy which you are trying to get me to discuss arose when I wrote that humans should not be made immune to suffering or they will become weak and unable to adapt. Humans, I wrote, should not be left bereft of the understanding that they are just another form of transient life like birds, animals and insects.

“Hardship, Carl, is a positive thing. Without hardship, without the need to fight for survival, without sickness or risk of early death, what do animals do? They breed. They multiply. Their numbers increase so rapidly that they consume everything. They destroy the environment that sustains them and then they die

out. Any that survive might be the fortunate ones or, more likely, the ones that adapted and changed their habits.

“Struggle and hardship are quite natural, Carl. Human suffering, though, is mostly caused by man himself.”

“That is not fair, uncle.”

The Professor turned. “Fair? Fairness? Do you also want me to discuss fairness?”

Carl seemed unsure.

“Did our ancestors ever consider if their lives were fair or unfair? I don’t think so because they had little to compare it with. Did they think it was tough? Oh yes. Hard? Certainly. Risky and dangerous? Of course. But fairness to them was more about dividing up the limited food so everyone got their share.”

“But their lives were different than ours,” Carl said.

“I agree. They were remarkably different. But you were asking me about people of long, long ago and about suffering and fairness. Times change, but not always for the best.”

Carl looked down. “Yes,” he said as if, at last, this was something he could agree with: that life now was not necessarily better now than a thousand years ago.

The Professor pressed on. “Are you really referring to quality of life?” he asked.

“I suppose so.”

“So, are you content with the quality of your life, Carl?”

The Professor interpreted Carl’s next sniff as getting closer to the problem.

It was a common complaint amongst twenty first century youth that their lives lacked something, that the world had let them down, that it was all grossly unfair. But they often fell into a silent mood, unable to explain what was missing and why. Carl was no exception. He stayed silent.

“Our ancestors experienced hardship,” the Professor said. “But they didn’t question it or rate the quality of their lives as you do now because they saw no alternatives and had no way of comparing their own lives with the lives of others. Their world, the patch of land that was their home, was small. They knew almost nothing of what life was like beyond the next hill or the next valley. They accepted life for what it was because that is what it meant to be alive and to survive.

“But things changed, Carl. The human animal has a unique ability to think. It did not wait for the slow process of evolution. It looked ahead. It planned. It no longer instinctively sought out greener pastures but invented solutions to

problems. It survived more easily. It changed even more rapidly with technology, transport, TV and the internet. The world became a smaller place. You could now see how other people lived. More importantly humans bred and rapidly increased in numbers just as any life form does with an abundance of food and no predators. It took humanity 200,000 years to reach one billion and only 250 years to reach ten billion.

“In those 250 years humans were being kept alive for longer by technology. It was a recipe for the disaster that had been forecast by some for centuries. Thomas Malthus, back in 1798, forecast it. Nothing was done. Thirty years ago, my own hero, Paul Ehrlich at Stanford, was warning that overpopulation and overconsumption was driving not only humanity to extinction but the entire planet. People listened, but still nothing was done.

Thomas Malthus – 1798, “An Essay on the Principle of Population.”

“Despite all our technology the ability of humans to understand the fundamentals of biology has utterly failed to keep pace. In fact, I would say it is now worse than it was when the people of long ago were alive. Those people saw nature as it really is, in the raw. They had few possessions and very little health care but they had a far greater appreciation of the common-sense in Darwin's theory that in nature only the fittest, the most adaptable and the most able survive.”

The Professor stopped talking and walking. “I make no apologies for talking, Carl, but am I making any sense?”

Carl, who had been sauntering beside him looked at him. “Yes,” he said. “But you are still not answering my question about fairness.”

The Professor sighed. “The selfishness of some means unfairness for others I’m afraid, Carl. You’ll just need to fight back. Fight for fairness by becoming more selfish. It’s nature’s game.”

Carl was silent but the Professor knew he'd made a point. Street riots, fighting and mass demonstrations had become so common, so widespread, that Carl would understand.

He went on. "That said, it's a lot harder now. After all, there are ten billion others trying to do exactly the same."

With that he walked away leaving Carl sniffing and looking down at his black, shiny boots.

Once upon a time the grey stone spire of a parish church had been visible from the spot where the Professor stopped to look over the perimeter fence. Now, if it was still there, then it was hidden amongst the distant high-rise apartments where a weak winter sun fought with low cloud and haze.

With no purpose left except as an ancient symbol of two thousand years of Christianity, it had probably been dismantled by a machine in a day to make way for more housing.

The Professor thought about his childhood hero, Paul Ehrlich. Had Carl heard of him? He doubted it. Ehrlich had calculated an optimum global population of between one and a half and two billion. Thirty years ago, when Ehrlich was in his eighties, there were already eight billion. Like himself, Ehrlich, had also been dismissed as a pessimist, an irrepressible doomster and even a racist. No need to panic said some. Technology will solve everything. Indeed, escape to another planet would be possible for a fortunate few. But what would become of the rest?

Was Thomas Malthus ever mentioned in history lessons these days or had the teaching of history become too tainted with the fear of facing facts and the shame of past events? He glanced back at Carl who seemed in no hurry to catch up.

Carl had asked about human suffering, fairness and quality of life. Was he now pondering on his answers or already wishing he'd not come?

There was a lot more the Professor could have said, of course. and it would have been easy to repeat things he'd written and spoken about in the past but, no longer meeting young people, he felt unsure about their sensitivities and whether truth, like history, had become too painful. He had his own sensitivities and painful memories of course. Was he now too old to have anything useful to pass on?

He thought then about the collapsed civilisations of history that were always forgotten when humans were overindulging and enjoying themselves.

Carl's example, the poor people of long ago, had, out of necessity, looked to the future but in their case it was driven by the seasons. They planned and saved for it because with no state help, they had only themselves to rely on.

Did Carl's generation plan for the future? Or did they live for the moment because the future was so uncertain? It seemed to the Professor that Carl was looking at both the present and the future and not liking what he saw.

Carl caught up and stood alongside.

"Do you live somewhere over there?" the Professor asked, pointing towards the middle of the city.

Carl nodded but showed little enthusiasm to say any more. So, the Professor pointed to the north. "Is Saint Michael's Parish Church still there?"

Carl shrugged. He didn't know.

"Can you imagine the village people of five hundred years ago who prayed at Saint Michael's Church, Carl?"

Carl shook his head as if he couldn't imagine anyone attending a church at any time.

"I can," the Professor said. "Five hundred years is the blink of an eye in time but look how things have changed. I wouldn't call myself a Christian but I can imagine them in family groups wearing their Sunday best clothes singing '*All Things Bright and Beautiful.*' Do you know that hymn, Carl?"

"No."

"It goes something like this though I apologise for my voice. Because of it I have never been a willing singer."

He was right. It was a rough and tuneless voice and an acute embarrassment but the Professor persevered because he had a point to make. Carl listened.

"All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small. Al things wise and wonderful. The Lord God made them all.

"Each little flower that opens. Each little bird that sings. He made their glowing colours. He made their tiny wings.

"The purple headed mountain. The river running by. The sunset and the morning. That brightens up the sky."

"He gave us eyes to see them. And lips that we might tell, how great is God Almighty who made things all so well."

"I can't remember the other verses because we've all stopped believing in Gods, haven't we? Who do we believe in now, Carl? Who do we put our trust in? Do we put our trust in politicians?"

"No."

"But which would be better, Carl? An imaginary God or a real-life politician?"

"I don't know."

"I do, Carl. We can imagine it was a God that gave us life in all its colour and diversity that we can see and celebrate in words like '*all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small'*. Politicians, on the other hand, have all but destroyed it by lack of foresight and leadership."

"Yes."

The Professor then stood back and looked at his nephew. It was becoming hard work. Carl's earlier show of confidence had evaporated. He was listening but seemingly unable or unwilling to respond. Still, he thought, if Carl's real questions, the reason he'd come, had not yet been posed, he'd persevere.

"And then there's the Lord's Prayer," he continued. "The prayer they used to recite as a small self-contained community in Saint Michael's Church. Have you ever recited it, Carl? Is it not a pity that solemn expressions of thanks to a deity are not allowed these days for fear of upsetting the feelings others?"

Carl examined his shiny black boots.

"The Lord's Prayer," he went on. "A simple statement of loyalty, a plea for daily bread and forgiveness for a few sins that in these more modern days might appear too petty to even mention. It was a prayer that could, if we had so chosen, have applied to anyone's God irrespective of doctrine. But look what happened, Carl.

"The requests the overworked Lord began receiving a few generations ago were a little more demanding. A simple loaf of bread was no longer enough. It was more likely to be a honeyed ham salad on buttered wholemeal bread, a choice of cheese, wine and beer, a bigger house or TV, a new car or an overseas holiday. And in addition to these requests what else did they expect from the Lord? That their rights be respected. Rights without sacrifices or contributions. Rights with no responsibilities attached.

"And if He, the overworked Lord, failed to deliver they would get angry and take their complaints to the government or even a Court of Law. With that sort of quick fix, they soon realised there was no longer a need for a God at all. So, welcome to the society that no longer worships a God but worships itself."

Carl was sniffing nervously and prodding the wet grass with the toe of his shiny black boots as if everything was his fault. But he was, it seemed, still listening so the Professor continued in the same vein.

"Your relatives of not so long ago had a simpler life, a harder one but a far more honest one."

This time, Carl nodded.

"Hardship was a way of life. They still laughed and they still cried. And I would argue that they were far happier and inwardly content than we are today. Happiness is another subject on which I have written a great deal, as you may know, Carl. Cheap, mass printed cards for a Happy Birthday, Happy Valentine's Day, Happy Mother's Day and Happy New Year. Happy Easter and Happy Christmas when they no longer want a God but only the chocolate and sparkling gifts. True, Carl?"

Carl nodded again.

"Happiness is a word like suffer, Carl. It needs defining but as it can't be defined to everyone's satisfaction perhaps it needs replacing altogether."

At last, some audible words from Carl: "What better word would you suggest then, uncle?"

That was better. Something had stirred him.

"Contentment is better," he replied without any need to consider. "Happiness has so many synonyms it's difficult to pin down. It includes everything from general satisfaction to ecstasy and delirium. Contentment is so much better."

"So, who is happy these days, uncle? Who is content?"

"You tell me, Carl. Living here puts me at a disadvantage but I'll make a suggestion. Who smiles the most? The child born into a poor but loving family living in a hut made of mud and straw and with the freedom to run, fetch water from a well and breathe fresh air, or the child born into a broken home on a crowded housing estate, fed a diet of processed food and given every plaything invented?"

Carl nodded as if the latter described the kids he knew perfectly.

"Increased wealth, affordable and easily accessible food, water, fuel, material possessions and non-essential luxuries do not equate with increased happiness or contentment, Carl. So, tell me, what has gone wrong?"

He didn’t wait for an answer but continued before Carl had even opened his mouth.

"I’ll tell you what went wrong. There was a time, a century ago, when food, water, fuel, healthcare and material possessions became so grossly under-priced that they were disrespected and taken for granted. Living was easy but people still need something constructive to do every day. They need a role, a purpose and a job they are proud of, so that at the end of each day they feel satisfied, that they have actually earned their living. But if they have no role, no purpose or no job that satisfies them or if they are living cheek by jowl in cramped conditions, they feel frustrated and angry as if they were being treated unfairly. But who is treating them unfairly? As modern humans rarely point a finger at themselves, they point it at the body that they have grown to rely on for everything - the government.

“It is having a role, a purpose in life, a satisfying job, a good home life and a feeling of relevance and importance that leads to contentment. Without those, life can become very dissatisfying. Spending money on non-essentials doesn’t cure it and neither does living on state benefits.” He paused. “Do you have a job, Carl?”

Carl shook his head sadly.

“I’m sorry.” The Professor said it with sincerity, but it didn’t surprise him.

The Professor was still waiting to hear Carl’s other questions but he’d got an answer to one of his own. Carl was unemployed.

It was no surprise. Unemployment, especially youth unemployment, was an international problem. Was it any wonder that schools were facing disruption with students feeling that education was pointless? It was also the main cause of the increasingly violent street riots brought on, amongst other things, by bad feeling towards those willing to work for less than the going rates. He felt sure that Carl would be mixed up with this. How could he avoid it?

Yet governments, having allowed numbers to increase, still refused to admit it was impossible to create enough jobs for so many people. Economies and wealth could, quite feasibly, grow with half the number of workers currently employed. But that still left millions with nothing to do.

Worldwide unemployment and underemployment and the poverty, social problems and conflicts it caused had been the main reason for the mass migrations that had started around 2000.

For males, there would never be enough jobs to go around. Machines and robots were cheaper, less bothersome and far more efficient. Even the buses outside the main gate were driverless. You paid by glancing at a camera the size of a

golf ball and were driven away in a box on wheels, a machine running on electricity and controlled by electronics. You took instructions from graphics on the wall, played with your hand-held entertainment device while you were moved around and talked to no-one. In effect you were, yourself, a machine that interacted with another machine.

And then, of course, there was the social problem of integrating millions of disaffected, unemployed immigrants with widely different cultural habits. The state could never catch up because the increasing numbers had exacerbated each of the existing crises - the housing crises, the schools' crises, the healthcare crises, the social welfare crises and the law and order crises. Social problems were costing more than could be afforded so gradually, but increasingly noticeably, publicly funded services were deteriorating. In other words, just as the Professor had predicted, the quality of life was also deteriorating.

Should he now give Carl a summary of a controversial lecture he'd given thirty years ago? The one advising the scaling back of artificial intelligence research and automation for the sake of creating jobs that humans could do until the human population could be reduced by five billion? Yes, costs and prices would have gone up but which would have been the best long-term strategy? Politicians, of course, had sided with big business.

He decided against telling Carl, but he'd been right. Standing alongside him, right now, was a victim. His own nephew.

Robot in the electronics industry.

His suggestion of a five billion reduction in population had, of course, been met with anger, demonstrations outside Parliament and calls for his resignation.

His response had been, "*Then carry on as usual. Abdicate your responsibilities. Pass them on to the next generation. Let them sort it out."*

And then there were the complete deniers, those who would repeat their usual mantra. "*Technology will find a way. Technology holds no boundaries. There's plenty of space for a few more billion."*

"But at what cost to quality of life," he would reply. "*There is surely more to human life than using technology to patch up self-inflicted problems. What about the social effects of overcrowding and mass migration? What about the incessant demand for better healthcare and a longer life? What about the threat of increased violence and social deprivation? What about the growing feelings of loneliness, insignificance and unimportance that comes with unemployment?"*

But no. He was cruel they said. His views were inhuman and against all civilised behaviour.

But was this civilisation? It was now 2050. The human population had, just as forecast back in 2020, increased by another 2.3 billion. Environmental destruction had continued, the extinction of animals, birds and insects was increasing exponentially and the imbalance between the poor and rich had widened. All the predictions had come true but nothing had ever been done by those charged with solving problems.

Climate change had dominated discussions for years but talk had always been on reducing CO_2 levels. No-one had dared point out that the obvious cause of increased CO_2 levels was the explosion in numbers of humans demanding cheap forms of energy. No-one had ever asked for action on reducing the numbers of humans for fear of being tarnished with the same reputation as Professor Harry H. Richardson whose views were said to be inhumane and against all civilised behaviour.

The Professor changed tack.

"As you look across this sprawling metropolis from up here, Carl, **h**ow do you feel?" the Professor asked.

"It's depressing, uncle. I feel…." Carl struggled for words. "I feel I don't want to go back. I feel better here where I can feel the wind. I feel closer to the sky."

The Professor smiled. It was an interesting reason to be inside Forest Hills Open Prison but he could see the logic.

"I have come here before," Carl continued. "By the bus. I have stood outside thinking about you. Only today did I decide to come in."

"I'm glad you did but I'm still waiting for more questions. I am talking too much."

"Yes," Carl said without elaborating.

For a moment they stood in silence looking at the view. From this angle, six lanes of cars, buses and trucks could be seen streaming in both directions on the main circular highway. A container train and a long passenger train passed each other on the railway.

"Do you feel insignificant, Carl?"

Carl sniffed. "I feel nothing," he said almost choking on his own words. "I feel absolutely nothing. I do nothing. I am empty. I feel unimportant. I feel there must be more to life but I don't know what. I know I want to work but there is nothing other than voluntary work in the care homes, helping old people or the disabled. They say it is essential work but it is not work for a man. I want something that uses my mind, my body. I feel wasted. I want to move away but I have no money and where would I go? I feel like a refugee in my own country. They say this is a free country. Free and democratic. But what is the point of freedom without opportunity? And it is not really free, uncle. There are things you can no longer say or write in case it makes others angry or hurts their feelings and yet my own feelings and opinions are hurt by the system. We have become too soft, uncle. We are soft but confused." He paused to sniff nervously again. "What is ambition, uncle?"

"Ambition? Ambition is a deep desire to achieve something through hard work and determination. It requires someone to have enthusiasm, commitment and a sense of purpose."

"Yes," Carl replied. "That is a good description but I know no-one like that. Why?"

For a moment the Professor was unusually lost for words. Ambition was a word he'd never thought required explanation. Ambition was what drove people, especially young people. Neither could he imagine a generation who lacked

enthusiasm and a sense of purpose so could it have been squeezed out of them by an education system that merely ticked boxes, delivered the government's agenda on social attitudes and then tipped the young out into a harsh and overcrowded world of no jobs and no opportunity.

So how had it got like that? Was it a deliberate strategy to force this generation into realising that to bring children into such a world was a mistake? It was, he decided, an interesting theory but only a theory. In practice the outcome was far too uncertain and no democratically elected government could get away with it.

No. The theory was interesting but entirely wrong. This lack of ambition amongst 2050's youth was just another undesirable effect of overpopulation.

"Why do people have no ambition?" he said in reply to Carl. "What is your opinion?"

Carl shook his head. "There's no future, so why bother," he said.

That was it. It explained things perfectly.

"Do you live alone?" the Professor asked.

"I live with five others. I have known two of them since school. We share a single room but we are not good for each other, uncle. None of us have jobs. We argue."

"Where is your mother, Carl?"

"My mother died when I was fifteen."

"I'm very sorry." The Professor looked at Carl. "How old was she?"

"Forty."

"What was the problem?"

"Liver."

The Professor nodded and another thoughtful silence descended.

Liver disease, just like type 2 diabetes had become an epidemic amongst young adults. It was mostly due to food and lifestyle. It had been well forecast and there was a simple explanation. Because it was too cheap, humans were eating more food than their bodies could cope with. To be brutal, as was the Professor's nature, it was greed. It was overeating. Easy access to food did not equate to good health. Visits to stuffy gymnasiums could never replace the hard, physical work in clean, fresh air that the human body had adapted to since before the Stone Age. Humans had grown bigger, taller, fatter and heavier in a space of time that was impossible through natural adaptation. Neither was there anything natural about the reasons for their survival. It was technology that kept them alive and dependant on the state.

“Do you ever see your father, my foster brother?” he asked somewhat hesitantly.

“I last saw him at my great grandmother’s funeral,” Carl replied. “I had not seen him for many years before then.”

“Ah yes,” the Professor said sadly, remembering the day of his mother’s funeral. “A memorable day.” He quickly changed the subject. “What do you do all day?”

“I check the jobs lists. Then……I don’t know what I do. Days pass. Sometimes I ride the buses. Sometimes I help cleaning the grounds of the hospital for exercise. I watch videos. I sit. I go out again. I cannot sleep because I’m not tired.” He paused. “Ten of my school friends have already died, uncle. Depression. Suicide. Some others joined gangs just to get free stuff like dragon and chalk. That is why there is trouble brewing.”

“You don’t do drugs?”

Carl shrugged. “No. My mother taught me.”

“It must be hard to refuse.”

Carl nodded.

“What will you do after leaving here?”

Carl shook his head as if he didn’t know.

“You will return by bus?” the Professor suggested. It was the only obvious solution other than to walk twelve kilometres, though walking everywhere might have done everyone some good.

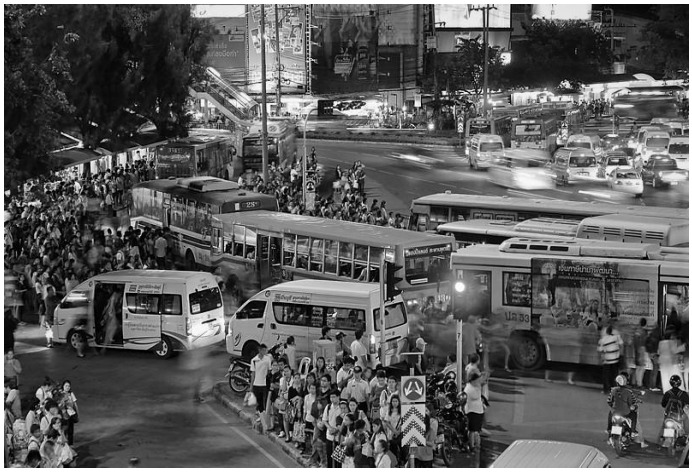
“Maybe,” Carl said sadly. “Maybe not.”

The Professor would always remember that reply. Instead, he asked “How crowded is the public transport?”

“Very.”

“It is strange,” the Professor said thoughtfully. “Zoos full of animals in cages were closed for sensitivities over animal cruelty and the transport of cattle, sheep and pigs for food was regulated to ensure so-called humane standards. And yet the mass transport of humans became as far removed from humanity as it was possible to get. Is it any better now? Are cattle and pigs not better served?”

Carl gave a half-hearted smile.



Bus terminal - Thailand

“So, here we are, Carl. The year is 2050 and things are, just as some of us forecast. How do you feel?”

“You tried, uncle.”

“I did,” the Professor agreed. “And now I sit and watch the slow destruction of all things bright and beautiful.”

Carl’s young face did not have the look of someone who’d come to ask questions. He looked neat and clean in his casually dressed style beneath the jacket. When he spoke, he exposed the standard set of sparkling white teeth in two, perfect rows. His bare arms had shown none of the signs of drug use but he still looked tired and fragile and his grey-blue eyes had the haunted look of someone lost in a wilderness. The few words he had so far spoken showed signs of a good upbringing which the Professor put down to his mother. But what were his unasked questions?

The Professor nodded to himself. He thought he may know but there was time. He would wait a little longer. “Shall we walk a bit further?” he suggested.

Carl nodded and followed but still said nothing so the Professor fell back into his own thoughts again.

He started with Stefan, Carl’s father, his own foster brother and what he’d said to Sam earlier. *“Procreation without responsibility, Sam.”*

Indeed, it was rumoured that Stefan had first fathered a child at age fourteen with fifteen-year-old black girl from Nigeria. After that it was likely that even Stefan had lost count of the number of relationships that ended with pregnancies.

There was nothing wrong with Stefan’s fertility but he’d often criticised the use of medical technology for improving the fertility of and conception of others.

After one strident speech he'd been told in no uncertain terms that to make fertility treatment illegal as he'd advocated would infringe the rights of those wanting to have babies. And when he'd countered by suggesting that such rights would infringe the rights of future generations to live in balanced societies where supply met demand and quality of life from birth to death could be assured, yet another religious leader had told him he was an evil extremist who showed no compassion.

And whilst the subject raged for a month, many of those living on child benefits, housing benefits and other state handouts were watching the daily antics of rich celebrities living lives awash with excess and believing that such excess was vital for the happiness they craved and also their legitimate right.

He'd said that any sense of personal responsibility was being lost by decades of shallow thinking, overindulgence and pampering while the more intellectually demanding realisation that standards of living and quality of life were slowly, almost imperceptibly, dropping went unnoticed.

The mystical 'they' - the governments – were, of course, seen as both the cause of the discomforts and the solution. So, what had 'they' done? They'd taken the simplest and most politically astute decision and handed out yet more unaffordable gifts. Not one politician had been brave enough to stand up and say enough was enough and spell out that the basic cause of all the complaints - the shortages, the costs of living, the lack of jobs, the destruction of the natural environment - was overpopulation and that there should be an immediate and radical reduction in expectations or a quick return to self-help and individual responsibility.

He asked Carl what he thought about the state stepping in to solve human problems.

"It's a good thing." Carl said with a sniff.

The reply didn't surprise him because that was the attitude of the young - instilled from birth and perpetuated through school into the world of joblessness. Rather than get into an argument he said: "But the people of long ago helped each other because there was no other help available. Helping each other is a strong characteristic of human nature but it is both a strength and a weakness."

Carl looked puzzled. "How can helping each other be a weakness?"

"It can be a weakness because gradually, as so-called civilisation has shown, no longer do only the fittest and most able survive but all who are born can survive - the weak, the strong, the sick, the young, the old. They are kept alive not always out of love but by technology and the legally enforced interventions of others. We no longer help each other or even care for each other but expect outside help."

"But we cannot allow people to suffer," Carl said.

"Ah," the Professor replied. "There we have it again. Sickness, pain, discomfort, hunger - they are all an essential part of what it is to be a living thing. To experience pain and discomfort is to experience life. Do you want to remove the understanding of life is by removing one of its key indicators?"

"But saying those sorts of things was exactly why they did not like what you wrote and what you said," Carl said with an apparent rush of indignation.

"What I wrote, Carl, was that hardship is natural but that suffering is directly caused by the intervention of man. Think about that. Try to understand what I meant.

"Towards its own kind, man is the most violent of all animals. Fighting and war causes suffering on a massive scale. Using more than your fair share of natural resources - food, water, fuel - eventually causes suffering to others. Having more and more children because of your own selfish desires and because there are now fewer healthcare risks and because there are state benefits to be claimed and because having as many children as you wish is tolerated by law eventually causes suffering to future generations due to the effects of overpopulation. Are humans so uncivilised that they fail to realise the real, long-term suffering caused by their selfish pursuits?"

"But people are selfish, uncle. That is their nature."

"Oh, yes. I agree. They love intervention that removes feelings of selfishness. They completely reject any intervention that denies them the right to be selfish. And if you read what I said it was that it is not the role of governments or religious leaders to encourage, enable or make it easier to be selfish. Instead, it was their firm duty, especially the religious leaders, to stifle selfishness for a long list of sound long-term humanitarian reasons that I gave. But by their very words and deeds they engrain selfishness because that is the easiest route to popularity.

"What is it that some religious leaders chant every day about forgiving trespass and not wanting to be led into temptation and being delivered from evil? I have always suspected that they are only referring to those currently living because they do not have the vision or scientific wisdom to see the effects of their preaching on future generations.

"Governments and religious leaders should acknowledge that it is necessary that the people they represent experience both the good and easy times and the bad and difficult times. Struggle and hardship are absolutely essential for the continuation of a species. If one generation finds ways to overcome hardship and adversity through individual strength and adaptability, then the next generation will inherit that strength and adaptability."

"But it is not fair," Carl replied.

The Professor shook his head. "Fairness has absolutely no place in nature," he said. "And you must stop looking upon suffering or hardship as a negative thing. It is a very positive thing. Hardship is essential. Without hardship, life itself is diminished. To experience times of hardship leads to a greater appreciation of the good and easier times. Quality of life can only be measured by balancing the good times and bad times. Removing the bad - the hardships, the stress and the discomfort – also removes the good – strength, determination and self-motivation."

The Professor paused, thinking. "Let me give you a good example," he said.

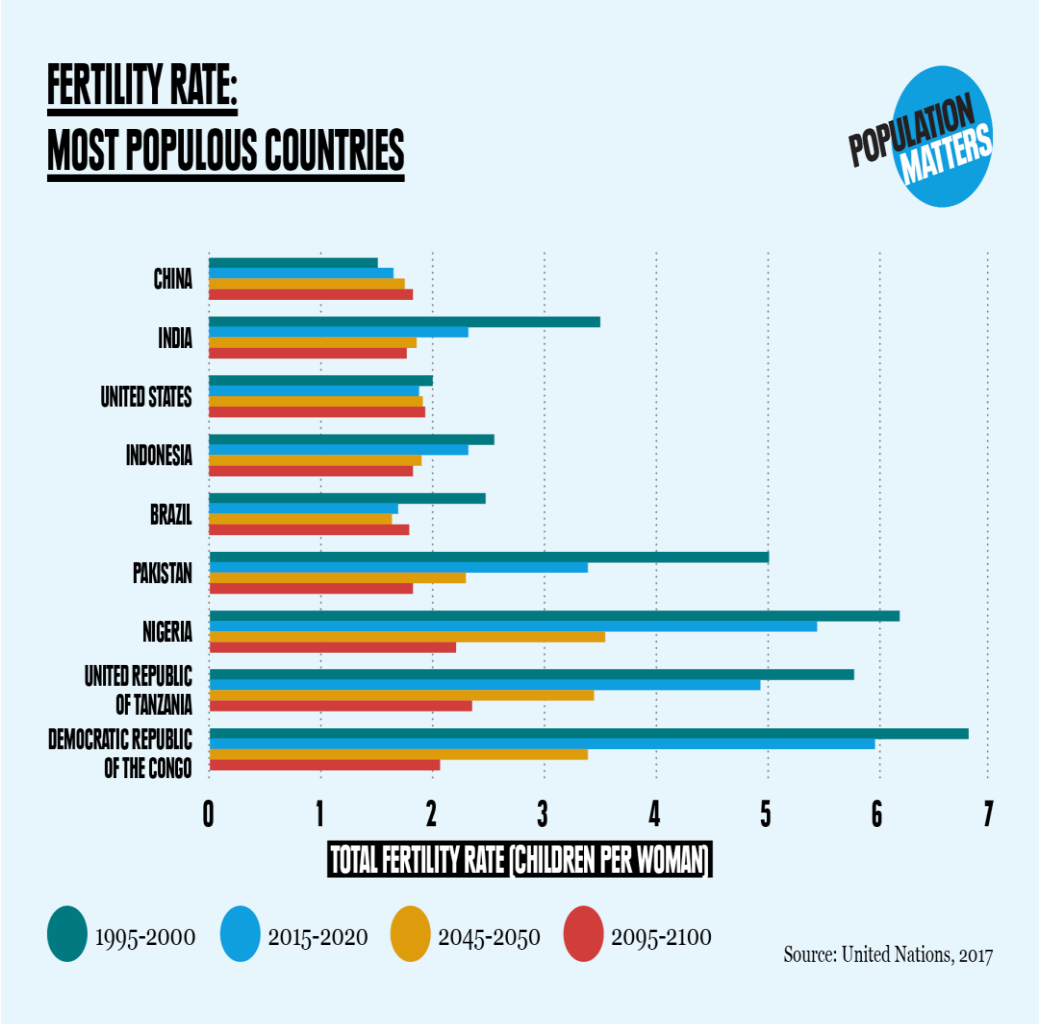
"Trying to be kind and fair by handing out huge sums of money in humanitarian aid does nothing to improve self-reliance. Trying to be kind and fair by handing out taxpayer funded benefits only succeeds in removing the desire for the natural, long-term, mutually beneficial relationships that are already there to provide that same support. Just look at divorce rates and the numbers of people now living alone. Are lonely people happier, more content? If they are, which I doubt, then there is now something fundamentally wrong with human nature. Social animals like humans cannot live alone in nature. They would never survive.

"And from a biological perspective, to remove the experience of hardship so that everything is 'fair' is to do away with the need to change your ways in order to survive. Life would never have evolved beyond single celled creatures."

"You mean there would be nothing?" Carl asked, puzzled.

"There would not be life as you know it. Life only began because the conditions on this planet were right. Cells evolved from little more than chemicals. Some cells survived simply by dividing into two. Others survived by forming colonies but only the best, the strongest, the most able and the most adaptable, survived and found an efficient way to replicate their own kind. Over billions of years they evolved into complex animals.

"But human reproduction has been interfered with. It is no longer natural. Reducing infant mortality and increasing the survival rate of mothers during childbirth through intervention is, above all, what caused the explosion in population. Good, some might say. But at what cost? To experience the multiple, negative effects of overpopulation?"



They walked on.

“Have you travelled much beyond the city, Carl?” the Professor asked.

Carl shook his head. “I cannot afford it,” he replied.

“But you have a phone?”

“Of course, uncle. It is not possible to live without a phone.”

The Professor nodded, mostly to himself. It was true that day to day life had become impossible without a phone though he was still unsure if the technology had improved life’s quality or its understanding. With it you could watch events unfold in every small corner of the planet in an instant. Another flood in Bangladesh? You watched it unfold. Another tragedy in sub-Sahara Africa and you felt you were amongst the lines of destitute refugees. Essential privacy and debatable standards of etiquette had long been the entertainment for millions. Virtual reality had taken over from reality itself with human interaction replaced by short messages. Deep reflection on the state of the world had been replaced

by a quick check of someone else's opinion and then jumping to your own conclusion without any real knowledge of the background, the history or the facts. Confusion had taken over from clarity of thought. There was no longer time for contemplation or deep, private thinking.

He told this to Carl. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

"But no-one saw it as a problem. In the West from where the technology had come no-one had stepped in to assess its downsides and set any controls because to do so would have been an infringement of rights. Freedom to do just what you liked was granted because day to day struggle for survival and hardship was gone. Everything you wanted was right there, affordable and accessible. Technology became the way of life, especially for the untroubled, living-for-today young. You understand, Carl?"

"Yes, but…."

"Fifty years ago, everything had become undervalued leading to a throw-away, disrespectful attitude. There was too much of everything. A third of food produced – 1.3 billion tonnes of it – was being lost or wasted. No-one cared enough.

"The consumer society was at its peak. But growing alongside all this was unemployment. More and more people needed more and more jobs and jobs depended on businesses who, if they were to stay in business needed to sell goods at low prices. There was over production and too much of everything at undervalued prices.

"There was more wealth than was needed for basic survival so they sought private pleasures – more possessions, more food, more clothes and bigger houses and because they had always been successful breeders, they sought to satisfy their reproductive urges. People were becoming lethargic, bigger, heavier, overweight and building up unseen health problems. But consumerism was what kept them employed and it was in no-one's interest to point out that consumerism had its down side. So, they continued spending and using up nature's resources.

"Long distance air travel and holidays were seen as their right. Back in 2016 3.6 billion people flew by air. 95% were non-essential for pleasure. Vast ships with populations the sizes of small towns took to the oceans filled with food and cheap entertainment stopping at already overcrowded resorts. They were eating, sleeping, drinking and swimming off overcrowded beaches in places half way around the world, places they had no interest in except for the sun, the food and the drinks at the bar - places that they then left permanently damaged, and its wildlife destroyed by their selfish indulgence.

“Looking back, Carl, would you say that self-indulgence has improved the quality of life, of the human need for fulfilment and happiness? Has it reduced human suffering? Have previous generations given your generation anything that you would like to thank them for? Other than adding you to the numbers this small world is required to support.

“And what of your current leaders? Does the Pope, for instance, still believe that he is well on the way to fulfilling God’s hopes for his worshippers or is he now having second thoughts? Is he and the current batch of political leaders about to demand urgent changes or is it business as usual?”

Carl didn’t reply. Perhaps he’d talked too much.

He looked at Carl and tried to compare him with his father, Stefan. Carl, he decided, did not resemble his father except, perhaps, in the colour of his hair. Carl was taller and stockier than Stefan had been and Stefan always had a look of confidence and contempt on his face. Carl’s face showed a complete lack of confidence.

Twelve years had separated the Professor from Stefan. While he was studying for his PhD at University, Stefan had been at school but had already become what his mother politely described as “troublesome”.

For a widowed woman, a doctor with a busy professional life, the experience of trying to bring up Stefan had been a struggle and eventually a tragedy. As a toddler he’d been put into care and fostered out. The Professor’s mother had been the last fosterer and she’d formally adopted him. She’d done her best but living and working surrounded by inner-city social problems had not helped. In the end, she’d reported him to police after her suspicions led to finding a hoard of cocaine and what was then called skunk under his bed. He’d been a dealer operating from near a bus shelter close to the local school. Finally, after periods of detention and prison he’d disappeared only to turn up at his mother’s funeral.

His mother had always tried to excuse him. *“It’s his background*,” she’d say. *“He’s trying to become accepted by the other boys. It’s peer pressure. It’s the education system. It’s class sizes. How can he be expected to learn in such a chaotic multi-cultural, multi-lingual system where even the teachers give up trying.”*

And she’d blame herself.

“I suppose I’m doing too much,” she’d say. “*I’m not giving him enough of my time.*”

She’d considered private education for him but schools had quickly seen problems and advised against it. Whatever she’d done, it was unlikely Stefan would have turned out any differently.

But his mother's own work-life balance had become difficult when Stefan was about eleven. As a gynaecologist with her own strong opinions on population growth and fertility she had already become heavily involved in campaigning for women's rights. Women were seen as the solution to keeping family numbers down to affordable levels. Some years later when Stefan had disappeared, she had started travelling extensively promoting family planning. She'd spent months in Bangladesh. With over 160 million people at the time, Bangladesh had the highest population density and some of the worst poverty in the world.

"Choose a smaller family," she would say. "*Live within your means and reduce the pressure on resources. Protect the natural world to ensure there is enough of everything for everyone."*

Stefan may not have taken much notice of his foster mother until her death but the Professor's life had been entirely devoted to carrying on with her message.

He looked at Carl again, sensing he was trying to find the courage to ask another question. It came at last.

"Am I really your nephew, uncle?"

The Professor slowed his walking, then stopped What should he say? Describe the background in the time left or leave it for another day, if there was one? Should he talk about family relationships? Express his opinion that too many boys were brought up bereft of a father figure with all the disadvantages that that brought? That still nothing had been done to address the need for different teaching methods for boys and girls? That to educate boys in an environment dominated by females may once have been seen as perfectly correct to meet the never-ending gender debate but that it was unfair and unnatural and led to disadvantages for boys?

But as for whether Carl was really Stefan's son and therefore his nephew, did Carl know something that threw doubt?

"I suppose so, Carl, but I don't know for sure," he answered truthfully. "I only met you once. You were about two years old and with your mother. She introduced herself as Lavinia - an unusual name which is why I remember. I was addressing a meeting before the election. She seemed interested in what I was saying and came up to me afterwards and held you up for me to see. It wasn't the best time or place for a discussion. Whether we were being introduced as uncle and nephew to save long explanations or just because she liked what I was saying, I didn't ask. I never saw you or her again. Neither did I see Stefan for years until….."

The Professor didn't complete the sentence for it was another painful reminder of his mother's funeral.

He hadn’t even recognised Stefan, who had sat at the back, until the undignified shouting that erupted at the end of the service. But for the publicity that had surrounded his mother’s death it was unlikely Stefan would have bothered to attend, but he still remembered Stefan’s foul language and abuse.

Perhaps thankfully, Carl said nothing more but strolled ahead leaving the Professor deep in thought.

Whenever bad memories struck, he would often distract himself by imagining the beauty of nature. When Carl turned, he was standing, pointing at the ground while in his mind was a moment in time, walking, hand in hand in a wood carpeted with springtime bluebells.

Bluebell wood - England

"Once upon a time," he said, "Where we stand now, there was a meadow of wild flowers and high grasses that, in the heat of summer, rippled like a lake in the wind. Children came here to play amongst yellow buttercups, cowslips, ox-eye daisies and red campion. They lay in the grass amongst butterflies and watched swallows that had flown from Africa to feed on summer insects. If they kept quiet, they might have seen badgers, foxes and deer and if they knelt down and searched low amongst the blades of grass, they would find beetles, grasshoppers and, at night, glow-worms that shone like tiny stars. Can you imagine that?"

Carl wandered back. "Buttercups, uncle? What are they?”

The Professor ignored the question. “Long before the meadow,” he went on, “this was a world unseen by human eyes, a world of untamed, natural forest, the home of wild boar, wolves and bears. As far north as the eye could see, to an even higher hill that seemed to touch the sky was a clump of high trees where, when their branches were still bare and frosty, before the first leaves of spring had arrived, rooks would build nests that would sway in the March winds that followed. People followed the seasons by watching such events."

He pointed again, this time to the east.

"Beyond the prison boundary there was once, not so long ago, a wild wood of beech, oak, sycamore and ash where wild garlic and bluebells flourished in the fresh wetness of springtime and fallow deer would hide until venturing into the meadows at dusk. Behind us, to the south, beyond what is now the prison's administration block, was where they cut down mature trees to build ships for the King to go to war. They used thousands of acres of forest for these ships and for weapons, for bows and arrows to fight their enemies and kill the deer and wild boar for meat. And what was left of the wood, the scraps, they used for fires to cook the meat and to warm themselves during the snows of winter.

"Driven by the need for shelter from the snow, rain and wind they cut stone from the hillside to build walls of stronger houses and, because the trees were now gone, they created the fields for crops and built borders - walls of stone or hedges. Now shut your eyes to imagine that cluster of houses, the small hamlet, the beginnings of the village which grew and grew and gave its name to the city that it now is. That small hamlet of perhaps thirty people has grown into a city of one million people that is now your home. Can you imagine that original small hamlet of wood and stone houses and the people that lived there?"

To his credit, Carl shut his eyes, trying to imagine ancient people as they huddled in the dark of night around wood fires, holding the bones and raw flesh of animals to the flames to cook and then to eat.

"Now open them again and tell me what you see."

"I understand what you’re saying, uncle. It is what we can no longer see. We can no longer see the hill that touched the sky. There are no meadows. There are no trees. There is no village. I see only dark shapes, concrete buildings and glass that reflects the sky. I see tall blocks of apartments silhouetted against the cloud. There is more and more of the same, as far as my eye can see."

The Professor nodded.

"That is our problem, Carl. We no longer see small houses like the ones in the hamlet, homes for families, the parents, the children, the grandparents. We no longer see their animals in the fields, the cows that gave milk, the sheep that gave wool and the chickens that gave their eggs? Instead, our meat and eggs are produced in vast factories hidden from view in case it upsets our sensitivities. We no longer understand how they coped with the seasons, the heat and dryness of summer, the cold frosts and snows of winter. Instead, we are warmed by the power of invisible electricity. Frost no longer forms on the inside of our windows in winter. We no longer wash in tiny bowls of freezing water but in hot water that gushes freely from taps. Our clothes are no longer made and repaired by ourselves but bought and then discarded simply because we have lost the creative skills. Our simple joys are no longer created by ourselves but mass produced by others who decide how we should be best entertained.

“Does faith mean anything now, Carl? If those claiming to be Buddhist or Moslem still find lingering solace in their ancient beliefs will it last? Wil they soon join Christians who have lost faith even in themselves?

“Do we know if St Michael’s Church is still standing, Carl? If it is, perhaps, one day, we could both enter its cool, stony interior to sit in one of the ancient pews and imagine the time when it was the focus for understanding, valuing and celebrating the natural cycles of life - birth, marriage and death - and for giving thanks for the harvesting of our crops? Do you not see how they lived alongside nature and so better understood biology and the true meaning of life with all its joys, heartbreak and hardship?

“People say that lives are now better. We have comforts and we live longer, they say. But it is not what we have gained, Carl, but what we have lost through having to cater for so many?

“You asked about happiness. Are we happier now with our comforts? Are we happy that we now have three times as many old people as we did fifty years ago? Can you tell me that having 1.5 billion people aged over 65 to care for is a success?”

Carl nodded. “You are also old, uncle.”

The Professor smiled. “Thank you for reminding me. I’ve been lucky with my health but I won’t go on forever.”

“And meanwhile?”

“I’m content. I feel fulfilled.”

There was a pause as Carl looked at the Professor. “Did you never do anything wrong, uncle?”

The Professor looked at Carl wondering if he might now ask the big question but the opportunity passed. He waited a moment but Carl looked away and said nothing.

“I admit I’ve made a few mistakes along the way, Carl. I’ve been far too outspoken at times and, on occasions, I’ve been wrong.” He paused to wave his arms at the prison grounds. “And I’m here, of course.” He waited again for the unasked question, but still it didn’t come. He changed the subject.

“Are there parks and gardens in the city?” he asked.

“Central Park is still there, uncle, but it is not so safe.”

“I had heard as much. It is such a pity. Parks and gardens should enable city dwellers to walk and feel part of nature. In parks and gardens, amongst grass and flowers you can begin to understand diversity. They are supposed to be uncluttered areas of peace and quiet in which to think and find some perspective on what it means to be alive, to feel part of life itself and understand your own

small place in it. It is only during quiet contemplation surrounded by nature, that feelings of stress and hardship can be made to move calmly back into perspective."

A mass of dark, grey cloud was moving slowly in from the west as Carl suddenly walked off. From a few paces away, he turned.

"Living behind a fence in a prison are you content, uncle? Do you feel fulfilled? Do you still have a clear conscience? Do you still feel that you said and did the right things? Are you satisfied? Was what you did wrong?"

So that was it the Professor thought to himself. It was no real surprise but, in a slow, roundabout way it seemed they might be getting to the point of the visit now. He walked towards Carl.

"I am not angry," he said. "Whether I am right is for others to judge, but what I've said and done satisfies my desire for simple common sense to prevail." He smiled. "It's satisfying talking to you, Carl. I wish I could help more. You are a bright young man."

"Maybe," Carl said with a sniff of embarrassment. "Does asking questions run in the family, uncle?"

The Professor nodded. "I've been asking questions all my life so I'd like to think so but we are not related genetically."

"No, I suppose not. But what is the point of it all?"

The comment reminded the Professor yet again of the defeatist attitude harboured by so many young people. He remembered reading a four-word suicide note recently read out in court. "*What is the point?"*

He looked into Carl's eyes and, beyond the questions, saw an emptiness as if he, too, was struggling with the point of living. He had no knowledge of Carl's upbringing but he suspected it was nothing out of the ordinary. Even if Stefan had disappeared, Carl's mother had stayed. Under the circumstances it seemed she'd done a pretty good job. Until she'd died.

Some, as always, were born with wealth, advantages, influence, family connections and with a role already mapped out, but the vast majority would grow up to feel insignificant and unimportant, as if there was no hope and no future. By Carl's age and despite thirteen years of education, the determination to create a future for themselves had often drained away through a lack of opportunities.

Put bluntly, 80 percent of people born were now excess to economic requirements. No-one would ever say that, of course, even though governments constantly used a successful economy as the source of wealth and happiness.

But it was exactly what he'd forecast all those years ago. Too many people with no meaningful roles living in a desolate world, emptying of wildlife and rapidly reaching the point of self-destruction.

Carl's latest question still hung there: *"But what is the point?"*

"Do you mean what is the point of life, Carl?"

There was no reply from Carl. Instead he turned and walked away again. The Professor followed.

The tall horse chestnut tree that grew beside the path was not the best example of its kind. It had suffered from a disease known as bleeding canker and a heavy, broken branch lay on the ground beneath. The Professor often sat on it during his walk.

"Come and sit for a while, Carl."

During warm, sunny days the tree offered pleasant shade but in winter, as now, it stood like a dark skeleton.

Its history was also dark. Forest Hills Open Prison had experienced more than its fair share of suicides by hanging and the tree had been an ideal place from which to tie a torn shirt or a belt. They had all been men and the Professor remembered one of them quite clearly - a young man of Carl's age. Suicide had been the single biggest cause of death in men under forty-five for many years. For most of them, it was the loss of self-pride, the feeling of uselessness, of isolation, of having no job or depression over relationship breakdowns. And, yes, the question of what the hell was the point of it all.

"What is the point, Carl? Do you still want to know?"

Carl sat on the log. He looked uncomfortable but he nodded faintly.

"The point." The Professor repeated it as if for his own benefit. "The point is that life happened and we're here. All we can do is try to make the best of it, just like this old tree."

"It's lucky it's just a tree, uncle. It can't think."

The Professor smiled. "You might be right."

"Are you saying there is no point?" Carl asked.

"None at all as far as I can see and I admit I've thought about it a great deal. Life, you see, is a function of matter and here on this planet it happened. We are currently the most evolved life form there is here so we must make the most of it in the faint hope that we might, one day, see the point."

"Meanwhile?"

“Meanwhile, we do what all other life forms do. We try to survive. We pass on what we learn but accept we might be wrong. We live as peacefully as we can and with our unique talent for analysis, we plan ahead.”

“Haven’t we made too many mistakes, uncle?”

“Yes. Because we didn’t plan ahead.”

Carl slid off the log and pointed at his uncle. “Did you make a mistake, uncle? Isn’t that why you’re here? Are you still planning ahead even from inside a prison?” He swung his arm to point at the rows of white-painted two-storey blocks. “Why? What the hell do you do with your time?” Then he turned his head, sniffed and wiped his eyes. “Sorry.”

The Professor stared at the back of Carl’s head for a moment. “I have to admit it gets a bit tedious at times,” he admitted.

“Tedious, uncle? Tedious?” Carl turned back. “How can you bear it?”

“I suppose it is because I want to,” he said. “I am determined to do my time. Afterwards, on I go. Meanwhile, I cope. I read. I continue to collect data on demographics and the effect humans have on the environment which I hope will go towards the book I’m planning. I was allowed to bring my microscope so I spend time on my collection of slides. I try to understand life and explain things to myself. I think a great deal and keep in touch with some from outside who still seek my opinions.”

“What opinions? Most people disagreed with you and your opinions, uncle. I thought you’d been dismissed as an extremist.”

The Professor nodded. It was true. There was no point in denying it. He had, after all, been a Member of Parliament and had used his position to speak out on the subjects that mattered to him as a biologist. That his political career didn’t last long was, to him, yet more proof that a politician was not expected to demand radical changes by spelling out truth that no-one wanted to hear. Neither, if they wanted to be re-elected, were they expected to point out brutal facts with uncompromising bluntness and demand massive sacrifices. They were expected to tiptoe around the big issues so as not to upset people. That sort of life had not suited him so he’d resigned, joined a lobbying group with similar views and started on lecture tours, but the lectures had done nothing to improve his reputation.

But extremism?

What was extremism other than the frank expression of views about a sensitive subject that others thought it better to keep quiet about. If it was backed up by evidence then why should such views be regarded as anything other than constructive alternative thinking worth listening to? And he was a scientist, after

all, and science and technology had been built on the back of experimentation and thinking outside the box.

He'd also been labelled as an antisocial fantasist with unacceptable political views. More often than not, though, he'd found his views mainly upset those with a vested interest in not changing anything. As far as he was concerned that was good. All he'd wanted was to stimulate discussion and offer drastic solutions to deal with drastic problems.

"We all have a right to say what we think," he said to Carl, knowing that that would probably provoke another question. Carl was clearly not without his own opinions.

"Say things, yes, but what about actions, uncle?"

Ah. The critical question. Was this the moment? He waited. Carl looked at him but said no more and so he gave up waiting. "Indeed," he said. "Actions are so much more serious than words."

He paused again still waiting for Carl to speak but, again, he just watched and waited with his worried eyes wide open.

"When I entered politics," he went on, "The most pressing human problem ever had been sitting there, staring us in the face, for far too long but no-one dared deal with it head on. The sheer number of human beings living on this planet was already causing catastrophic problems – over consumption, environmental destruction, loss of species, mass migration, food and water shortages, conflicts, poverty, joblessness not to mention carbon emissions and climate change. The list went on and on. And yet nothing was being done simply because to mention the word overpopulation was too sensitive for the ears of those who could have done something. It was like an embarrassing disease, far easier to pass it on to the next generation to deal with."

"But you mentioned it, uncle."

"Even so, it was far too late. The damage was done and getting worse but at least a few hushed words were spoken at Cabinet meetings, at Congress and in Parliaments. Even the United Nations, a hundred years too late, moved on from publishing its elaborate statistics and forecasts to lesser known closed debates on what might be done about the problem, but only within their budget of course. To seek additional billions for a solution was far too politically sensitive.

"Overpopulation, Carl. Can you speak the word aloud? Can that word now pass your lips without fear of attack by the liberal minorities that still hold sway over the direction of social change?

"Would you now feel confident enough to use that word in a complete phrase that would still throw certain politicians and religious leaders into such

paroxysms of fear and trepidation that they would cover their ears and shout aloud *'Stop. Stop'?*

"Can you now say '*human overpopulation is unsustainable and we need to deal with it'* without fear of being assaulted in the street?

"Can you go even further and shout out aloud that '*the human population must be reduced by billions'* without fear of a knock on the door by the vigilantes of human rights? Or attack by those offering artificial conception services? Or those offering perfect, genetically engineered designer babies all of whom claim you are an evil extremist with no right to deny people their rights to have as many babies as they want?

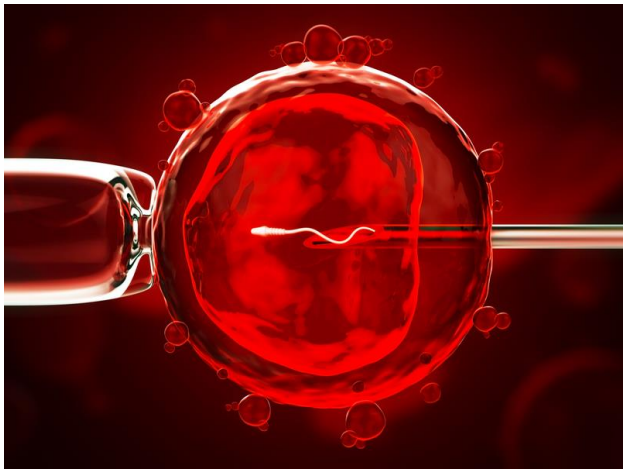
"Which is the more evil, Carl? The clinics providing the technology to create hundreds of thousands of human babies for profit or me pointing out that bringing more babies into an already overcrowded world by whatever means is selfish and should be restricted by law in order to protect future generations?"

"But you didn't stop there, uncle," Carl said.

"True. I wanted to set up of an international organisation of the size and importance of the United Nations tasked specifically with finding solutions to the problem. Was that extreme?"

"And then you went even further"

Ah yes, the Professor thought. They were still edging slowly but surely to the big questions, but he would wait.



In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

They left the old tree log and strolled on, Carl absent-mindedly kicking at small stones along the path as the Professor looked at the sky and waited for the next question. Grey clouds were gathering and a stiff breeze picked up as they turned the far corner and headed south.

“Uncle,” Carl said. “Do animals know fulfilment? Did the deer and wild boar who were killed for meat know fulfilment? Do chickens that make eggs have rights?"

This was certainly not the expected next question. "Animals do not ask such questions of themselves,” the Professor replied. “They just get on with trying to stay alive."

"So, are they content?” Carl asked.

The Professor sighed. “Why is your generation so fixated on understanding feelings and emotions, Carl? Is it because you fear you may have lost some? Are you, perhaps, concerned that feelings like contentment and fulfilment are a thing of the past?”

In reply, Carl shrugged.

“Tell me, Carl. What does fulfilment mean to you?”

“We were taught that it means you have everything you need.”

“Taught? In school? What has the world come to, Carl? Do human emotions now require teaching?”

“It was part of a lesson on human emotion and interaction. We were taught that to be fulfilled and satisfied you had to have everything your heart desires.”

“I see. So, do you now have everything your heart desires?”

“No.”

“What’s missing?”

“I don’t know, uncle.”

“Did they teach you what to do if it went missing or had never arrived in the first place?”

Carl looked at his feet.

“What you were taught is just not good enough, Carl. It sounds as if it is the quantity and quality of personal possessions that leads to fulfilment. Fulfilment has nothing at all to do with what you own. Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote that to be fulfilled is to be what you are and to become what you are capable of becoming.”

Carl looked up. “Yes, that’s better,” he said. “But how can we be fulfilled if we have no job?”

They were half way around the perimeter fence. Time was running out and still the Professor felt Carl was circling the real question. He took a breath and thought, instead, about pigs, cows and chickens.

“Asking me whether contentment and fulfilment forms part of an animal's needs is odd to say the least. Especially as most of your contemporaries think meat and eggs are made in factories and have never formed part of a cow or a chicken.”

Carl nodded seriously. “I saw a video on farming, recently,” he said.

The Professor thought he, too, might have seen that: a single farm producing a million tons of meat and half a million eggs per year. To meet the ever-growing demand for more and more food for human consumption the number of mega factory farms had tripled in fifty years. Animals were no longer being cared for as individuals with as much a right to life as a human but were bred, grown and then butchered on a scale that was almost impossible to imagine. If an example was needed of the utter disrespect humans had for life this was it. Consumers didn’t want to know how food was produced. They just needed as much of it as they could consume and to buy it as cheaply as possible. Turning a blind eye to where it came from and how it was produced eased what little conscience they had.

After watching the video and the automated butchering process the Professor had turned it off to sit and calculate the amount of food required to feed a million chickens that were then fed to humans. He’d become a vegetarian forty years ago.

“Can I assume you’ve never seen cows, sheep and chickens living in meadows of long fresh grass? That you’ve only seen them living on conveyor belts or hanging upside down by their feet from processing machines?”

“It was a chicken farm, uncle. Automated.”

“Of course,” he replied. “So, you won’t have witnessed the air of contentment about animals that are free to roam, or noticed that chickens scratching naturally in the undergrowth are quite different creatures to their cloned cousins in factories. Are you aware that they are all individuals each with an ability to express their differences if treated with dignity and respect?”

Carl looked puzzled.

“Given space, fresh air and a more natural environment I would say that animals do experience a feeling of contentment that shows itself in their mannerisms and their habits. It should come as no surprise, for instance, that they are often friendlier towards humans but I doubt if they ask themselves whether they feel fulfilled in the way you were taught. Their only possessions are their lives which they would normally fight to protect in all their natural ways though they are utterly powerless in a factory.”

“So, do those factory chickens suffer?”

“Those chickens do not consider their plight. They know nothing of what life could be. What I’m saying is that the quality of their lives would be enhanced by living naturally. Personally, I find producing cheap food for billions of unthinking humans by processing even more billions of live animals in factories utterly distasteful.

“But if those chickens are suffering then who will have caused it? Humans. Human suffering is also self-inflicted. We are a cruel species, Carl. But if you are trying to get me to discuss what I once wrote about human suffering then you must read what I wrote and not how others chose to interpret it. What I wrote was that to try to eliminate human suffering by always giving them what they want without demanding something in return only leads to greater distress and suffering. But I can see, like the others, you struggle to understand. Do you want me to explain?”

Carl nodded.

"Then think about that deer in the forest, long ago,” he said. “She is shot in the chest by hunters with an arrow. She is seriously wounded but she manages to crawl away. Perhaps she will die. But who helps her? Who intervenes? No-one. In your words she is now suffering. In your opinion and if she were human, she would be deserving of intervention to save her life. But deer do not help each other except as herds. Nevertheless, she is suffering, she is struggling, she cannot walk, she cannot feed. You and I know that the injury threatens her life. But does she experience pain as you would if your body was pierced by an arrow and you were bleeding. Probably, but we don't know for sure. Discomfort and stress? Certainly. Does she consciously understand she may die? If you think she does then you are assuming she has the same ability as you to rationally consider imminent death. That cannot be right. Instead, she relies on her instincts - conscious but unthinking awareness of her predicament forced on her by pain, physical discomfort and stress.

"Might it be instinct that made her crawl away to hide until the hunters passed by? If so, there is still only one instinct at play there - the one that all deer have - to run away from perceived danger. That she could crawl into a thick bush out of sight was luck. Did she recover? We will never know. But, if she dragged herself away to lick her own wounds and lived, then it was her natural instincts that saved her."

"I still do not understand," Carl said.

"That is because you are programmed by human thinking. Animal instincts are not understood by the most highly evolved animal there is - a human. Your brain is struggling to understand something that is totally alien.”

"But I like the deer,” Carl said. “I would want to help it."

The Professor shook his head. “Leave it alone," he said. "The deer will become stronger if you do not intervene. Leave it alone to lick its own wounds. Leave it alone to pass on its survival instincts to its offspring."

"But if it dies how can it pass on what it has learned?"

"It can’t. But if it had something special about it that helped it survive, then that’s when things are passed on. It ran away – instinct inherited from its predecessors. It hid – inherited instinct. It licked its wounds – instinct. That’s survival of the fittest. But it must still die someday. Death is inevitable. But deer are a good example of natural population control. Given too many and too little food, they die out. With too few and plenty of food, they increase in numbers. It's a natural balance.

“Humans, though, interfere in the natural balances that affect their species. We reproduce and deliberately intervene to save babies and mothers. We intervene in injury, sickness and old age. The painful outcome of interference is visible all around us. We can no longer cope with numbers. Weakness, injury, sickness or old age, no longer, necessarily, means dying. What I wrote was that we need to examine our desire to intervene because there lies the real hardship and suffering.”

Carl nodded uncertainly.

"And another thing, Carl. Out of pity, might you want to save that injured deer? Might it be because you liked its big brown eyes that looked at you in fear when you were close to it. Might you have interpreted the fear you saw in those eyes as a plea for help as if it were human? Because that is foolish ignorance. You are now comparing its eyes, its emotions, its feelings, with your own. And what about the billions of other animals, birds and insects that are facing death right at this very moment? Do you want to round up all sick and injured animals and take them somewhere where they can be cared for? Would we not be inundated with sick and injured animals just as human hospitals are packed with the sick and the elderly? Where do you stop? Where do you draw the line with your constant desire to keep things alive because you, yourself, fear pain, death and suffering?"

"But we never draw a line with humans."

"That is exactly my point. And what is the downside of that misplaced and self-defeating desire to end all human suffering and prolong life beyond what is natural?”

“Too many people,” Carl said.

“That’s it,” he said looking back as he walked off. “And then you complain of a lower quality of life and ask questions about suffering, happiness and

fulfilment. Are humans not the most stupid of all animals? Are we not well on the way to self-destruction and the destruction of everything else as well?"

Time was moving on and still the Professor waited for the big question, but Carl seemed only to be trying to digest what had gone before.

The Professor looked at his nephew wondering again about his background, his upbringing, his mother, Lavinia, and what influence, if any, Stefan had had. Broken families and chaotic households were common. Was it any wonder that young people, especially jobless young men like Carl, were confused and even suicidal? The other helpless victims, of course, were the elderly who were abandoned by sons and daughters, the very people who should be there to care for them in their old age.

Carl was deep in thought.

"Have we progressed, Carl?" the Professor asked. "Are we better humans now? Do we still care for each other? Despite our apparent wealth, are we as compassionate as we once were?" He took a few more steps. "Why do we abandon ageing parents for the state to care for or to cope alone?" He took another few steps. "Why, exactly, have you come to see me, Carl?"

Carl's face twisted as if he was toying with an unasked question.

"I wanted to know more about you and why you are here and….." He changed the subject. "And I don't know what to do. I thought you might know."

It sounded feeble to Carl but it was too late now, he'd said it. And he'd still not asked the one question at the top of his list. He bit his lip. The Professor shook his head.

For all their worldly ways and information on anything at their fingertips, 21st century humans seemed more uncertain than ever. To him it was proof of an increase in mental frailty, itself caused by living in a society that protected people from the reality of life with all its risks, dangers and pitfalls. Thirty years ago, they'd been called 'snowflakes' – weak, fragile particles that melted instantly when taken away from the safe, familiar environment where they'd formed.

"No longer able to cope when faced with the uncomfortable views of others, historic facts, death or even petty domestic issues, they run to seek words of comfort from counsellors armed with diplomas but with no more knowledge or experience of life than anyone else," he'd once said at a conference on biological psychology.

His point had been lost in the debate and amongst yet more accusations of extremism but if he was asked again, he'd have repeated it. The inability to cope

with adversity had been eroded by a feather-bedded society that had become too remote from the harshness of life itself.

“Why do you think I can help, Carl?” he said. “Isn’t a gap of sixty-years asking too much? Am I not just a wrinkled old scientist with nasty opinions who understands nothing of modern society?”

“You were my age once. Could you try?”

“What’s the problem?”

“My friends want me to fight the newcomers. What should I do?”

The Professor stopped walking.

So that was it. Or part of it. Or one of the still unasked questions.

‘Newcomers’ was the modern term for the most recent influx of millions of immigrants who had left homes in Africa and Asia to avoid drought, famine, poverty and internal conflict. Out of humanity, they’d been offered shelter wherever they ended up. In reality, it had become a problem of sheer numbers and it couldn’t be stopped without reacting as if they were an invading army.

As with many other mega cities who had accepted the influx and tried to accommodate them, seventy five percent of the population of the city beyond the fence were designated as newcomers. Lax border security, human rights legislation and high breeding rates were the main causes. If a country was known for its humanity and willingness to help then they arrived. They were desperate but they knew their rights.

But with no new jobs being created, unemployment amongst the young, whether locals or newcomers, was at an all-time high and no viable solutions was in sight. Carl was undoubtedly one of them and the problem would only get worse.

Jobs could only be created if it was economical to recruit but machines were more affordable. Not only were there now massive, automated factories, farms and food processing plants but automated shops, automated distribution centres and transport and places that only employed supervisors to watch banks of screens. In hospitals, even routine surgery could be performed remotely. The only jobs that had increased substantially over the last thirty years were in nursing and caring for the elderly – jobs mostly done by women. Young males like Carl were missing out in hundreds of thousands. Was it any wonder they were angry and wanted to fight?

"Ah, the newcomers," the Professor said. "I thought there was something else on your mind.” He paused for a moment. “Let me first ask you, Carl. What’s your surname?”

Carl looked puzzled. “I have my mother’s name - Strand,” he said.

“Well then, Carl Strand, it sounds to me like your ancestors on your mother’s side might have been one of the Vikings that came over in boats from Scandinavia a thousand years ago. Rapists, plunderers and arsonists amongst them if rumours are to be believed. It might also explain your fair hair. The point is, are you yourself not a newcomer?”

Carl seemed to find it slightly amusing. A faint smile flickered on his pale face. "I suppose I am also a newcomer,” he said, “but I am not as new a newcomer as some and our ancestors only arrived in small groups not in waves of hundreds of thousands."

That was true. "So, how and why do you intend to fight the newcomers?”

"Why?” Carl repeated. “Because we feel we are a minority in what was once our own country."

“What is a minority? You are a human being, are you not? The newcomers are of the same species are they not? And you have already admitted you are probably the offspring of past immigrants. So, are you really saying you feel too small and insignificant a part of a mixed community?"

Carl scratched his head and thought about that. His uncle had a strange way of asking questions at times. He didn’t speak like others he knew. It was taking a bit of getting used to.

"Yes, I suppose that is it," he said eventually. “We feel unimportant and ignored and upset.”

They had stopped walking again. The Professor shook his head. "Feeling unimportant and insignificant is a sign of weakness, Carl. If you feel that way then you must do what other animals do. You must either fight to raise your position within your herd or learn to cope with being an outcast with a lower status.”

“I see.” It sounded hopeless. Impossible.

“But beware. Those who have already fought for dominance may go for the simple solution of eliminating you altogether. They are, after all, much more selfish than you.”

He let that sink in for a moment before adding, “And explain to me this weak-sounding word 'upset'? It is a word you have mentioned before.”

Carl nodded. "Oh yes. We were taught at school not to say we are angry, uncle. To say you are angry causes friction. Anger must be controlled. So, we say we feel upset or unhappy instead."

The Professor had read of this strange demand being placed on young men. Anger, they’d been told, mostly by their women teachers, was not good. It must

be controlled. Quite how it should be controlled when the entire system was breaking down, unemployment was rife, the drugs culture was out of control and civil disobedience on the increase was never explained.

"So 'upset' means that all is not quite right, that life is not as perfect as you would like it or how you expected it to be. You are unhappy, distressed, discontented, depressed and feeling desperately unfulfilled. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Anger seems a perfectly good word to describe all of that, Carl. Can I give you permission to use it in my company?"

Carl frowned. "Yes, I suppose it's anger."

"Describe this type of anger."

"There are different types?"

"Many"

"I see. Well, it's not physical anger, uncle. It is more in the mind. Perhaps it is both. We do not talk anymore. We have exhausted ourselves with talking. We know what we want to achieve but not how to do it."

Carl paused to think, still unsure whether his own words were what he actually meant. He moved on by mentioning the side effects.

"Many people are hungry," he began. "They ask for food, especially the newcomers with children, babies and brothers and sisters. They are definitely angry, uncle." He looked at his uncle with a frown on his face.

"Perhaps they should have not had so many babies," the Professor said. "Besides the technology to improve conception there is technology to stop it."

"Yes, but……" He tailed off. Then: "Do you know about suicide, uncle?"

Of course, the Professor knew about suicide. Amongst teenagers it was at an all-time high. He merely nodded. They seemed to have moved a long way from Carl's need for advice on whether to fight the newcomers.

"What's your point, Carl? I thought we were discussing fighting the newcomers."

Carl sniffed and frowned and his mouth twisted as if he might cry.

"It is because we feel useless, uncle. Life is pointless. They…...we see no future. There are no jobs and we feel there is no reason to be here. School is too crowded and they……. we learn nothing of value. They…. we meet in the bus terminal by the health clinic. There were two hundred there yesterday. Many are on drugs. They are crazy, uncle. Sometimes they run out of control. They ride in the buses using their free passes just for somewhere to go but the buses are crowded and only go in circles. The teachers do not always come to teach

because they cannot teach so many students in one room and the newcomers speak too many different languages. And the teachers do not know how or what to teach because why learn anything when there are no jobs. So, my friends are going to fight because they see no other solution and they want me to join them."

It was his longest string of words so far.

"And who do they intend to fight?" asked the Professor.

"The gangs from Africa and Asia who came here for the better life and to escape the problems in their own countries. They live together in groups in the high rises on the north side and the old houses on the south side. It is where all the poor newcomers live. The women have babies because it is their comfort and they live on welfare. The men move around because they have nothing to do. Many want to move away again but where will they go? So, they have gangs, they drink, take drugs and they steal. “

The Professor knew all this of course. It was nothing new but he listened with a deep sense of pity for Carl for living amongst it and seeing so clearly that things had gone badly wrong. Overcrowding, poverty, criminality, alcohol and drug abuse had always gone together, but this was 2050. Things were supposed to get better.

Instead, the ever-contracting national wealth was, as always, being used for short term fixes to keep the lid on uprisings or, worse, a catastrophe.

Welfare handouts had always been the politician’s easy fix but they did nothing to address the fundamental problems and what Carl called fulfilment. The lives of millions of humans living over the prison fence was little better than the lives of the chickens in the factory farms that fed them.

He wondered what to say that would answer Carl’s question about what he should do.

“Fighting won’t solve it,” he began, but then he paused for a moment thinking, as he often did, that war could, indeed, be the solution. But Carl was standing and waiting for more comforting words of wisdom.

“Animals and birds fight over territory and feeding grounds,” he began. “It is no different for humans. But humans, because of their ability to think and plan ahead, add more sinister dimensions to their desires to win territory - envy, jealousy and outrage at unfairness for instance. Fighting can do little to solve feelings of that sort. What’s more, animal fights can last for a few seconds or a few hours but human battles can last for many years. They leave lasting scars on human memories and the numbers killed, maimed or displaced can be beyond imagination.”

That was the Professor's tempered warning for Carl's ears but he could easily have ventured into the more controversial areas that had got him into trouble in the past. Catastrophic world war had one big advantage. It could reduce the population quickly and significantly

"Fighting is a decision you must make for yourself, Carl," he said. "It may be a last resort but it is sometimes the only way to change things."

"But I want to change everything – absolutely everything." Carl replied in a tone his uncle could have likened to anger. For the first time he was showing genuine passion. "I don't like the way I live. I want to do something with my life. And you know what, uncle? Despite all your colourful speeches and your writing, uncle, you failed to change anything. Why should I listen to you?"

The Professor couldn't argue with that. He watched Carl saunter away but then returned looking even more angry. His eyes were wet. "So," he said, "I'm still waiting. What's your advice?"

"I suppose you must fight, Carl. I can't think of anything else. Get stuck in. Go and do the job of all the past politicians, religious leaders, self-interested, liberal do-gooders and worthless international bodies who turned a blind eye. And, of course, the people like me who talked a great deal but, in the end, failed to make a difference."

"And if they send in soldiers to stop us?"

"Keep going. They'll stop short of killing objectors for fear it'll make matters worse. If it then spreads to become a massive conflict, an uncontrolled uprising by ordinary people against authority then we'll be witnessing the ultimate cost of all past political failures."

Carl nodded but seemed unconvinced. He didn't, the Professor noticed, suddenly turn, say good bye and run out brandishing a stick. Instead, he stood there staring with his red, watery eyes, his hands trembling.

The Professor tried again. "Look at the leaders of the last hundred years, Carl. Can you name one who spoke out about……"

He didn't finish. Carl no longer seemed interested in the past. He interrupted. "It's too late now and it's a waste of time for you to keep on repeating what you've said a thousand times before. Nothing is fair." Carl was almost crying.

The Professor nodded in agreement. He moved to stand by the fence and looked over. He agreed with what Carl had just said and could not deny the futility of his own efforts. "I agree but you're speaking of fairness again?" he said softly. "Life is not fair."

He heard Carl huff and sniff as if he was no longer interested in what he might say. Fairness and pity were just like happiness, hardship, fulfilment and suffering. Words about which he had already written and said too much.

At last Carl came to stand next to him. He wiped his eyes. "Something needs to be done," he said, clearly trying to stay calm. "But I still don't know what."

"How many times have I heard that?" his uncle said quietly. "We should have anticipated these problems two or three hundred years ago and made long term plans to solve them?"

"But we didn't, uncle, did we. You once said the population should be cut to two billion. Good idea. But how? Nothing happened did it?"

The Professor looked exasperated. "I agree." And they stood for a moment in silence until Carl spoke again.

"Sorry for getting upset, uncle."

"Upset?" the Professor replied. "That was the best outburst of anger I've seen for a long time, Carl And everything you said is right. Collective anger is the best way to force change. Don't be sorry."

"So why did no-one listen to you and to Malthus and to your friend Ehrlich and all the others?"

"Oh, they listened alright," he replied. "They were just too weak to act. I once said humans will not survive on dilemma, uncertainty and indecisiveness. They are weaknesses that would quickly destroy other animals. The deer ran away, Carl. It didn't stand around scratching its head, wondering what to do. It ran. Instantly. It ran like the wind.

"But we have a long history of leaders too frightened to act even when they have the facts laid before them. The outcome of their refusal to act on human population growth is there for all to see."

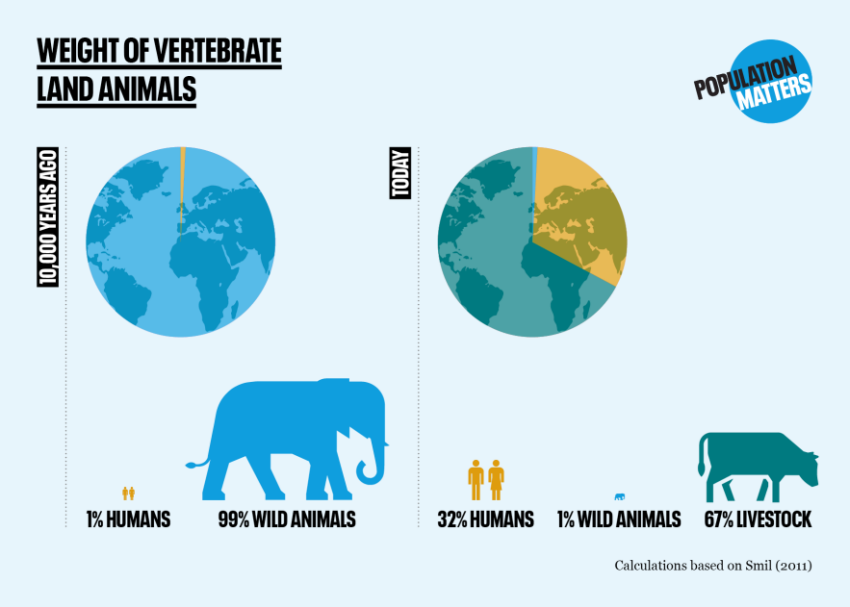
Carl's eyes reddened once more. Then they filled with tears. He made no noise but sniffed and wiped his nose and eyes with his hand.

The Professor looked at him wondering about his inner strength. Did he have the energy and determination to do something or was he more likely to resign himself to do nothing at all?

"I still don't know what to do," Carl croaked.

The Professor held out a hand and rested it on Carl's shoulder. "Nor me," he said and watched a flush of horror spread across Carl's face.

"Not now," he added. "I'm too old. My reputation is shattered and….." he waved his arms towards the prison blocks. "I am here for a while yet. But it is exactly what I forecast all those years ago. You and millions of others like you now have to deal with the biggest self-inflicted problem that faces not just the human race but every other living creature we share this planet with. It is a problem that was foreseeable but brushed under the carpet, out of sight and out of mind. Extinction is an increasingly likely outcome."



He turned, leaned on one of the concrete fence posts, gazed out over the grey, urban sprawl before them and wrapped his arm more firmly around Carl's shoulder. "I'm sorry, too," he said.

What more could he say? He'd made his position clear thirty years ago and did not retract a single word of what he'd said or written. It was because he understood the enormity of the problem that he had found himself in prison. The plain fact was that the world was grossly overpopulated with humans and the point of sustainability had long passed. He'd demanded action that he knew would be unacceptable but, not only that, it was already too late. World leaders had done nothing although, in rare moments of forgiveness, he often thought they also realised the predicament and were merely making the most of their own short lives.

He pointed towards the city. "Sometimes, when I look over there, I wonder if I am better off here. We are all prisoners now, Carl. Prisoners of fate."

He paused again, wondering whether to mention another controversial period in his life. At least it would be a distraction and a new angle on the problem.

"Do you know about the state of emergency in 2039, Carl?"

Carl nodded.

"I used the state of emergency that existed at that time as a test of the determination to act. It only worked in as much as it merely showed up world leaders for what they were - weak, incapable and unfit for the offices they held. They were too afraid to take the only action that made sense."

"But you advocated stopping humanitarian aid," Carl said.

The Professor nodded. His nephew had certainly done some homework before venturing inside the prison.

“Not exactly,” he replied. “I did not advocate the stopping of all aid, just the stopping of certain types of aid. Read what I actually said and why, Carl. As I’ve said before, do not always believe what others said about me."

"They said you were advocating a cull of human beings, uncle."

The Professor took a deep and noisy breath. "Yes,” he said. “They love emotive words, but a cull means deliberately killing in order to reduce numbers. That is not what I recommended."

"It is similar, uncle. What you recommended was tantamount to a cull."

"OK,” he replied. “Let us analyse the situation at the time. Why, for instance, on that one occasion that caused so much international outrage, did they want to send such vast amounts of aid?"

"Because there were thousands of desperate refugees.”

“Not thousands, Carl. Estimates put it at over six million men, women and children in huge, scattered groups moving north from West, Central and East Africa. That was the scale. But why were they migrating?”

“It was failed harvests because of no rain. Climate change.”

“And the primary cause of climate change, Carl?”

“I suppose it’s too many people.”

“There’s no doubt about that. But why had it taken more than fifty years to link climate change and water shortages and every other environmental problem directly to human overpopulation?

“Why did we waste fifty years talking about carbon emissions, carbon footprints, carbon offsets and carbon credits and not the real cause of the problem - human over population? What sort of leaders were they that used questionable evidence of climate change as a way to raise taxes but were too weak to discuss dealing with the more difficult question of human overpopulation?

“The mass migration problem was a case in point. They wanted you to believe that the cause was below average rainfall not that there were too many people using too much water.”

“People didn’t like talking about overpopulation, uncle.”

“Correct. So, they left it for future generations to solve. Your generation.”

“They didn’t know what to do. They didn’t have a solution.”

“They didn’t even want to discuss a solution, Carl. They counted numbers, they extrapolated figures, they issued quiet warnings but never discussed the

desperate need for a solution. The subject was non-negotiable. The mass migrations became yet another discussion about climate because that was what they wanted you to believe so you were distracted from the real problem.

“I agree there had been below average rainfall for five years but to get an average you sometimes have to have more and sometimes less.

“It was water shortage not rainfall shortage – a subtle difference - so let’s get the facts straight. It was water shortage caused by over extraction of water. Rivers, lakes and wells ran dry. Underground reserves, the water table, drooped just as it has in many other places in the world. Rainfall could not replace the rate of consumption because it was no longer just being used by local small farmers but by overpopulated cities as drinking water, pumping it for miles from its source. It was being used by big multinational companies, manufacturers and for mining on an enormous scale.

“If you looked at entire processes from start to finish it was taking three litres of water to produce a half litre of drinking water. It was taking twenty thousand gallons of water to make one car and three thousand gallons of water to make one mobile phone. Not all of those things were assembled in Africa but Africa was where the precious raw materials were being extracted – using local water. Average rainfall could never replenish it quickly enough.

He stopped for a moment to let the facts sink in.

“And why else were those hundreds of people migrating, Carl?”

“Yes,” Carl said as if he knew this. “There were tribal problems, uncle. There was religious fighting and fighting over land. There was terrorism and atrocities being committed by soldiers. And there were no jobs.”

The Professor nodded. “Everything brought on by population growth and lack of basic resources like water. In fact, Carl, there was extreme poverty. There was hardship on a scale you’ve never seen here and, hopefully, never will.”

“But you were accused of recommending mass slaughter, uncle. A cull of humans.”

“That’s correct,” the Professor admitted, now visibly agitated. “Accused by the Catholic Church,” he added. “An organisation representing 1.2 billion people. An organisation that was responsible for increasing human poverty and destitution by its pro-life policy and, for years, denying birth control to millions.

“The Catholic Church, Carl – the body that is supposed to represent the poor through the teachings of Jesus Christ whose mother, Mary, was so poor she apparently gave birth in a stable. The baby Jesus himself laid in a manger amongst hay, the food for cattle, sheep and goats.

“The Catholic Church was the biggest block to all attempts to discuss population control and so help reduce poverty. It constantly condemned poverty

as the evil results of capitalism. It condemned overconsumption and lavish purchasing at Christmas and yet it is the biggest financial power on earth. It has huge international investments in banks, billions of shares with corporations and multinationals and vast wealth tied up in real estate. The wealth of the Pope himself is incalculable. How perverse is that, Carl?"

"Go. Sell everything you have and give to the poor." Mark. 10.21

"They said some terrible things about you," Carl said sadly.

"When you know you're right it's like water off a duck's back, Carl."

Carl hesitated, trying to work out the meaning of a phrase he'd never heard. "I suppose so," he said with no conviction. "They called you cruel and an evil monster."

"Empty words, Carl. And let's get the facts straight. I did not recommend a cull."

"But you recommended doing nothing to help."

"Listen, Carl. The world was faced with a huge humanitarian disaster, for which it was unprepared. For all the statistics and forecasts, there was no plan in place for what to do for half a million displaced Africans desperately trying to reach a better place. This was economic migration on an enormous scale. Their only solution to the social catastrophe if these people made their way to other countries was to hand out food, tents, medicine and money. They had been paid to lead but had long reached the limits of their leadership capability. So, they responded to accusations of mismanagement and unpreparedness in dealing with perfectly foreseeable events with irrational outbursts and the pointing of fingers. That deer would have made a far better leader, Carl."

“But they said to do nothing was inhuman and would have caused more suffering.”

The Professor sighed. “Carl,” he said. “The cause of the problem was their own failure to do nothing beforehand. Remind yourself once again. What else were these poor, stricken people running from?”

“Civil war over land and jobs and……”

"So, is civil war not culling? Is ethnic fighting, sectarian violence and brutal execution of fellow human beings not culling? Was not the plundering of water supplies by multinational corporations the equivalent of a death sentence for people whose lives depended on it?

“Why did they ignore forecasts of impending disaster for subsistence farmers if their water sources were destroyed? Was it because the multinationals took preference?

“Was it the official position of the United Nations and the Catholic Church and others to ignore the unfortunate poor until it could be said the tragedy was really due to climate change? That these unfortunate people were in the wrong place at the wrong time?

“Wy would the UN’s head of African Affairs not admit that the UN had, for years, been under intense pressure from rich countries who claimed their presence offered jobs to poor Africans and so needed the UN’s moral support to expand? Why not admit that what these huge, foreign and very often state-subsidised companies really wanted was profit and to meet the insatiable demands of their own people?

“Whose rights should have had preference, Carl? The local people’s rights to continue their lives as they had for a thousand years or the rights of multinationals to dig and consume so much water in the space of just a few years? Who were the ones carrying out the genocide and the culling, Carl?”

Carl seemed unmoved. “Yes, uncle, but to do nothing was also said to be like culling innocent people.”

The Professor nodded. “And why did they start using emotive words like culling? Was it, perhaps, my accusation of corruption and mismanagement amongst global leaders going back generations that annoyed them? Was it my opinion that those who had wined and dined and posed for smiling photographs for so long had been utterly negligent in addressing the single most important matter affecting the billions they were supposed to be representing? Was it my reminder of warnings going back twenty years that to sit and do nothing would eventually cause a humanitarian disaster on a scale that could see millions if not billions of humans wiped out? Was it their intention all along, I asked, to do nothing and wait for disasters like this to happen?”

"You made them very upset, uncle."

“I made them angry, Carl.”

“Was it right what you said about water supplies?”

“I merely repeated was what was already known. That freshwater supply was fixed by nature and had become insufficient to meet demand. They had the statistics but still they allowed the tragedy to happen.”

“You advised not giving aid.”

“Not exactly. I said that in a world that already took out more than it put in, it was like throwing a few small stones back into a massive hole we’d already dug. I said that their so-called humanitarian aid was not a permanent solution but, as usual, just a temporary fix to neutralise the guilt. Aid, I said, was only useful if it led to self-sufficiency but that, however much was given, it would never be enough. Look at what’s happened here, Carl. Dependence on state aid only creates yet more dependence. It rarely leads to long term self-sustainability.”

“Everyone objected to what you said.”

“Not true, Carl. Many agreed but kept quiet. But that’s another weakness of humans that animals do not have – the fear of being ostracized.

“Nevertheless,” he went on, “Help would still have been given whatever the rights and wrongs. Human kindness, you see, is driven by yet another human fear – the fear that unless you help others in difficulties, they might not help you in future. Do unto others as you would have done unto you is how they excuse it. Now isn’t that another perverse sentiment coming from people who are increasingly unwilling to take care of their own elderly parents but prefer to dump them into care homes?”

The Professor suddenly stopped as if another thought had crossed his mind. He frowned, stared at Carl and shook his head sadly.

“Old people,” he said almost despairingly. “Our parents. Are humans not the most hypocritical of animals? We claim to be so caring and averse to human suffering yet, when it comes to our ageing parents who have become an inconvenience, we abandon them to live out their remaining time in conditions we would never wish for ourselves.”

Carl watched him turn away for a moment as if hiding private feelings, but it didn’t last long. He turned, wrapped an arm around Carl’s shoulder again and pulled him down to sit beside him on the wet grass.

“My legs are tired,” he said as if to change the subject. “I, too, am getting old. I’m not as fit as I was and always walk too slowly to delay going back to that dismal room. And walking in circles with the same view is not good for anyone.

I am like an animal pacing up and down inside its cage. Might I go crazy? You see, I still have a need to go somewhere, to achieve something." He smiled at Carl. "But I'm pleased you've gone out of your way to see your old uncle, Carl. I'm touched."

"Yes, but….." Carl stopped. Then he looked away.

"But what? Never be afraid to speak your mind, Carl."

"It was what you then did that made you a criminal in the eyes of the law, uncle."

"Go on," he encouraged.

Carl hesitated once more. "The reason you are in prison, uncle. You stepped over the line. You moved from being a scientist to an extremist."

"Many who are brave enough to speak honestly of what is in their minds have been called extremist, Carl. To call someone an extremist is supposed to be offensive but it is often an attempt by others to shut down debate on uncomfortable subjects. Even after their death, history will still describe them as extremist even though much of what they forecast has come true."

Carl stood up. "Someone once said you had no place in modern society, uncle."

"How could I forget? I'm perfectly comfortable being told I have no place in modern society. Is modern society so perfect? In fact, I remember replying to that Christian bishop that she might like to consider whether she herself had a place in a modern, civilised society. Surely, I said, it is a sign of an advanced civilization to anticipate human disaster before it happens and act accordingly. To sit on your hands, watch tragedy unfold and do nothing surely goes against everything your God ever taught you about humanity."

"Did she reply?"

"Of course not."

"And someone else said you had no place in a compassionate society, uncle."

"Which was a view somewhat closer to the truth," the Professor agreed, "But it still lacked understanding of my meaning. I agreed I had no place in a society that saw hardship as something that should be eliminated at whatever the cost. Do you remember what I said earlier about hardship?"

Carl nodded.

"Whereas I call it hardship, others call it suffering. Whereas I regard hardship as essential, perfectly normal and natural, others want to remove it entirely, thus denying humans their right to become better people by dealing with that hardship. It is not a popular philosophy but I have never sought popularity."

Carl nodded thoughtfully.

“But I still don’t like to see people suffering, Carl. The suffering from old age is an example but then, death is part of life."

He paused before changing the topic. “What’s your real question, Carl? The one you’re edging towards but stop short of asking. Why not spit it out now or I’ll die of old age waiting.”

Carl sniffed. “It’s hard to talk about.”

“No, it isn’t. You’re just like the rest, Carl. Nervous of addressing sensitive matters. I think I know what’s coming so speak out.”

“It might upset you, uncle.”

The Professor sighed. “We’ve been here before, Carl. We decided that getting angry can deal with upsets. If you’re upset then get angry with me. If I get upset, I’ll get angry with you.” He stood up, walked to the fence and looked over. Carl then joined him, sniffing, opening his mouth as if to say something then shutting it again.

The Professor looked at his watch. “We have just mentioned death, Carl and time here, as everywhere, is running out.”

Carl sniffed again and the Professor gave up waiting for the question he knew was coming. He tried forcing it through a question of his own. “Do you, too, think I am unfit person to live in a modern society or a compassionate society, Carl? Am I an evil extremist? What is your opinion?”

Still there was no answer.

“Was I such an evil being with no compassion for my fellow humans that I needed to be incarcerated in Forest Hills Open Prison?”

Carl frowned as if hurt by such self-deprecating words but he still said nothing. The Professor shook his head.

"What a dilemma,” he said looking up at the ever-darkening sky. “The human weakness of not wanting to upset someone with words. Can I help you, Carl? I promise not to get upset because I’m sure I know what you want to discuss.”

He looked straight into Carl’s eyes. “Do you think that what I did that caused such outrage increased someone's suffering? Or did I step in to stop them suffering?"

He continued to stare at Carl, challenging him to respond. Carl first looked away and then looked back. Tears had formed once again and he frowned, screwing his face into a look of sorrow and pity, though whether it was self-pity or sorrow for finally being forced to ask the question the Professor couldn’t decide.

"You are quite clearly referring to the death of my mother, your great grandmother. Yes?" he said.

Carl's face relaxed a little. "Yes."

"At last," the Professor said with a mocked sigh of relief. "Shall we walk again? The final stretch?"

He didn't wait for a reply but walked away. Carl followed and then came alongside. "I assume you know the bare facts otherwise you wouldn't be here. Might an explanation of the personal circumstances help you?" he asked Carl.

"Yes."

"In that case let me start by describing your great grandmother, Doctor Helen Mary Richardson," he began "How can I condense the full life of one great woman into just a few sentences?"

He thought for a moment as Carl strolled beside him, waiting, sniffing and wiping his face.

"A tall, elegant woman in her prime. A distinguished doctor, a consultant gynaecologist who became the Senior Vice President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. A leading campaigner for women's rights with particularly strong opinions on population control that, I have to admit, greatly influenced my own work. She was ninety years old when she died. Did you know that?"

Carl nodded.

"Have you ever seen her photo?"

"No."

The Professor fished inside his back pocket and withdrew a slim wallet. "Here," he said.

Carl held the black and white photo in its small, clear plastic envelope. He nodded, stared at it and then handed it back. The Professor took it, looked at it probably for the thousandth time and slipped it back into his wallet.

“She had become something of an expert on discrimination and opportunities for women but it was the slow progress in patriarchal societies like Bangladesh and Pakistan that particularly concerned her. Population growth was dragging both countries down and women were quite obviously the solution to ensuring child numbers were at affordable levels. She began travelling, promoting family planning especially in Africa and Central Asia. Bangladesh, with over 160 million people at the time had the highest population density and some of the worst poverty in the world. Your grandmother wrote and spoke a great deal about poverty and its relationship to childbirth. *‘Choose a smaller family*,’ she would say. ‘*Live within your means and reduce the pressure on resources. Protect the natural world to ensure there is enough of everything for everyone.’*

“She would illustrate the problem by asking what would happen if each family had just half a child more. ‘*Would that help reduce the population?*’ she’d ask. And of course, they all thought it would help. The truth, of course, was the opposite. World population would not be the expected 11.2 billion by 2100 but closer to 16.5 billion.

“*’But what would happen if families had half a child less?’* she’d then ask and the answer, of course, was that it would not grow but drop to 7.3 billion by 2100. Your grandmother was full of statistics like that – mostly given to her by me, I have to admit.

“Did I already tell you that it took humanity 200,000 years to reach one billion but only another 200 years to reach seven billion?”

Carl nodded sadly and spoke for the first time for a while. “The numbers went up, uncle, but the quality of life went down.”

“It depends how you measure quality, of course,” he replied. “There are few who would want to return to times when age expectancy was around thirty-five years. On the other hand, some people achieved an awful lot before dying young. Vincent van Gogh was thirty-seven, Mozart was thirty-five. John Keats the poet died at only twenty-five.”

He paused and gave half a smile. “Thankfully, scientists last a lot longer. But there’s a need to measure contentment and fulfilment as you know, Carl.”

Knowing where all this was heading, he took another deep breath.

“So, your grandmother,” he said. “While I talked about the environmental impact of population growth and its unsustainability, your grandmother talked about quality of life and poverty. But she was getting older and I was, by then, a politician and finding myself in all sorts of problems for being outspoken. I was dropped from lists of speakers at conferences and conventions. I became the subject of newspaper articles, some suggesting I should be listened to, most saying the opposite – that I was a hard, uncompromising individual with no

heart and, being childless, had no comprehension of the emotional need for children."

He paused as another thought struck him and Carl jumped in. "Didn't you want children, uncle?"

"No."

It was the first time they'd come close to mentioning the Professor's wife. Catherine had been a biochemist. They'd known each other since student days but married late, in their early thirties. She'd died of a brain tumour two years later. *S*am McIlroy had already learned, a long time ago, never to mention the Professor's family.

He continued where he'd left off.

"It was a hard time during which I lost my Parliamentary seat," he said. "I managed to retain my status as a scientific adviser to the Government but it was a precarious position. I reverted to writing and accepting offers to speak to some of the more enlightened groups but I became more and more impatient with so little action being taken and all the time I was leaving an even wider trail of controversy in my wake."

He suddenly stopped walking. It had already become just a slow stroll and the administration block was getting closer with every step.

"Let's sit again, Carl, or we'll arrive back too soon and the friendly but inquisitive *S*am McIlroy will want to know whether my left knee is feeling better and whether you watched his favourite soap last night."

The ground was wet but a crumbling concrete bench stood beside the pathway. He pointed to it. "Avoid the jagged, rusty reinforcements, Carl. It's budget cuts."

So, they sat for a while, the Professor leaning back, staring up at the grey, overcast sky.

"Yes. Your grandmother," he said again as if it was a painful subject. "As my reputation rose but mostly fell, she was becoming less and less mobile. I would visit her at her Norfolk cottage overlooking the North Sea. Even after thirty years, she still missed my father, your grandfather, Bill. He had also been a doctor, an orthopaedic surgeon, and as she grew older, she would talk about him more and more, show me old photographs and tell me stories about their young days. She'd talk about people and families she'd met in Bangladesh and Karachi. She was still in touch with one young Bangladeshi woman who had risen from the slums in Dhaka to become a paediatrician. Taslima would write long letters and my mother would read them to me. In her replies she was always trying to persuade Taslima to go into politics but in the end my mother admitted to me: "*Taslima is too good for politics*," she said.

“She gradually lost weight. She was quite visibly sad and lonely and became less talkative. She felt she had contributed as much as she could during her life but at eighty-nine, she could do little more than just sit. She had lost most of her sight. She could smell the sea and the flowers that I brought her. She could hear the seagulls if they were close but she could not see them. Reading was something she loved to do but she could no longer read. Instead, she listened to audio tapes but, for her, it was not like turning the pages of a book and reading it for herself. Someone came every day to help her but she refused to move from the cottage.” He paused and sighed.

“We had talked for many years about the problems of old age, about population growth and about the increasingly common practice of abandoning old but bright and intelligent people who had contributed to society to either fend for themselves or, worse, to live together in conditions that, as younger people, they would have found abhorrent."

He paused for another breath. Carl watched him and frowned, uncomfortably.

"Then, on her ninetieth birthday, she told me, quite clearly, that she had had enough. That it was time to go. To face the inevitable. She was ready, she said. She wanted her death to come when she was fully aware. She did not want to drag it out until she was beyond the point of comprehension and had become what she described as a *‘useless old burden’*. She was now, to use your word Carl, suffering.”

He paused yet again as Carl stared at him with wide, unblinking eyes and a deepening frown across his forehead.

“She had, long ago, stopped going to an old people’s free lunch run by the local community because, as she told me, ‘*It makes me sad. They are all lonely and abandoned and those that still have their wits about them will talk openly if encouraged to. They see no point in living, Harold. We oldies are being kept alive even if we don’t want to be. But for what, Harold? Why?’* She always called me Harold.

“I visited her again a month later and we discussed it one last time. We sat together, mother and son. She was in bed with her head on the pillow and smiled at me as I held her hand and administered the injection, the injection she herself had put aside twenty years before in readiness. Her last words to me were, *'Thank you, Harold. My dear Harold.*"

The Professor nodded to himself. “And that was that. She died smiling, Carl.”

Carl blinked, sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and grasped the sleeve of the Professor’s damp sweater with his fingers. "But was it the right thing to do, uncle?"

The Professor straightened up. "Yes, of course," he said. "Absolutely. She had, as she used to say, *'paid her way'* but that *'enough was enough'*. She had contributed but had never been a burden on others. She had put in far more than she'd taken out. Possessions meant very little to her. Memories were what she valued. She was deeply satisfied with her work and with what she had achieved. She had been very content with her marriage to your great grandfather. There was nothing left to be done. Her life was complete. She died, Carl, feeling totally fulfilled."

"But what you did was wrong in the eyes of the law," Carl. said.

"Oh yes. I knew I had broken the law. We both knew I would face problems."

"But you still went ahead."

"We hoped some good might come of it. She knew it would be difficult for me with my background and reputation. But I had argued for years that it was wrong for human rights to be tipped in favour of the young and healthy who wanted to reproduce thus adding to the problem of overpopulation. Instead, they were stacked against intelligent old people, thousands of whom were being kept alive without dignity, and long after the quality of their lives had passed, by a system that required them to be kept alive whatever their health or state of mind or wishes.

"As your grandmother was fond of saying, '*Quality not longevity'.*

And with that the Professor stood and stretched his back. "Any more questions?" he said. He held out a hand, palm up. "It's starting to rain. Bring on the summer. Winter is such a dark and dismal time. I hope the horse chestnut survives to flower another year."

"How much longer, uncle?"

The Professor knew what he meant. "Two years," he said. "I will be seventy-seven. Let's finish our walk."

They had completed the full circle. The administration block was less than a hundred metres away.

"I'm sorry if I've disappointed you, Carl. You came here for advice."

"I came to talk to you, sir. You are my uncle and I admire you for speaking out. My mother always spoke highly of you. It is why she brought me to see you many years ago. It is why I came here. She told me to try to meet you and talk to you. And I think I now understand about my grandmother."

Carl thought for a moment. "I also understand about the newcomers. Fighting seems so pointless. They are not bad people. They came because their futures were bleak. They ran like animals escaping fire thinking they would be safer

here. Perhaps they should have stayed to try and rebuild their lives but they had nothing."

"But humans breed with no consideration for their children's' futures," the Professor replied. "Perhaps it's time for a new type of spiritual leader, Carl. Someone who can rise above politics and appeal to the dying art of common sense."

Carl thought about it for a while. "People always blame others, uncle. Never themselves."

"True." He paused for a moment. "What are your thoughts on fulfilment now?"

"What we were taught was wrong. It is not about having everything we need. It's about what we are and becoming what we are capable of becoming. It's about feeling content about yourself, but contentment only comes from putting in more than you take out not by demanding more and more for doing less and less.

"The problem is, uncle, I think it's too late. We have taken out too much and not put enough in. It's as if all the others who went before have stripped it bare. Now we have nothing. So, we are angry because we think that those who went before should have seen the problems they were causing for the future. Now, we see no future at all, uncle. We are overwhelmed by hopelessness."

Carl took his uncle's arm again. "Uncle," he said quietly. "Why did they not listen to you?"

"More human weakness," he answered instantly. "Truth hurts. Humans like their comfort zone and I made them feel uncomfortable. They will always ignore demands to change their ways to avoid disaster if it means losing their comforts. Animals change instinctively but we don't."

"But you were right, uncle."

"I'm glad you think so but it made no difference. Humans believe they understand everything. In fact, they understand very little, even about themselves. But then, of course, there was the matter of your grandmother and I found myself here – out of sight and out of mind - because those that recommend and propagate unwelcome changes must be hidden from the public."

Carl thought for a moment. Then: "Was my father a good man?"

"Like us all, he was a victim of circumstances, Carl."

"But was he a good man?"

"No worse and no better."

"I'm also a victim of circumstances, uncle. I do not know what to do. I see no hope." He paused to kick at gravel. "Did you watch the news last night?"

“The street riots in Paris, Berlin and Barcelona?”

Carl nodded. “And down there,” he said pointing towards the city. “They were planning more anti-government riots today. They want jobs and money. I could have gone but I came here instead.”

The Professor said nothing.

Jobs and money and homes were what they all wanted. Thousands had been killed in clashes with government-backed forces during the last ten years but demands for change were now being co-ordinated across borders. It was reaching a crisis but solutions, giving them what they wanted, were impossible. It was exactly what he had warned. Even if population growth eventually slowed as was expected unemployment, food and water shortages, conflict, economic migration and social problems would still continue to grow and anger and discontent would eat deeper and deeper into the fabric of a global society of billions. Finally, it would reach a breaking point and that’s when the global tragedy would unfold. What wold it be? Disease? War? Even the Professor couldn’t forecast that.

Right now, and more fundamentally, Western-style democracy as a system of governance was failing. Weak politicians pandering to the selfish, short-term demands of its electorates had stifled essential changes. If progress was to be made, then hard, unpopular decisions were required, not the simple scattering of small crumbs of short-term comfort. To deal with humanitarian problems on a global scale required a different sort of leadership, the sort that had been dismissed by democracy as too radical, too hard and too extreme. But he didn’t tell Carl that.

Instead, he remembered the figures of twenty years ago.

At least 750 million people worldwide were known to want to leave their place of birth. 33percent of all those living in the impoverished Sahel part of Africa had wanted to leave because of impossible living conditions. Millions had already left.

He remembered his mother’s words on his last visit to her cottage. “*Family planning wold help,”* she’d said. “*But these places are not conducive to providing the sort of comfortable, Western-style living standards they aspire to. But that’s what they want – electricity, housing, jobs, education, healthcare and opportunities. It’s never going to happen, Harold.”*

The Professor looked sadly at Carl who was waiting for him to say more. But what could he say?

As if reading his thoughts, it was Carl who spoke next. "We are like rats in a cage, uncle. And the cage is getting smaller and smaller and more and more crowded because thousands and thousands are still arriving."

The people called the immigrants ‘newcomers’ but the politicians still called them economic migrants as if it was their duty to offer them jobs and opportunities. It was, of course, hopelessly impossible for the sheer numbers.

“It is a tragedy, uncle,” Carl continued. “They spend their last money to leave their homes behind, desperate for better lives. It started many years ago when poor, desperate people from Africa and Asia began migrating by boats and across land. The numbers then were small. Now there are so many that no-one can stop them and they disappear into the community. We talk to them and understand but we, too, have just as many problems as they did back in their own countries." He paused, almost breathless. "What can we do?"

The Professor sighed. What could be done, now? The fact was there were no leaders big enough or brave enough to manage a world of over 11 billion people of a thousand different cultures living shoulder to shoulder by the year 2100.

Perhaps those countries who had already foreseen the difficulties and walled themselves in, physically and administratively, might survive, the Professor thought, but the rest? For a young man like Carl the future looked especially bleak.

Compromises would never work. There was only one scientifically sound solution. And that solution - the one he’d written as a single, short paragraph typed on one small sheet of paper and then copied to world leaders - had sat on tables for forty years. But they ignored it because they were all, each and every one of them, scientifically illiterate status seekers who couldn’t make decisions but merely danced on a stage, smiled at cameras and tried showing sympathy whilst conveniently ignoring the fact that it was sympathy that had got the world into the predicament in the first place.

Carl gave up waiting for his answer. "Some people say the leaders are too afraid to act,” he said. “But I do not think they are afraid."

"So why do you think they do not act?" the Professor asked.

"Because there is no longer a solution, uncle. It is already too late."

“That’s it,” his uncle said and walked away.

Looking towards the administration block the Professor could see the grey uniformed figure of Superintendent *S*am McIlroy heading towards them. Their time, it seemed, was up. As he grew closer, he could even hear Sam’s keys jangling from his belt.

In the time left, he turned to Carl.

“Don’t rely on world politicians, Carl. They have ruled over a time of overindulgence, greed and excess. By not listening to those who issued sound

warnings, they have allowed the taking out of far more than was put in. Through their own weaknesses and selfishness, they have failed to teach the meaning of the word sustainable. By not acting to preserve the environment they have overseen its destruction. By not enforcing living within means they failed to teach that hardship is an essential part of human life in order to understand life itself. By failing to describe the nightmare of a world where humans are allowed to breed and multiply without control, they have overseen the destruction of not only ourselves but the rest of the living world as well. Total extinction of life on earth is not an unrealistic possibility, Carl. Politicians have trashed the world and yes, you are right. It's now too late."

The Professor had stopped at that point but he was to regret those last words.

"Time's up, Professor," Sam called out from twenty metres away. He then looked from the Professor to Carl and back to the Professor. "Did I interrupt something?"

He patted the Professor's shoulder and looked at Carl "He's a very serious old man with some very depressing views, young man. He doesn't smile a lot but he's friendly enough."

He checked his watch. "Two hours, Professor. It's more than you usually have. And your nice sweater is damp. Inmates with influenza are quarantined. You won't want that. Are you ready to go back?"

The Professor looked at Carl. "Time's up, Carl."

Carl nodded.

They followed Sam towards the administration block and the main exit without talking. Carl sniffed and kicked gravel.

"After you, Professor," Sam said pressing the security lock on the door. Carl followed. Sam entered last, clicking the door shut. "Right then. Did you enjoy chatting with your old uncle, Carl? Will you be coming again?"

Carl nodded but didn't reply so Sam walked a few metres away to wait as the Professor held Carl's hand with his own and put his other hand on his shoulder. "You're a credit to you mum, Carl. I've enjoyed our chat."

Carl nodded. "Thank you," he said. His eyes were wet again and he sniffed.

"Will you come again?"

Carl didn't answer.

"You decide, Carl. In the meantime, you've got other decisions to make. Take care."

Carl didn't look at his uncle again but walked straight to the exit door. Sam followed him, clicked the door open. He watched Carl wander away then stop and stare up at the grey and damp winter sky.

Sam turned. "Is he OK, Professor? He looks depressed."

"A lot on his mind, Sam," the Professor replied. "He came with some questions. I hope he was satisfied with the answers." He nodded rather forlornly. "But I enjoyed his company."

"Good," Sam said without too much interest. "Now then, Professor, off you go. No need for me to see you back home. You know the way. Tea at 3 pm. I'll see Carl to the main gate."

The Professor returned to his room, went straight to his bunk and lay there thinking about Carl. There was so much more he'd have liked to tell him and, now, more questions of his own - about Carl's daily life, his mother and his childhood. Perhaps it was because he rarely talked to anyone these days but he felt somewhat overwhelmed and, unusually for him, emotional.

He wondered what Carl thought about him now and whether he'd only succeeded in depressing him as Sam had suggested. But it hadn't just been him who had made such dire forecasts.

He recalled a meeting back in 2017 with an economist with similar views to his own. He, too, had forecast that young people could no longer expect the same level of affluence as their parents. He'd described a future society with a tiny, wealthy elite and a huge sprawling proletariat who had no chance of clawing their way out of a hand-to-mouth existence. It was hardly news to the Professor, of course, and the economist hadn't mentioned the additional effect of millions of immigrants on jobs and prosperity. To have done so in 2017 would have risked accusations by some of racism. But, thirty-three years on, it was easy to relate to what he'd said about traditional middle classes needing three or four jobs just to maintain their previous lifestyles.

But, of course, it was quite foreseeable that creating that many jobs was going to be impossible. Even in 2018 there had been serious youth unemployment and now in 2050, unless you were one of the privileged few, there was less than one low paid job available per person with the state propping it up from a pot that was getting smaller. Such begging, even from the state, was inhuman, undignified and degrading, It only fed the feeling of unfulfillment and anger that Carl experienced.

"Are old people to blame for the situation, uncle?" Carl had asked. *"Is your generation at fault*?"

It was not only his generation at fault, of course, but all generations with many having lived through two world wars that were still remembered vividly. They had sought a life free of suffering, war, pain and hardship. In a way, post war governments were right to reward them for their sacrifices but only to a point because they had then started demanding rights without responsibilities. Good leaders should have withstood such pressures, looked to the future and seen the warning signs.

Instead, desperate for popularity, they had failed to understand that kindness also means ensuring that people are self-sufficient, that life without struggle is utterly meaningless and that fulfilment always comes from succeeding against the odds. But politicians also loved the apathy that came with a culture of dependency on the state because it ensured their own survival. Apathy explained why uprising against bad governance was now too late.

"Looking back, Carl," he'd said, "*Would you say that the self-indulgence of the past improved the quality of life, of the need for fulfilment and happiness? Did it succeed in reducing human suffering? Have past generations given your generation anything that you would like to thank them for?"*

If Carl was already depressed then those words could only have made him worse. So he lay there worrying about what he'd said, about how Carl lived with no job and no future and how he could help him.

His mind moved on.

"They are always promising solutions, uncle, but we need them now," Carl had said.

"They are cruel diversions," he'd replied. "*They will always say there is light at the end of the tunnel. Don't worry, our technology will allow exciting new opportunities and ensure things will only get better, they will say. Look at our space technology and our plans to colonise new planets, they say. And, of course, that might be possible for a few chosen pioneers but what about the billions left here who could well be facing extinction along with every other living thing?"*

And then he'd gone even further.

"If urban fighting spreads, it will be like no other war in history. But that, in my opinion, is when a real decision maker may arrive on the scene. It will be someone just like some who have gone before - a self-serving individual seeking power, fame and prestige and with a vision of going down in history as the saviour of the human race. But be aware. This leader may then show his ultimate leadership qualities merely by the pressing of a red button."

Carl had looked shocked. *"Do you really believe that might happen?"* he'd asked and it had been his reply that then changed Carl. A look of desperation

had spread across his young face and, despite the cold, beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Yes," he'd said. "It is too late for a planned, controlled and gradual reduction in population, so someone, somewhere might decide to go for mass extermination. Selective extermination has been tried before. Humans are well capable of it. The ultimate extermination? The final cull?"

The Professor was still worrying about his effect on Carl when there was a heavy banging on his door and Sam's loud voice.

"Professor, come quickly. It's Carl."

The Professor stood up and opened the door. Sam was standing there, breathing heavily, his grey uniform darkened by wet patches on his back and shoulders. Rain drops ran down his red cheeks.

"I took him to the gate, Professor," he panted. "He was very quiet. I watched him walk across the road and then I saw him take something from the trash bin by the bus stop. It was a gun, Professor. He must have put it there before he arrived because we search all visitors. He shot himself. In the pouring rain. He just put it to his head and shot himself. There was a loud bang. I ran over. He was lying on the wet grass with blood pouring from his head. He was alive and he opened his eyes and looked up at me. I got down very close and heard him speaking. He said, *'Say thank you to my uncle. Uncle Harry was always right.'* And then his head fell back and hit the road. He's dead, Professor."

THE END

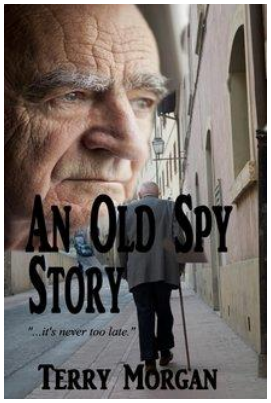
About the author:

Terry Morgan has been writing stories and poetry for over twenty-five years, mostly while he "lived out of a suitcase", travelling with his own exporting business. Having visited around eighty countries during that time he now lives with his Thai wife, Yung, in Petchabun, Thailand with occasional visits back to friends and family in the Forest of Dean and the Cotswold Valleys around Stroud in the UK. He mostly writes novels with a strong international, business and political flavour and occasional satire.

Website: www.tjmbooks.com

Full length novels by Terry Morgan all published on Smashwords:

An Old Spy Story



The old spy in "An Old Spy Story" is octagenerian, Oliver ("Ollie") Thomas. During a long career spent trying to earn an honest living with his own export business, Ollie was also, reluctantly, carrying out parallel assignments in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere only loosely connected to British Intelligence. But, by using threats and blackmail, his controller, Major Alex Donaldson, was forcing Ollie to help run his own secret money making schemes that included arms shipments to the IRA through Gadaffi and Libya, money laundering in Africa and assassination.

Now aged eighty six, recently widowed and alone Ollie still struggles with guilt and anger over his past and decides to make one last attempt to track down and deal with Donaldson.

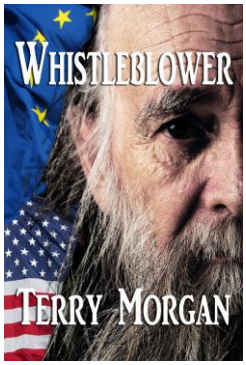
"A masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about."

"A wonderful and moving love story from an elderly man's perspective is beautifully woven into it and the ending is masterful."

"I enjoyed it – exciting, endlessly beguiling and fun."

"Thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish. A remarkable book from a writer who has clearly been there and done it. Easy reading."

Whistleblower

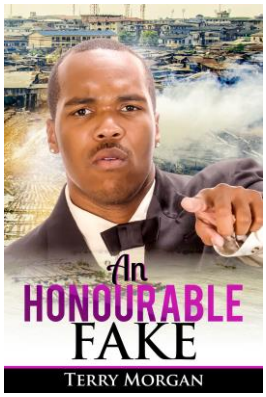


Huge amounts of international aid money are being stolen by those at the heart of the political establishment. Ex-politician, Jim Smith, threatened and harassed into fleeing abroad for accusations of fraud secretly returns to renew his campaign. A realistic thriller covering events in the USA, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia and a sensitive study of a stubborn and talented man who steadfastly refuses to fit into the stereotype of a successful businessman and a modern politician.

"Highly convincing.....This could all be happening right now. Another realistic and highly entertaining story...."

."Whistleblower", by Terry Morgan, is an international thriller that stretches from England to Thailand with many stops in between. The plot centre's around the timely topic of international aid money and the criminals who feed on it. The hero, the story's whistle-blower, is British ex-politician Jim Smith, and the story follows him around the globe as he seeks to put a stop to the corruption. Morgan, a world traveller who now resides in Thailand, knows his locations well. Cities in Italy and Africa come alive, and Jim Smith's home in off-the-beaten-path Thailand is wonderfully described, allowing readers to feel like they're there--this is no easy thing to do, and the authenticity of the various settings is a real strength of the book. Another strength includes the protagonist. Smith is not a typical hero. He's older and lacks the suaveness and action-hero credentials of a James Bond or Jason Bourne, but he more than makes up for it with his intelligence and depth--a big pleasure in the book is being invited into this man's life as he tries to pick up the pieces after an underhanded campaign aimed at ruining him. The plot moves along briskly, and the technology, players (politicians, intelligence agencies, criminals), and small details about the finance industry all add up to a novel that's rich in credibility and intrigue. Anyone interested in seeing the world from the comfort of a good armchair should read Morgan's book." (AMAZON)

An Honourable Fake



At age fourteen, Femi Akindele, an orphaned street boy from the Makoko slum in Lagos, Nigeria, decided to call himself Pastor Gabriel Joshua. Unqualified and self-taught and now in his mid-forties, Gabriel has become a flamboyant, popular and highly acclaimed international speaker on African affairs, economics, terrorism, corruption and the widespread poverty and economic migration that results.

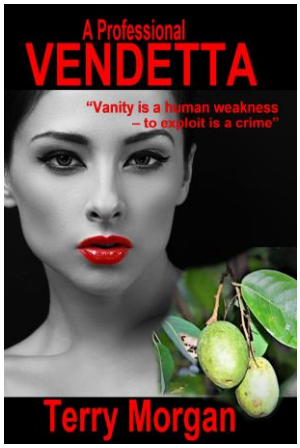
Gabriel wants changes but, in his way, lie big corporations, international politics and a group of wealthy but corrupt Nigerians financing a terrorist organisation, the COK, with one purpose in mind – the overthrow of the democratically elected Nigerian President and the establishment of a vast new West African state.

On Gabriel's side, though, are his loyal boyhood friend Solomon, a private investigator of international corporate fraud and the newly appointed head of the Nigerian State Security Service Colonel Martin Abisola.

"A rare sort of political thriller – a black African hero."

"Accomplished and knowledgeable – a class follow up to Whistleblower."

Vendetta



Eccentric, untidy Oxford University Professor "Eddie" Higgins has become the 'scientific adviser' to a local company, Vital Cosmetics, run by its new and vivacious chief executive, Isobel Johnson. It doesn't begin well. "Yours is an industry dogged by exaggerated claims, impossible claims and false claims," he tells her. Can they work together and so expose the Russian and Chinese gang exploiting Vital Cosmetics and other companies for counterfeiting, money-laundering and drug smuggling?

The Malthus Pandemic

Daniel Capelli is a private investigator of international commercial crime.

Armed with an unusually vague remit from a new client, an American biotechnology company, to investigate the theft of valuable research material but motivated largely by a private desire to see a Thai girlfriend, Anna, he travels to Bangkok for an infectious diseases conference. Here, he discovers that several virologists have also disappeared. One of them, David Solomon, is known for extreme views on the need for direct action to reduce the world's population.

As the investigation deepens, he rapidly uncovers a sinister plot to deliberately spread a deadly new virus, the Malthus A virus, specifically created by Solomon. But Solomon needs funds and help to spread it. With sporadic outbreaks of the disease already in Thailand, Nigeria and Kenya, Capelli finds two other characters - Doctor Larry Brown, an American doctor working at the USA Embassy in Nigeria, and Kevin Parker, an academic and expert on the history and economics of population control - have also arrived at similar conclusions but from different angles.

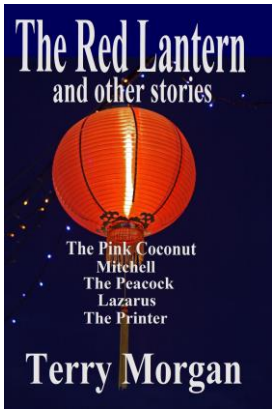
Calling on help from another close friend, Colin Asher - a London based private investigator - it soon becomes clear that Solomon is being supported by a rich American with a history of fraud, embezzlement and murder and a secretive Arab healthcare company with a ready-made international distribution network. Their plan: To help spread the Malthus A virus and make huge profits by marketing ineffective or counterfeit drugs.

But with his cover blown by the murder of another colleague, the charismatic Kenyan detective Jimmy Banda, and with increasing fears that the virus is about to be released Capelli, Anna and his colleagues face another problem - persuading UK and USA politicians and the international agencies responsible for bioterrorism and commercial crime, to believe them and respond in time.

"Anchored firmly in the present, no high-tech Bond style gadgets, just good old-fashioned detective work. Gritty descriptions of the international locations,

compelling plot and poignant rants about the inadequacy of democratic institutions and persuasive insight on the inner workings of the global establishment. Easy reading and difficult to put down once started. Enjoyable read."

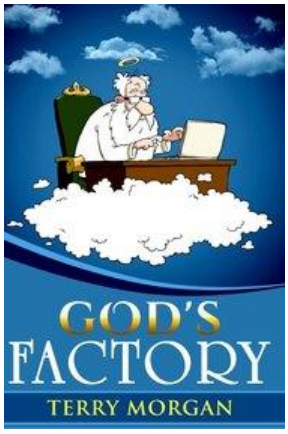
Short Stories:



The Red Lantern is a selection of six short stories about international crime, corruption and terrorism taken from five of the author's full-length novels – An Old Spy Story, Whistleblower, Vendetta, An Honourable Fake and Bad Boys.

Humour & Satirical:

God's Factory



Terry Morgan writes mainly serious novels with a strong international background but intersperses it with less serious satire and humour like '**God's Factory'.**