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Not Quite World's End

A Traveller's Tales

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Extract

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WORLD'S END

It may not entirely have escaped your attention that the world seems to be getting worse.

Most people would say that their lives were often more violent, usually more disturbed, and always less predictable than in the past. Nuclear weapons are spreading, violence is rampant, terrorism has become commonplace, the breakdown of conventional morality has weakened our relationships with one another.

Of course, anxiety has been a leading feature of every decade for the past century, and probably forever; people in the supposedly golden Edwardian years before the First World War were worried sick by the rise of German militarism, the decline of Britain's standing in the world, the growth of violence in Ireland and in the streets of Britain, and the sudden manifestation of free love, socialism, feminism and strange new art forms.

But there is one difference: nowadays we worry that the very existence of our world is threatened. Billions of people face shortages of water and food, and the increased danger of flooding. Climate change would (no, will – this isn't just some vague theory) be devastating for the world's poor. And therefore it will have a savage effect on the world's rich as well.

Since the end of the Second World War, what we vaguely call, with some geographical inaccuracy, 'the West', meaning the developed countries of the world, has experienced the most remarkable period of economic growth in human history. Yet it doesn't seem to have made us particularly happy or safe: at the start of the twenty-first century the chances of being robbed or violently attacked are approximately twice as great throughout 'the West' as they were in the early 1950s. (Nevertheless statistics of this sort aren't necessarily much of a guide to the nature of the life around us. It wasn't until

D-Day in 1944 that the fighting in the Second World War took over as the leading cause of premature death other than illness for the British people. From September 1939 to that point, despite all the bombs that had rained down on British cities, and despite the fighting on four continents, the chief cause of death had been the unglamorous road accident.)

The great majority of us lead a far more comfortable existence than at any previous stage in history. Things that were beyond the reach of the super-rich sixty years ago are standard for most people now. Even our children have mobile phones. We are all constantly entertained in ways of our own choosing, we scarcely have to wait for anything we want, and we expect to have holidays in the warmest and most distant places.

In the world at large, more people live in abject poverty than ever before, yet the poor now form a noticeably smaller proportion of the human race. When, at any previous time in human existence, could anyone even have suggested staging a campaign to Make Poverty History? That has happened in our time; and, if we were only prepared to make some fairly basic sacrifices, we might actually achieve it.

But above all, we who live in the wealthy countries of the world have come to expect that our lives will be peaceful: something that no other generation in human history could have considered. There are fewer full-scale wars going on now than at any time since 1945. It is true that Tony Blair, during his ten years in office, involved Britain in more wars than any prime minister for forty years. But there were only four of them, and by the standards of the twentieth century they were mostly small affairs, in faraway countries of which most people knew little. By the start of 2007 the so-called War on Terror, supposedly the great issue of our time, had been quietly put to one side, and even George W. Bush's White House decided not to mention the phrase in public any more. The police and the intelligence services took the leading role in countering terrorism, and the soldiers concentrated on trying to shore up the governments which the Americans and British had created in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Altogether, living in Britain after the end of the Second World War was rather like living in Queen Victoria's reign: great and

growing wealth at home, small wars abroad, and occasional outbursts of terrorist violence which achieved nothing.

It is only human nature, of course, to assume that we can go on like this indefinitely. British people thought, right up to the day in July 1914 when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was murdered by a Serbian extremist, that life would simply continue as before. Five years earlier, the leading political theorist Norman Angell – his full name was Ralph Norman Angell Lane, and he was later knighted and awarded the Nobel Peace prize – had published a huge best-seller called *Europe's Optical Illusion*, later issued in the US as *The Great Illusion*. The cineaste Jean Renoir borrowed the book's title for his magnificent film. Angell argued that the international economy meant that war had become entirely futile, and was virtually unthinkable between civilized nations. He didn't quite say that war had become impossible, but that was the comfortable impression most people drew from it; which is why they bought his book in such numbers.

Nor was this the first time that it was possible to believe in the inevitability of peace. Just over a century earlier, in 1792, William Pitt the Younger, who was usually a remarkably sensible politician, told the House of Commons, 'There never was a time when, from the situation, we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace.' The words were only just spoken when the execution of King Louis XVI took place. The war which broke out with France was to last, on and off, for twenty-three years.

Imagining anything radically different from our comfortable, peaceful existence is really hard. It was well into the start of 1940 before people in Britain or France could be persuaded to take the war with Nazi Germany seriously. Human beings have always had a tendency to assume that everything will continue pretty much as usual; we don't trouble to envision anything else. As I write this, western Europe has experienced sixty-two years of unbroken peace and prosperity. The only time such a thing has ever happened before were the eighty-four years of peace and prosperity which the Roman empire enjoyed from 96 to 180, under the emperors Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Edward Gibbon famously wrote of this period,

> If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.

Unfortunately, Commodus turned out to be a disgustingly bad ruler, a man constructed along the lines of Uday Hussein, Saddam's son. Rome's decline, once started in earnest as a result of his rule, never really stopped until the empire itself collapsed, more than two hundred years later. Contrary to popular belief, prosperity and good governance aren't inevitable: they have to be worked at.

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In 2000 I wrote a book called *A Mad World, My Masters*, which was a series of traveller's tales. This new book of mine is slightly different; I think of it more as a book of tales by a traveller. You may think that a pretty pointless distinction to make, and I agree that it probably doesn't matter very much; but I didn't want the stories to be largely unrelated this time, as they were before. I wanted this to be a book with attitude.

So there is a kind of theme to it. Often it will be so faint that it will be hard, maybe even impossible, to detect; but to my mind it's there, all the same. I have tried to create a kind of mosaic of our strange world in recent years: wonderful, appalling, immensely sad, uplifting, depressing, optimistic, stupid, full of imagination and creativity and destructiveness, and heavily under threat. A continuing theme in the book is the war in Iraq, because for the past five years that has dominated my life. But other things have dominated it too: especially the birth in January 2006 of my son Rafe, which has changed me greatly.

Until a couple of decades ago, it was usual for authors to put a little tag from another writer on the title page of their books: the more highbrow the writer and the more obscure the tag, the better: *Bread was his lust, and pain his glory – Rilke*; you know the sort of thing. Graham Greene used to go in for it, perhaps because he found it funny. Now, though, the habit has gone out of fashion, just as hand-drawn illustrations have gone out of fashion and seem

distinctly unserious; though if they were good enough for Dickens, Tolstoy and Evelyn Waugh I don't see why the rest of us shouldn't at least consider them.

So there is no quotation on the title page of this book, largely because like many writers I'm scared of seeming unmodish; but if I had decided to put one there, it would probably have been from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: the moment when the young shepherd who has just discovered an abandoned baby bumps into his elderly father, who has just witnessed a savage death. 'Now bless thyself,' he says: 'thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born.'

This is a book about death and about new life, about hope as well as gloom and despair. We have to find our own balance between these things, it seems to me, if we are to have any real understanding of our world and our nature as human beings.

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One night recently, as I lay in a large, comfortable bed in room 709 at the Plaza Hotel, Buenos Aires, I dreamed I was being bombed.

The explosions seemed to go on forever, and each time I thought, The next one's bound to get me. My head seemed as vulnerable as an eggshell. I covered it with my arms, and pressed myself into a gutter in the road, lying close to the kerb for protection. As I lay there I kept apologizing: sometimes to my wife, sometimes to my baby son, sometimes to an indistinct group of people. They all seemed to be standing over me, completely unaffected by the bombs, watching and criticizing what I was doing. Then the bombing turned into small-arms fire, and I woke up gasping, still saying sorry. And after a few minutes, back in the peaceful, sunny world of Argentina, I ordered some tea and croissants and sat down at my computer to write this.

I've never had the dream before, but it was scarcely surprising that I should have had it now. The date was the 6th of April: four years to the day since a group of us had been bombed by an American plane in northern Iraq. I had spent much of the previous evening talking over the whole thing with someone who was with me at the time: Oggy Boytchev, the BBC producer in overall charge of our northern Iraq operation. Oggy now works with me full time,

and over a late Buenos Aires dinner in a delightful fish restaurant we bored our companion, the cameraman Nick Woolley, by going over it all yet again.

Oggy is quick-minded and lively and cultivated, the kind of person who knows instinctively what is going on in the cultural and political life of the country, and has seen the latest plays. He grew up in communist Bulgaria and escaped to London and the BBC in the 1980s. Wherever he is, he looks as though he comes from somewhere else. In Russia he looks like someone from the Caucasus; in London people take him for an Italian; in Iran they think he's a Turk. In fact he is that most British of men, a foreigner by origin who is utterly integrated into British life – more so than most Brits.

Nick is also quintessentially British, but a native Yorkshireman through and through. Not the cloth-cap-and-ferret Yorkshireman of a previous age, but tall, funny, easy and equable. As a child, he was taken to a public show and saw a television cameraman filming it. At that moment he decided to become a cameraman himself, and the dream came true.

Nick remains entirely calm in the worst situations; Oggy and I have sat beside him in Baghdad with fifteen minutes to go before we have to feed our report for that night's news on the satellite, and neither of us has realized that the incessant power cuts have caused Nick's editing machine to seize up. And when it starts working again, he shows no sign whatever of relief. He is the steadiest person imaginable.

Neither of these men, so different from each other in background, physical appearance and approach, ever says no to a difficult assignment; neither of them complains or blames me when things go wrong; neither of them starts to work out ways of going home early.

This evening, over dinner in the Buenos Aires fish restaurant, Oggy and I talked about the contrast between the extraordinary escapes we all had, and the dreadful death of our translator, Kamaran; not to mention the seventeen other Iraqi Kurds who were killed in front of our eyes. Oggy wasn't with us when the disaster happened, though he got to the scene of it very quickly afterwards.

We talked for the thousandth time of how our colleague, Tom Giles, had been walking straight towards the spot where the bomb

landed, then turned away because his mother rang his mobile phone to wish him a happy birthday and so saved his life. We praised the courage and firmness under fire of our security adviser, Craig Summers, who rescued all our luggage from our burning car. We talked in affectionate terms about Dragan Petrovic, who had come with us to northern Iraq even though his wife had been about to give birth, and who had staggered across after the bomb landed to pick me up and pull me to safety, because he thought another one might hit us at any moment. And we talked about the remarkable pictures our cameramen had got of it all.

Then, in the way of these things, we ordered three glasses of some fiery white spirit and a small dish of *dulce de leche* to share between us, and started talking about something else.

So it was understandable that I should have had my nightmare that night. Yet even so it came as a complete surprise. After four years, I thought I had come to terms with the bombing and its terrible aftermath, the bodies burning, the eviscerated man stumbling around, the brains lying on the ground. But I suppose you never do sort these things out entirely, and they attract other, unrelated memories, like the rail of a sunken ship attracts coral.

In my dream I lay in a gutter, sheltering from the bombs. The only time I have taken shelter in a gutter was in June 1989, during the massacre in Tiananmen Square. I could take you now to the place in Chang'an Avenue where I threw myself down that night; and I promise you, a kerbstone gives remarkably little cover from bullets. Perhaps that, rather than the bombing, was what disturbed my sleep.

But the apologizing was completely up to date. The fact that I have had a baby son at the advanced age of sixty-two is one that the professional busybodies of Fleet Street have discussed often and sometimes condemned roundly. Like the inquisitive neighbour who twitches the curtains and watches your comings and goings with disapproval, the columnists of Britain's wonderful newspapers have also criticized the fact that I continue to work in places like Iraq and Afghanistan; as though any of it is their business. I suppose this sort of thing must have found its way into the area of the mind at which dreams and nightmares are formed.

Much of my life is spent in the sordid places of the earth; the

Plaza Hotel in Buenos Aires being one of the rare and very welcome exceptions. Nowadays, usually with my two colleagues Oggy and Nick, I travel to Baghdad every six weeks or so, and to all sorts of other countries in between. Going there is interesting, it is worthwhile, and it means I can talk with some authority about Iraq when I have to. But what, of course, the newspaper columnists have spotted is that I enjoy it, in a masochistic sort of way; and as a result they condemn it. It's true that these are often the most interesting places to visit; what would there be to talk about, after all, if I just went backwards and forwards to Geneva, or Chicago, or Dubai? Or, God help us, if I stayed at the BBC's soulless offices at Shepherd's Bush?

So I carry on travelling; and because I travel for news, my journeys often take me to the rougher kind of place. But I suppose, if I were to be really honest (and what's the point of writing a book if you can't be honest in it?), I suppose I feel nowadays that it's a way of fending off the approach of old age. Maybe, too, I want to demonstrate that it's perfectly possible to be over sixty, with white hair and a lived-in face, and still be immensely active. Others of my kind of age, I can see, feel the same impulsion: Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, the yachtsman, for instance, or the explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, a friend after whom my wife and I named our newly arrived son. (Soon, though, we cut his name down to Rafe, because Ranulph seemed a little daunting for someone only eighteen inches long.)

This attitude to age is unquestionably something to do with our generation. We are the ones who reached adulthood in the 1960s, and we were taught then to regard ourselves as the pinnacle of human civilization. Now that we are moving from late middle age towards eventual old age, I suppose we find it hard to cede that position to others. And at the same time each of us seems to want to send out a message, not just about ourselves but about others: that it isn't necessary to start the long decline into inactivity and irrelevance just because you've notched up more than three-score.

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Sometimes it seems there are so many threats to our life and prosperity that it's hard to choose which of them to concentrate on. Human existence is becoming a little like one of those video games

where you are a soldier dodging down endless corridors with some ludicrously large weapon in your hands, while enemies of every conceivable description jump out at you from all sides. The proliferation of nuclear weapons, not always in the safest hands; the enormous weight of First World debt; the rise of China, the return of Russia, the lack of strength in Europe and the obvious decline of America; grotesque overpopulation; the terrifying consequences of global warming; each of these things can destroy the delicate balance of our lives. But perhaps our civilization won't be destroyed by bankruptcy or terrorism or vicious dictators, but by a simple sneeze. Disease is a greater threat to our civilization than anything else, including global warming.

If some particularly virulent disease were to attach itself to the influenza virus and mutate, then we could see an enormous death toll in our crowded cities. Over the centuries, nature does occasionally seem to feel the weight of humanity on its shoulders, and shrug – with the most terrible consequences. The loss of life across Europe during the Black Death, from 1348 to the early 1350s, may have been as high as half the entire population. The influenza pandemic which swept across the exhausted world in 1918 and 1919, apparently gaining its huge strength among the soldiers in the trenches, killed between twenty and forty million people – many times more than died in the First World War itself. Quick, concerted action stopped the spread of the SARS virus after it appeared in November 2002, and only 774 people died of it. But such viruses show a remarkable cunning, and another outbreak with different causes might be harder to stop. The British government regards the threat from disease as greater than that from any other cause, including terrorism; and it believes that if there were a major pandemic like the influenza of 1918–19, anything up to 700,000 people might die in Britain alone.

But even if we manage to avoid some catastrophic outbreak of disease, we may simply experience the kind of slow decline which destroyed the Roman empire: corruption and weak government at home, coupled with the immense pressure from the poor, huddled masses outside our boundaries, whose homes are threatened or destroyed by the ecological disaster which our own carelessness has created.

This must be a serious possibility. Thomas Malthus may have got it wrong back in 1798 when he wrote his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, arguing that there were simply too many people on the planet for the amount of food they could produce. But now that there are six billion of us, and our unchecked activities have threatened the amount of land available for the growing of food, maybe we should re-read Malthus with a bit more sympathy.

We have, of course, fouled our own nest pretty comprehensively. The time when it was possible for sensible, unbiased people to wonder whether global warming was really happening, or whether the obvious changes in the world's climate were just a passing phase, has passed. Even in 1997 the evidence was thoroughly convincing, but only a few governments wanted to know about it. Today you have to be a committed contrarian to deny that there is a serious threat – or else, like the governments of the United States, India, China and others, you have to have a very clear short-term vested interest in claiming that it doesn't really matter too much, and that other, more immediate concerns are more important.

Even now, the proof is still not total. The best report so far was issued in several parts in 2007 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which included officials from the United Nations and governments around the world, and a large gathering of independent scientists. The scientific work which the IPCC's scientists reviewed included nearly thirty thousand pieces of data on physical and biological changes in the natural world, and found that 89 per cent of them were consistent with the idea that the world was heating up. The rise was, the report said (after much haggling over the wording, as a result of the reluctance of the Americans, Indians and Chinese), at least 90 per cent likely to be due to man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

Perhaps some of the scientists' rhetoric about the dangers of global warming is exaggerated; you have to scare people thoroughly if you are going to make them ignore their short-term interests and change the way they behave. But it smacks of wilfulness nowadays to argue that the evidence is not compelling.

Some of the worst possibilities can be averted if the world takes action by about 2015. But even maximum intervention and change, if all governments embraced it here and now (which they won't),

will not prevent some of the devastating effects of global warming. The glaciers and polar ice-caps will continue to melt, at a much faster rate than we originally thought, and the result will be higher sea-levels, more flooding, and even more pressure on the existing land.

Higher sea-levels will ensure that poverty increases, rather than decreases, and greater poverty will mean less population control; which, as Robert Malthus correctly noted, is the only way of preventing disaster. By 2035, on present trends, there will be 8.5 billion people in world, and 98 per cent of them will be in the less developed countries. Poverty and faster population growth, acting upon each other, will bring more instability and extremism. The population of the Middle East, already the most unstable part of the world, is expected to grow by 132 per cent by 2035. Saudi Arabia, once an under-populated, docile country, has seen its population grow from seven million in 1980 to twenty-seven million by 2005. There is a clear undercurrent there of violence and anger.

To protect itself from unrest and terrorism, the Western world could well find itself using its technological advantages in ways which would be completely unacceptable at present. Faced with an overwhelming threat to their existence, people might empower their governments to take all sorts of violent and aggressive steps. In thirty years' time, a multitude of new and devastating weapons will be available to the advanced governments of the world. Many will be based in space, and neutron technology can produce weapons which will destroy all human life in a city at the touch of a button, yet do no damage to its buildings or structures.

You could imagine that by 2048, a century after George Orwell wrote *1984*, three or more large national blocs might well live in a state of complete mutual hostility, each capable of destroying the others yet held back by fear of the consequences, just as his Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia were. To guard against terrorist infiltration, the different blocs would bar their borders against travellers and infiltrators. Holidays or business visits outside the blocs would be a long-distant memory. So would be a liberal approach to human rights. Superstates like these would maintain themselves in power by whipping up nationalist scares, fear of foreigners, and hysteria.

Monster cities will have swallowed up much of the national

territory. Immense *favelas* and shanty towns, greater than anything on earth at present, will surround them. These supercities, unpoliced, unprovided for, deprived of basic decency and self-respect, will be an immense source of rage and violence. A new class warfare will exist, along roughly Marxist lines, with the have-nots terrorizing the haves and forcing them to adopt ever-nastier forms of self-protection.

As for the natural world, it would be cleared of much of its animal, bird, insect and plant life. Tigers, gorillas, orang-utans, the black rhinoceros, the Amur leopard and more than a thousand other species of mammals will have ceased to exist in the wild. One in eight species of bird will have vanished. So will ten thousand species of flora. The dawns will be largely silent, the forest floors and meadows bare of everything except the most common plants.

Whatever is still rich and rare about our world will be gone, and we will have to go to zoos and special parks to have any idea of what we have driven out and destroyed. The earth is already in the grip of a mass extinction. In the normal way, species come and go all the time; but the present process is anything from a hundred to a thousand times worse than the natural 'background' level of disappearance.

Of course, a great deal of this could have been written twenty-five years ago, and it would all have been true: not quite in the way it looks on the printed page, perhaps, but in aggregate. Supercities already exist. If you travel twenty or thirty miles out from the centre of Lima, for instance, through the urban sprawl, you will come to the newest slums of all, on the very edges of the city. They spring up on the bare desert floor without water or sewerage or transport or schools, filled with the violent and the ignorant and the vengeful. The only thing these people possess apart from a few belongings is the vote, and demagogues of the left and right depend upon them for their sudden rise and angry policies.

Class war between the destitute and the moderately wealthy already exists in South Africa today, and only the South African government refuses to acknowledge it. In 2006 there were hundreds of violent attacks each day, in which an average of fifty people were killed. South Africa, a delightful country in so many ways, and an

example to the rest of the world in terms of political decency and reconciliation, is one of the three most violent nations on earth.

Colombia is another, with its political instability and its cocaine wars; Iraq, its balance and stability as a nation hopelessly compromised by the American and British invasion of 2003, is the third. But Colombia and Iraq are special cases; South Africa is not. Apartheid did terrible damage to its basic moral structure, and population growth along the lines of the Middle East and elsewhere has given birth to a new culture of total violence and an almost complete lack of compunction.

'He was looking into my eyes all the time,' said a Nigerian woman in Johannesburg, describing the moment when an armed robber broke into her house. 'He put his gun against my baby's head and watched my face as he pulled the trigger.'

This was murder for its own sake: murder that had nothing to do with stealing money, or getting revenge for the injustices of apartheid.

And what about the xenophobic states which Orwell predicted in *1984*, frightened and angry about the outside world, and determined to control the lives of their citizens? Well, we saw a little of that in the United States after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Orwell would have recognized the PATRIOT Act as a perfect example of Newspeak. A few brave journalists and writers stayed firm against the general hysteria in America and ran the risk of being branded as unpatriotic – 'traitors', more than one reporter on Rupert Murdoch's Fox News called them. Some of this awkward squad, whose members included Gore Vidal, Graydon Carter and Lewis Lapham, noted at the time that scarcely any of the members of Congress who voted for the PATRIOT Act, Democrats as well as President George W. Bush's Republicans, actually had the time or the inclination to read through the wording of the act before voting it into law.

So we are not heading towards this disturbing future from a clean start. We have already shown our capacity for mindless violence, and our vulnerability to the hysteria of resentment. We have done great damage to ourselves and our environment, and the chances are that this damage will grow worse.

Yet it is important to try to keep a sense of balance about it all. People in Peru and Saudi Arabia and South Africa can live perfectly decent, law-abiding, happy lives, without being touched by violence or extremism. We may well lose some of the most beautiful and interesting animals and birds on the planet, yet we have already lost a great deal and still find our natural world fascinating and complex. In spite of our fears, we travel more now than we have ever done before, and London has resumed its old place as the world's capital city because it has taken in more immigrants from every part of the globe, just as New York did before it.

Past generations would have been appalled by the crudity and brashness and violence of our times, but we take it all for granted and would simply like to damp down some of the less attractive consequences. We certainly wouldn't want to go back in time and re-experience Edwardian medicine, or 1930s class-consciousness, or 1950s holidays.

To our grandparents and great-grandparents we would seem unbearably aggressive, godless and uncultured. Yet we rather like our world, and compare it very favourably indeed with the past, about which we tend to be critical and patronizing. Despite our dreadful reality TV, our coarseness of language and action, our celebrity-worship, our tabloids and our violence, we feel ourselves to be more advanced than any of the generations of the past, and their snobbery and racism and dreariness are unbearable to us.

The lesson, I suppose, is that human beings can get used to anything, and quickly make themselves comfortable with it as a result. Our adaptability is one of the main reasons for the fact that we have come dangerously close to destroying our planet; but it also helps us, not just to keep going, but to enjoy ourselves.

At the end of this book of stories, if you manage to get that far, I will put a rather different case from the one I have so far outlined. Countries, it seems to me, find their own balance, and what might seem hellish and unlivable to one generation is natural and sensible and logical to another. There is no reason for us to slash our wrists quite yet. Just as the future will seem better in some respects, it will also be intolerably dreadful by our standards. And yet the people

who inhabit it will look back on us – *us!* – as dull, rather absurd primitives.

In the meantime, although we have every reason to be anxious about the future, our basic common sense (another of our protective, highly successful qualities) will keep most of us from committing mass suicide. We will endure the changes ahead with remarkable calmness, continuing to adapt our lives to the changes around us. There will be a few who will become over-excited along headless-chicken lines. During the late 1970s a couple in Canada became convinced that all-out thermonuclear war was inevitable, and that North America would be incinerated. So they took their children, uprooted themselves from their comfortable home and fled to the farthest and safest part of the earth in order to escape the dreadful certainty of war.

At the end of 1981, they arrived in the Falkland Islands. Four months later, the Argentines invaded.

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Recently my wife Dee and I came back to live in London after a long and highly enjoyable time in Ireland. Leaving our flat in the outskirts of Dublin was a sad business. Behind us, the electronic security gates (to which everyone in the village seemed to know the code) juddered and squeaked to a close. We looked at each other: after years of living beside the sea in the village of Dalkey, we were leaving. The last couple of suitcases, containing everything from a tasteless commemoration mug from the handover of Hong Kong to an odd volume of Thomas Moore's poems, filled the back seat.

I shoved the car into gear, and we swung off for the last time down the hill to Bullock Harbour, to Dun Laoghaire, to the airport and thence to London. We would never again sit on the rocks with a glass of champagne in our hands, looking out across the placid waters of Dublin Bay to Howth Head, or lie in bed at night listening to the wind howling round the eaves, or walk through the quiet village to get the papers on a Sunday morning, or sit drinking a pint of something warm and bitter in the bantering conversation and thick atmosphere of Finnegan's pub: still, I think, the finest pub I have ever come across.