

The Dying Problem

I can't remember the last time I wished someone a happy birthday.

I suppose by the looks of it, this was just a start to the beginning of the end, or rather, means to an end. That's what we all thought at first. I guess the spark that ignited it all was the shooting at Columbine High School on 4/20/1999. Just a couple of madmen with neurotic agendas, an infamous tragedy isolated in time, or so we believed. It was only a few years later that events like this became prevalent in the news. Was this due to the reaction of the initial crime, a new fad of murder to occupy the times and minds of a young, new millennium? We didn't know it yet, but this was no fad. Fads come and go. This was a *trend*.

The next big one was Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT on 12/14/2012. It was no longer a surprise to turn on your television and hear about the latest school shooting on the evening news. Kids killing kids. It was an epidemic. Most attributed it to attention seeking lunatics or mental illness. We had no idea back then that these lone gunman actually had a leg up on the rest of us. They knew something we didn't. They knew about the dying problem.

Back in those days, the killings were like natural disasters; no stopping what the universe had in store, like fate. The scientists called it "natural selection", the religious called it "God's will". The politicians called it "tax deductible". Nature, fate, and watching the world turn. There's no better solution to a mystery like death than just simply packing it in and shrugging your shoulders. Maybe a few gave it that old college try, but in the grand scheme of things, we all kind of accepted that hey, when you die, you die. End of discussion.

And then the year 2020 happened. The Coronavirus. It is still a bookmark in our history books today. The War on Death. Like the domestic wars of the past few decades, the War on Death along with the War on Drugs and the War on Terror, seemed equally likely if not less likely to succeed. Some guy in some city in some market in China allegedly ate a bat. A bat. That was the best we got. The origins were never made clear. Before you know it, all of China had this deadly virus. One month later, the whole world. It was a virus so potent and so unexpected that it killed over 100,000 people in its first three months. The largest demographic of victims were racial minorities and those that were immuno-deficient. In other words, those that had the least money, the least privilege, and required the most medical attention to survive. Like we'd agreed though, this was just nature right? When you die, you die. End of discussion. This event marked the turning point in what we considered "natural". Reports rapidly surfaced about the vague origins of this "Bubonic Plague-like" pandemic. At that point, we had dismissed them as wild conspiracy theories. That was a mistake.

In 2022, after two years of being plagued by the largest viral pandemic in human history, a group came forward to accept responsibility. They called themselves the Cull for the Overpopulation of the Planet Service (COPS). They were an organization that began in the United States that admitted to genetically engineering the virus and grew it artificially in a lab in the Wuhan Province of China. Their goal: global population control. For a short while, they'd succeeded.

The COPS went down in the history books as a global terrorist cell. A group of racists and bigots that sought to eradicate portions of the population that they felt endangered their way of life and their economy. They hadn't accounted for the effects of what they had caused

though. A global lockdown remained in place over the two year span to prevent the spread of the virus. Well what do humans do when they're cooped up and bored?

Reproduce. Repopulate. Repeat.

The subsequent boom of births was given the generational nickname "Coronials", as they were conceived during the quarantine of the Coronavirus. Prior to this phenomenon, the Baby Boomer generation was the second largest generation at 73 million people, following the end of World War II. They produced then the largest generation, the Millennials, at 76 million people. The Coronial generation shattered each of these prior feats with a total population of 98 million people. Unintentionally, the COPS had engineered a larger overpopulation than they had begun with. This is where our civilization derailed.

The Coronials were not only the largest generation, making up a vast majority of people in the job markets, but also an astoundingly intelligent one. Born and raised in the age of a global pandemic, this group would go on to solve the quandaries and intricacies of the world's greatest afflictions. In 2032, a headline: "*Coronial Scientists Get Ahead of Alzheimer's!*" In 2049, from the New York Times, "*Coronials Cure Cancer!*" Finally, in the year 2105, "*Coronial Woman Defeats Death!*" The cure for fate: two pills and a glass of OJ.

It was on 3/19/2198 that the first headline of its kind broke the news almost 200 years after the Columbine High School shootings: "*World Reaches Maximum Capacity at 10,586,392,444!*" This is where it all changed, where *we* all changed.

Consider this: When you fill up a glass with water, one might think it full at $\frac{3}{4}$ filled. Another might find it full when there is but a small lip between the water's surface and the rim of the glass. As it turns out, water can capably fill a tad beyond that rim. It forms somewhat of a dome or bubble hovering delicately atop the glass edge. In our instance, this

phenomenon occurred at the number 10,586,392,444th person. When one more droplet is added to that full glass. *Splash!* The tension breaks.

Believe it or not, it actually took scientists many months to decipher why the global population had leveled out so evenly. No census, no graph, nothing appeared to show an increase beyond that number 10,586,392,444. Had people stopped reproducing? Were the numbers off? Unfortunately, the numbers were correct. What's more, they didn't decrease either.

On 12/24/2199, we cracked the case. The population remained stagnant. Modern medicine had progressed to the point that death no longer occurred. At first, we rejoiced. The Washington Post: "*Hartford Hospital Reports No Deaths This March!*" The Baltimore Sun: "*Murder Rates Drop To Zero for First Time in Recorded History!*" Too much good news can be a bad thing though. Fox News headline: "*Hospital Workers Laid off Due to Over Staffing*". Buzzfeed: "*Why are Funeral Homes Going Belly Up?*" After all of the signs, it was an article by Time Magazine that really shook the globe to its core, a story that caused head scratching to cease: "*Is Anyone Out There Pregnant? Please Stand Up.*" As it happened, nobody stood up. Nobody died and nobody was born. We had reached *equilibrium*.

Up until this point in history, medical trials were commonly practiced on animals before human testing. In this case, that method was not a viable option. Gunshot wounds, suicide, severe disembodiment and decapitation were all medically reversible and revivable. Doctors of this generation were forced to try something they had never been trained to practice, DNR, or Do Not Resuscitate.

It was tricky at first to find a willing volunteer. Most citizens were happily over 90 years old and thriving. Elementary schools were relatively empty if not completely barren.

Help came in the form of a Coronal named Claire Perdue-Reynolds, a 176 year old widowed librarian who had recently finished reading every book in her public library. Her husband, Eric Reynolds had died in a plane crash years before the reviving medicines had come about. For the first time in years, a lethal injection was administered and viewed over a live television broadcast. Her last words were etched into a marker by the library in which she had once worked, "An unfinished book should be renewed; but if continuously reread, will be overdue." Hours later, a phone call came in to the hospital where Perdue-Reynolds had died. It was a woman by the name of Adeline E. Danville in Nantes, France. She was pregnant. Sure enough, nine months later, Adeline gave birth to a healthy baby boy and the population cap was met once again. No more pregnancies or deaths happened in the months leading up to baby Danville's birth. This sparked conversation around the globe as to how to proceed further with the human race. The first talking point thrown out to the masses was to put an age cap on society whereby anyone over the age of 200 must commit suicide. Other voices then protested that the elderly and successful were not to blame and that those who contribute the least to society should be sacrificed. With this, a large wave of citizens rioted and called for "Death to the poor!" Others chanted, "Death to prisoners!" The public outcry led to various factions targeting jails and homeless shelters with homemade bombs and riddling prison yards with bullets via drive by shootings during outdoor recreation hours. As the killings continued, births began to sprout up again. With this came new protests and new conducts of terror.

In the year 1970, a historic Supreme Court case called Roe v. Wade protected the rights and liberties of expecting mothers to have abortions. This sparked a divide between the two sides of the issue known as the Pro-Life movement and the Pro-Choice movement,

arguing for the unborn child's rights and the mother's rights respectively. In the year 2205, a noticeable shift was made in the rival campaigns. Although Pro-Life and Pro-Choice still remained prevalent, the awakening of a new campaign rose to the forefront, Pro-Death. The Pro-Death group argued that no new children were necessary anymore. They had created immortality so why reteach an unsubstantial life when those that had earned their immortality could now bask in their successes? Maternity wards became targets along with the shelters and prisons. Even those who didn't believe in the Pro-Death movement were still happy to take part in the "Maternity Massacres" as they became known by; because now that there was a publicized population cap, everyone on Earth knew the margins that could be filled, and they wanted *their* children to be the ones to make the cut. Hospitals could not keep pace with the surge of murder that suddenly sprung up around the globe, nevertheless the population remained steady at its cap by those anxiously waiting to see the population ticker drop a point or two for the chance to reproduce.

The changes in global society changed rapidly. Neighborhood terrorism was not something that could be maintained over a long period of time. Instead, it evolved into groups like the Sacrificial Saints and the Drop Dead Dahlias. The Sacrificial Saints were an altruistic collective. They tended to be on the older side but occasionally a young man or woman would be in the mix as well. They were a group that saw their purpose as a means to the future of humanity. Often times, they would parade through the streets or along busy highways making a large spectacle of themselves. Most often they were dressed in white robes and wore nooses as they marched. Once their destination was reached, a ceremony was performed and would conclude with a group suicide. It was usually a public hanging but you would also see group flights off of high buildings or even firing squads. Sometimes it was a

collections of tens of people, other times hundreds would march proudly to their deaths. This organization was heralded as heroic by most of society.

The Drop Dead Dahlias were more of a product of the COPS group mentality. They were a mostly female based group that centered their beliefs on the hatred of those that valued their immortality over the prospects of new life. They launched many bombings and attacks on old folks' homes, concert venues, and churches, mainly in the form of suicide vests and Zyklon B, the lethal pesticide used in gas chambers during the Holocaust of 1941-1945. Their name today is still infamous, though they garnered massive support from those that silently prayed for the grossly effective results of their attacks.

The dying problem somewhat straightened itself out in the year 2211 with the cultural birth of "Fashionable Suicide". This new norm came in the form of what were called, "Suicide Shops". These shops were often outfitted with firearms, nooses, razorblades, various types of pills, carbon monoxide canisters, etc. The societal craze became, *how will you kill yourself and why is death important to you?* It was as if a social media obsession had erupted that made death "cool and heroic", rather than "tragic and heartbreaking". Whatever this new fad was, it was working. The shops even included vast selections of stationery and prewritten suicide notes like demented Hallmark cards. Unfortunately, we once again noted what we believed at the time to be a fad, was in fact a trend.

People threw all that they had into planning the perfect deaths for themselves, so much so that they had forgotten about the lives they'd wanted to create in the process. Thousands of children died of neglect in the coming years. It was not uncommon to find newborn babies lying at the bottom of dumpsters or floating down rivers in baskets like an old Bible story. Folks stopped working and stopped feeding their families. They became

caught up in the rush to the finish line. Before we could really reaffirm our grip on the world, it was too late. No one was meticulously watching the population numbers anymore. In fact, it was quite the opposite. *How many tick marks could be subtracted from that number at once?* It became a challenge to some. *Subtract as many as you could to secure a wealth of opportunity for the next generation.* But nobody stuck around to watch over that next generation...

My name is Richard Perdue and the current date of my writing this is 4/20/2399. It is my 400th birthday and also the 400th anniversary of that damned shooting at Columbine High School. It has been so long since I've had a happy birthday, but I suppose this would be the one to celebrate. The current population is 208 and I am the last individual alive above 7 years of age. I apologize to the generation that I leave behind, and more so to the one I let slip away. Today is my death day. I bequeath to you a fresh start. Today, I will see my daughter again. I hope to hear all about those books she read.

Long overdue,

Richard I. Purdue