Bad Influences

by

Emma Segar

This version of Bad Influences has been adapted for the electronic or printed page from the original version at http://badinfluences.org.uk.

It is submitted on CD as a record of the blog fiction that forms the major part of the thesis, though it is not the version that was examined. The original blog fiction, as it appears at the website above, is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Edge Hill University. This website has been accepted by the British Library for preservation in the UK Web Archive (http://www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/). Until such time as it is archived, it will remain active at http://badinfluences.org.uk.

Submitted July 2016
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A note on how to read this e-book:

One of the major conclusions of the PhD thesis for which *Bad Influences* was written is that blog fiction is a distinct fictional form, whose primary characteristic is that it is published on a blog. This e-book is, therefore, not a blog fiction. You can’t subscribe to the feeds, experience the story in real-time or interact with the characters as you could have if you had read the live version. You can’t even like a post with your Wordpress ID, share it on Facebook, propagate the memes or try the quizzes, unless you go to [http://badinfluences.org.uk](http://badinfluences.org.uk) and read the story in its archived form.

However, you can read this on your e-reader, or even the printed page, which is great! You’ll be experiencing the story in a new way, as yet untried. It wasn’t what I intended when I wrote it, but I hope you’ll enjoy it and let me know how it worked for you. I have tried to retain a few of the features that were present in the blogs, and you will even see one or two features of the live story that are no longer apparent in the archive, such as the points at which character avatars and web banners changed.

I have even managed to give the e-book at least one or two possible reading options. If you go through this book page by page, not following any of the links, you will read the blog entries in the order they were posted, starting at the chronologically earliest, ending at the latest. However, if you click “next” or “previous” after an entry, you will go to the next or previous entry on that character’s blog. If you click on a character’s avatar in a comment they have posted on another entry, you will go to that character’s profile page, which will contain a hyperlinked, chronological index of their posts. You can use these links to read each character’s blog one at a time, or to skip between them as you choose.

The comments remain in their threads at the end of each entry. The ones whose character avatars have a cracked-effect border were written by me. Any without this border were written by the participants listed in the acknowledgements. Whichever way you read, you will find some comments to be out of sync with the timeline you’re following. Sometimes characters went back and commented on old threads even after posting new entries. There are no spoiler warnings or pointers to relevant entries.
There are causes and effects, and ongoing plotlines. You can read these in any order you want to, and I’d love to hear about how that worked out for you.

Enjoy!

Emma Segar

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Acknowledgements

As I have said on both the original Bad Influences site and my thesis dissertation, I’m hugely indebted to my research supervisors, Ailsa Cox and Peter Wright, for their patience, persistence, encouragement, feedback and extended deadlines.

I am also grateful for the artistic talents of Lia Segar and Arthur Goodman. Lia is a Brighton-based artist who trained in Fine Art at Camberwell. Arthur has been drawing comics for fifteen years, which regularly appear in small press publications. You can see more of Arthur’s work on his website Favourite Crayon (http://www.favouritecrayon.co.uk/).

Finally, thanks to the participants whose comments appear in this version. I Parsons and jackdandelion (whose true identities I still don’t know) made some small contributions to the comments on the early entries, and Fiona Gregory’s participation became such an essential element of the story that I’ve called her the Fifth Bad Influence. It is good to know that there are people out there who throw themselves into interactive fiction with so much skill and enthusiasm. It gives me hope that the apocalypse – however it happens – will be blogged, and perhaps as things fall apart, some of us will be brought together.
Bad Influences

The e-book of the blog fiction

by

Emma Pooka
Bright Horizons

The ground, the sky and the things between

Next →

Chicken Flu outbreak in Vietnam

Posted on January 5, 2026

I am the first posting to my blog! Where is everybody from the summer? You are all very slow, just like getting ready for the forest transect in the morning! ;-

Everybody hears the news from Vietnam? So scary to think of so much illness very close to where we had our camp. I hope the people we meet in Tuyen Quang are healthy. I am afraid for the small farm villages – even if they have no disease, they will lose all their chickens. I think about our chickens in the camp, how we like to feed them scraps, and they fly into the tree at night, and Elaine swears very loud and didn’t believe they can fly! I didn’t want to eat them at the end, they are part of the group.

I want to send some money to the family of the children who take our leftover food for the animals and who bring us the “special” rice wine, but I do not know how to send this to them. I try to ask the office of the Extreme Research company in Beijing, and they only send me a message to say we are not in any danger from the Chicken Flu. Can anybody SkLMp their local office to find the information for me?

I am very busy the last few weeks with studying, and now preparing for Winter break soon. I will miss my new friends at Beida, but look forward very much to seeing my family and Xuining friends, and to celebrate the New Year and Spring Festival at home! It is not long after 1st January, so I begin with a meme for 2026: Tell me your three resolutions! Mine are 1) Paint a little every day 2) Keep writing my blog and 3) Go
outside every day and speak to another person, so I am not just working and blogging and going crazy! You see, without my Bad Influences, I am very good. I tag Elaine, Jack and Ash!

23 thoughts on “Chicken Flu outbreak in Vietnam”

Elaine on January 5, 2026 at 3:38 pm said:
Good to hear from you, Mei! Yeah, scary news about Vietnam – but we were way out in the mountains where there aren’t so many visitors, so they should be pretty safe there. I don’t do New Year’s resolutions, but since you’ve tagged me I’ll do a post explaining why. And don’t think you escape us Bad Influences that easily – we’re right here to distract you! Don’t go studying too hard, now, and remember to get blotto every weekend – it’s your duty as a student.

Mei on January 5, 2026 at 3:40 pm said:
I swear to my family who may read this blog, Elaine is very responsible!

Elaine on January 5, 2026 at 3:42 pm said:
Yeah, but responsible for what? ;) I don’t know what the youth of today are coming to with all this hard work and healthy exercise. Long as you’re having fun, sugar-snap.

AK Hailstorm on January 5, 2026 at 3:45 pm said:
Hey, Mei, Elaine, you’re here! Fucking kick-ass awesome! We’re gonna rock the W4 to the core! Destroy college!
I'll skim the office for you, Mei, but I doubt there's any way to get money to those people other than wiring it to the post office and hoping someone will give them the message next time they come down to the village. Extreme Research certainly won't be sending volunteers out there again in the near future. It might be better to just make a donation to one of the NGOs working out there – maybe Ben will know who? He was a volunteer or co-ordinator or something for Red Meds Cross Borders, wasn't he?

Or something! ;-) Hey guys – yeah, I’m still out there, but nowhere near Tuyen Quang. We’re dealing with the areas worst affected. It seems pretty well contained in Na Ham, so as long as it doesn’t spread as far as Hanoi the Northern provinces should be fairly safe. Great to see all you guys on here!

Hey guys! Yay, we’re all here! This is so peachy! xx!!Hugs!!xx

Hey, Mei – guess I’d better put something on here instead of just SkIMping you every 10 minutes! Missing you loads and longing for those moonlit nights on the mountain, with chickens roasting on the fire, potatoes roosting in the bamboo...no, wait...other way around.

Ah yes, days sitting under a leaky tarp, burning the leeches off our ankles...
And on the dry days, the flies...

And at night, the mosquitoes...

And the flour that made the special bread with extra protein.

But it wasn't all good. We had to trek through all that unspoilt scenery, too.

And drink all that homebrew rice spirit and cheap beer...

And sample Ash's foraged cuisine... it was hard work.

It was. Sometimes Jack and Mei disappeared into the forest all day with their sketchbooks...

And came back at dinnertime with one sketch! ;}
Ash on January 6, 2026 at 7:20 am said:

Punchline thief! ;-D

Sarah on January 14, 2026 at 7:30 pm said:

my dads all frettin but dont wanna hassle ya. gis the skinny, you sneezin like a chickin or wot :'(?

Kittyllama on January 14, 2026 at 7:34 pm said:

I just saw the newsnets – This is so scary!! Poor Mei! :-(

AK_Hailstorm on January 15, 2026 at 12:46 am said:

Man, this is so fucked!

Elaine on January 14, 2026 at 7:35 pm said:

Holy Gorgonzola, Sugar Snap – just caught the news. Hope you and yours aren't affected – sklMp me if you get a chance, K?

Jack on January 15, 2026 at 12:44 am said:

Hey Mei – been trying to SklMp you all day, but I don’t know if I’m getting through. Saw on the news what’s going down in China, just want to make sure you’re OK. Call me?

Next →
Not so resolute

Hey my macaroni cronies, welcome to page one of my shiny new blog! I haven’t done this shit since high school – hard to believe there’s people out there who actually want to read my scrambled brain-eggs, but it can’t be a total figment of my ego because I’ve been asked, by real live actual people, to keep in touch with them on here. I even got tagged in a meme already, and since it’s a serious breach of netiquette to ignore a tag, this is me responding with alacrity.

Trouble is, the meme was about New Year’s Resolutions, and I don’t do ’em – not never, not nohow. Yet my Extreme Research compatriot Mei has asked me to post up personal information on the internet for all to see, and I must oblige. So here, for your delight and edification, are the reasons why I don’t do New Year’s resolutions.

1) I Fear Failure

Yep, the first reason’s just plain old cowardice. It’s all very well to harbour intentions of achieving something in the privacy of my own brain-space before blowing it off in favour of a quiet night in with a lasagne for one and a bottle of plonk, but to publicly resolve to achieve something? That’s just setting up myself and anyone foolish enough to care for big disappointment.

2) I Failed Already
Here I am, with a first rate training in Performing Arts, living the entertainment dream on the Colmart airwaves with my erudite observational commentary and pronouncements on the price of canned peas. I don’t exactly have a track record of achieving what I set out to do.

3) What’s to succeed at, anyway?

And, you know, even if I had made it, if I was a well-known vidcast presenter or a big comedy Voice, isn’t all that just peddling canned peas on a grander scale? At least the rut I’m stuck in now has an honesty to it. I look at the paths the people I admire take through their careers and see them all selling out, doing ads, doing gigs they don’t even enjoy anymore, living an empty dream. Sure, they have money and adulation and security. But they don’t have any more integrity than I do. Of course, I don’t have any of that other stuff, either. I think I had a point somewhere, but I lost it...

Oh yeah, that’s why I don’t make resolutions. Please subscribe to this blog for more life-affirming cheery chatter!

10 responses to Not so resolute

Mei · January 6, 2026 at 8:18 pm
This is silly – you say you have failed to be a performer, but you do a performance even on this blog.

Jack · January 6, 2026 at 11:15 pm
Yeah, you should find an open mike night and do some stand-up.

Elaine · January 6, 2026 at 11:18 pm
I spend all day on an open mike – I don’t think I could even get the energy together to go find another one after work, especially not when the audience can shout back. They get right through the cracks in my ego’s armour-plating.

Kittyllama · January 6, 2026 at 8:21 pm
Follow your dreams, Elaine! Never give up! XX!!Hugs!!XX

Ash · January 6, 2026 at 11:19 pm
I’ve decided that the best way to deal with dissatisfaction is to be satisfied with it. I think you rather enjoy hating your job, and I have no doubt that the good people of Canberra appreciate what you do.

Elaine · January 6, 2026 at 11:21 pm
I do take some perverse pride that I’m the only Greeter in the known world to get fan mail, but at the end of the day, who benefits? The evil empire of Colmart, that’s who.

AK_Hailstorm · January 6, 2026 at 11:23 pm
Work sucks. Destroy resolutions!

parsons_l · January 9, 2026 at 3:29 am
Potential’s a funny thing, I think. Some people seem to think a career, and by extension a life, is like the class guinea pig, which they used to give you at school to look after over the weekend (maybe they still do). If it’s in the same or better condition when you have to give it back (as in, you die) than when you got it, you’re a success. For guinea pigs, fine; for life, not so much. Maybe integrity is most important. Maybe I need a better metaphor...

Elaine · January 10, 2026 at 9:25 pm
Guinea pig? They wouldn’t have trusted me with the cress in the yoghurt pot. Integrity – does that regrow when you’ve over-pruned?

Ash · January 11, 2026 at 4:07 am
Not without going through a whole lot of fertiliser, in my experience.
I've been tagged by the Amazing Mei about a New Year's meme, so I'm going to follow her good example and put the stylus to the tablet. I've done a few sketches lately, and thought I'd share this one with you guys:
Next resolution: Stop being such an anti-social loser. Yeah, my girl's in Beijing and all my school buddies are in NYC or Jersey City, working or studying or some shit, so I got to find me a new gang. My folks are always saying I spend too much time shut up here on my own playing socnet games with old buddies who've left town, so I've invited all the ones who are left for a party, the kind where I can flick real popcorn at them while I annihilate their asses, instead of just destroying them down a headset. Some younger bros of the dudes who left for college got a band, and want some cover art for their album, so I could even get some work out of it. Hey, I can sell it to my folks as Networking!

And last: I just started a blog, how's that for a free resolution! Promise to keep it up for at least a year, guys, or until we all meet again. You can all come stay on the farm anytime – it's a lot like our camp in the jungle, 'cept further from civilisation.

23 thoughts on “Sketchy Resolutions”

Ray January 7, 2026 at 6:37 pm
A LAN party is just about the only networking I'd believe you get up to!

Jack January 7, 2026 at 6:40 pm
Don't embarrass yourself old man, LANs went out with the W3.

Ash January 7, 2026 at 6:43 pm
Psst! We never called it the W3. It was the World Wide Web, or more usually the Internet. Internetz if you were a youf in the noughties.

Kittylama January 7, 2026 at 6:54 pm
Lol! Yay, the internetz!

Sarah January 7, 2026 at 6:56 pm
u woz nevva youf, dad, u aged.

Ray January 7, 2026 at 7:02 pm
Good to meet ya, Ash – nice to not be the only parent hanging round this playground... According to my Jack and your Sarah, us digital immigrants were born old and can only get further behind the times as they move on.

Ash January 7, 2026 at 7:11 pm
They may be right...it was our generation that developed the W4, but that’s no substitute for growing up with it. Sarah could send a video message before she could write her name.

Ray January 7, 2026 at 7:13 pm
Yeah, Jack was a hotshot with a game controller before he could use a knife and fork right.

Carla January 7, 2026 at 7:14 pm
You mean, last week?

Jack January 7, 2026 at 7:16 pm
Nice, sis. Hey everybody, meet the family.

Sarah January 7, 2026 at 7:19 pm
im off 4 the PUs start on life b4 the intrnet.

Jack January 7, 2026 at 7:20 pm
I don’t believe it existed. How can you have a life without the internet?

Mei January 7, 2026 at 6:45 pm
I am drawing you?

Jack January 7, 2026 at 6:47 pm
You’re drawing all the critters that were eating me alive.

AK_Hailstorm January 7, 2026 at 6:49 pm
Destroy leeches!
Ah, yes, I remember. But I draw them only after they finish eating you, not to disturb the wildlife. ;-D

Call it artistic license...

That explains my industrial strength mascara and svelte physique. What do you think, guys, do we need to revoke this artistic licence of his?

I was going to suggest 3 points and a fine – but since Sarah has already shared it to just about everybody I know, and they all insist it’s a very distinctive likeness, we might have to let him off with a warning.

It is very sweet – I like the chicken!

I’ve got this on the wall of my DJ booth at work. Nice job, Jack.

Thank you everyone, and I do commissions for cash. I’ve BLinked you some Avatars for a taster.

Sweet!
Being tagged for a New Year’s Resolution meme has prompted a little reflection. I’ve already bored you all with the long-term smallholding plans, but I’ve been struggling to think of any project I have underway that might yield results within the year.

I’m experimenting with a new chicken run, to discover whether limited access to the vegetable patch results in pest control and fertilisation or total annihilation of all plant and invertebrate life in the region. And, of course, there’s always another hoop to jump through at work, another demand for proof that I still know how to give injections, dress wounds and talk reassuringly to people in pain, in case I’ve suddenly forgotten everything I’ve been doing for the last fourteen years. I wouldn’t dispute that nurses need to keep up with developments in their field, but in all my time on A&E – sorry, Priority and Fastrack Customer Care – I’ve never seen a development that changes the essential nature of what people need and want from us, only new procedures, insurances and acronyms that get in the way of providing it. Career development means nothing more than running on the spot.

I don’t really want to list anything work-related as a personal resolution, anyhow. I’d like to say I’ll spend more time with my family, but Sue’s job is as manic as mine, and Sarah’s 17 now and has her own hectic social life when she’s not taking the car apart.

In a rare moment of all being in the house without anybody imminently needing to be elsewhere, I sounded them out about working visits to some permaculture communities over the summer; research and recreation in one. They feel the logistics are unlikely to come together, what with Sarah’s work placement, Sue’s job, my job, the chickens… Mention was made, again, of the previous life-changing plans, the self-sustaining summerhouse of recycled materials that never got planning permission, the European
mini-van adventure that was whittled down to a caravan holiday in Cornwall. Well, we still have the caravan: it sits, static and accusatory, at the bottom of the garden, gathering moss on its wheels. Sarah uses it as a quiet place to do her homework, though she sometimes does her homework with very loud music and at least three friends. I've come to the conclusion that significant change in my life would require wider changes in the world beyond, in the daily necessities that persistently force me to delay my plans. I'd like to resolve to rekindle the part of me that once thought I could change that world, and give a suitable legacy to my parents. The revolution they ran from in 1980 had turned on them, but their failure to change Iran for the better never dulled their determination that ordinary people can make a difference by making a noise, and they were noisy to the end – especially in crowded restaurants. I've been quiet since 2015, and I don't know whether I have the time, strength or resolve to find a voice again now. The world has a tendency to get in the way of our plans to change it.

I'll just be quietly glad that my participation in the Extreme Research conservation project in Vietnam actually happened last year, though it seems a distant oasis now. What I would like for this year is the space and time to pursue further adventures, but if that's ever going to happen all I can really afford to do now is work, and defer my resolutions for another year.

17 responses to “Unresolved”

Elaine January 8, 2026 at 12:48 pm

Good luck with that holiday – personally, I prefer to go off into the wilderness at the weekend with a rucksack. None of this co-operating with a bunch of strangers to grow your own lentils, give me a tin of beans and a good 20 miles distance from the next human being and that’s my R&R.

Ash January 8, 2026 at 12:51 pm
I was about to reply that Sue may have something to say about me setting off on another expedition without her, but it seems she’s in agreement with you! I can see the attraction of a bit of isolated outback, but I think I’d rather not be alone.

Mei January 8, 2026 at 12:53 pm
I think you will never travel far, because you will find a place you like too much, with chickens and organic toilets and people playing guitar and drinking stinging nettle tea, and stay there forever! ;-)
You’ll have to pass your driving test first, not to mention learn to drive with a trailer.

pieca shiz, I drive > you in me sleep.

Incidentally, for anybody inclined to judge, I assure you all that my daughter knows how to spell, capitalise and punctuate her sentences perfectly, she’s only doing this to make me look like a negligent parent.

na, san anti capitlist statement, down wiv the uppr case!

destory all punctuation

Hey Sarah – we all heard a lot about you. You heading through New Jersey when you come to the US?

wasnt gonna why whats there?
A whole lotta farms?
Hey, Mei – couldn’t work out what the time was for you and didn’t want to SkIMp you in the night now you’re sharing a dorm, so I did a screened entry, all sneaky-like. Just it’s been preying on my mind – hope I wasn’t out of order making insinuendos about you and Jack back on your first post. Just shooting my mouth off again, didn’t mean to embarrass you. Are you even still together? I kind of guessed once you were back home it’d be a little too long distance for a couple of spring greens like you.

4 responses to Sneaky sneaky private post for Mei

Mei · January 10, 2026 at 10:01 pm
It’s a little difficult with Jack now. He is unhappy I decide not to apply to Universities in America.

Elaine · January 10, 2026 at 10:02 pm
He wanted you to turn down a place at PKU? That’s warped!

Mei · January 10, 2026 at 10:03 pm
I know, but he is so upset – I did not expect this. I think he is little bit depressed, because everybody leaves him to go to university.

Elaine · January 10, 2026 at 10:04 pm
Aw, the delicate pastry-puff. He'll keep till the holidays, Beansprout. You get on with your life, he'll just have to find one of his own.
Too busy to worry

Posted on January 15, 2026

I know it is now all over the international news that the Chicken Flu from Vietnam is spread from human to human, and some case are reported in Southern China.

I want everybody to stop worrying for me! Three reasons:

1. Although very contagious and making some people very sick, it is not fatal for most people. It is like a bad winter flu – it is causing a lot of problems in areas with a serious outbreak, but not disaster.

2. Many precautions are already taken all over China to prevent spread any further. We have already people in the university to give us information, paper face masks and anti-bacteria spray for our hands. The more effective plastic mask with the ventilation on the front is for sale everywhere, in many sizes and colours, and this becomes a fashion for the students. Everybody is wearing a mask and cleans the hands when going in or out a public building or transport.

3. Beijing is a very, very long way from Guangxi, and it is only some small village in Guangxi that have the virus.
Biggest worry is that the ban on travel in and out of the Southern provinces will not end by the New Year, so people will not see their families. We can only hope that this will not happen, and the outbreak will be over before Spring Festival.

I have to travel only to Anhui, not too far South, and this will not be difficult.

In the meantime, I have many friends now in Beida and my studies keep me very busy, so do not worry for me if I do not blog for a week – I am very safe, just busy in Beijing!

11 thoughts on “Too busy to worry”

Elaine on January 15, 2026 at 8:23 pm said:
Long as you’re ok – just let us know if we can help, like if there’s a national shortage of cough syrup or whatever, I’ll send you a package courtesy of Colmart.

AK_Hailstorm on January 16, 2026 at 12:43 am said:
Yeah, get prepping your stores, there’s gonna be mayhem.

jackdandelion on January 15, 2026 at 9:12 pm said:
Glad to hear your ok.
So people are wearing masks in class? It must seem very strange for the staff to teach a class but not to be able to see their faces properly.

Mei on January 16, 2026 at 8:03 am said:
My art history lecturer comes in yesterday wearing the mask with a cat face – so cute! But he takes it off for speaking. Some wear the mask all the time in public, but this is little bit too much, I think. Most people will take it off after they come into a room and sterilise the hands.
Jack on January 16, 2026 at 12:41 am said:
Good to know you’re OK – I still wish you’d come stay over here for the holidays, though. I miss you.

Mei on January 16, 2026 at 8:02 am said:
I look forward to when I see you in summer, but for Spring Festival I think it is important I see my family – I miss them very much, too! Please understand xxx

Ben on January 16, 2026 at 12:44 am said:
You’re right to get on with your studies, take precautions and not panic, but I thought I should let you know what I’m hearing from my colleagues in Vietnam and Guangxi. It appears to be a more virulent strain than the authorities are letting on. That mask is more than a fashion accessory – don’t leave home without it.

Jack on January 16, 2026 at 12:57 am said:
Thanks Ben – just as I was starting to relax again.

Mei on January 16, 2026 at 8:05 am said:
Thank you, Ben, I will be careful.

Kittyllama on January 16, 2026 at 8:07 am said:
You’re so brave, Mei! I’d be terrified! XX!!Hugs!!XX

Ash on January 16, 2026 at 2:21 am said:
As Elaine says, we are ready and waiting to chip in with anything you need – just give us the word.
Greetings, shoppers! Here I am, blogging at you live from Colmart, where I have been given a rare half day off the air while security try to identify the source of a shrinkage crisis, meaning a group of swaggering primates who keep two-way radios holstered like pistols in their pants have commandeered my studio (well, closet) for their complex sting operation. At least it’s keeping Coll, head of security and the Columbo of Colmart, busy and out of my face.

For those who don’t know, Colmart is the major supermarket in my neck of the woods. It’s risen to the top of the Food Chain food chain by rebranding itself from a massive conglomerate to just another family corner shop – except, y’know, bigger. Colmart’s employees are one big, happy family – kind of like the Mafia, but without the job security, and worse pension prospects. My job as a Greeter is to make tannoy announcements aimed at disguising the relentless dreariness of the shopping experience behind a manic enthusiasm for mundanity.

This means I spend my day sitting in a five foot square annex to the security office, thinking of friendly and personal ways to tell customers that buying an extra pack of bog roll will significantly enhance their lives, and waiting for lunchtime or death, preferably death as there’s less chance of being collared by Coll at the exit. I don’t know what ingenious little quasi-legal scheme of hidden cameras and planted RFIDs he’s
concocted to take down the international shop-lifters’ conspiracy this time, but I know he’ll want to tell me all about it before I get through the door.

7 responses to Security Issues

Kittyllama · January 17, 2026 at 10:33 am
You’re so funny, Elaine! XX!!Hugs!!XX

Jack · January 17, 2026 at 10:53 am
I’m so glad I’m always gonna be self-employed.

Mei · January 17, 2026 at 12:19 pm
You need a new job!

Elaine · January 17, 2026 at 12:21 pm
I need a shotgun and two – maybe three – cartridges.

AK_Hailstorm · January 17, 2026 at 12:22 pm
Grenades’d be better. Destroy Colmart!

Ash · January 17, 2026 at 11:00 pm
I’m all for work-related rants, but I’d exercise a little caution in what you say publicly about your employers.

Elaine · January 17, 2026 at 11:02 pm
Since this blog doesn’t have my full name anywhere about it I doubt it’ll fall within my immediate boss’s radar – though I wouldn’t put it past Coll to turn cyber-stalker and track me down. If it comes to it, though, I reckon I got more on him than he does on me. I don’t see this little blog coming to the attention of the Colmart bigwigs – but just in case, you’ll note that some names have been misspelt to protect the indolent.
Bright Horizons
The ground, the sky and the things between

Trouble getting home

Posted on January 20, 2026

Now I begin to worry a little. I am prepared to go home, with my new face mask for the journey and a lot of anti-bacteria spray, and I SkIMp my parents from the station, but no reply on the homeset. I try my mother’s and father’s handsets – no reply. I leave messages and have no reply all day. I check their socnets, nobody is posting anything for two days.
The station has many crowds of people and many ad-screens with warnings for the flu, saying to wear masks at all times and use anti-bacteria spray on hands before you enter the train. But some people have only a piece of cloth tied around their face, or only the free paper mask, and these are wet and falling away from their faces. My friend Li, who studies medicine, tells me that the mask does not stop the germs, it only stops people touching their mouth and nose. Most of all, it makes us feel safer. Still, when somebody is coughing, everybody moves away from them, and it is so crowded, this becomes very dangerous. I think one man is coughing on purpose to make a way to the train, but he stops when an old woman is taken away from the station because she cannot stop coughing. She is saying “Not flu, I had this cough 10 years, it is not the flu!” but she is forbidden to travel.
The train arrives, and I fight through the crowd but before I get to the door, the destination screen says “cancelled”. Then I get a message from my grandmother – she is telling me “Stay in Beijing, don’t try to SkIMp – afraid they will trace this handset.”
I check the newsnets, and see the breaking news that some towns in Anhui province are isolated as a precaution, to contain a minor outbreak of the bird flu in a rural region. But Xiuning is no small rural village, it is close to Huangshan and almost a city – if my family is in the isolated area, how big is this area? And what is wrong with SkIMp? I must go back to the university, to check for more reports from independent newsnets on a faster and better set, but I begin to be very afraid.

16 thoughts on “Trouble getting home”

Ben on January 20, 2026 at 5:12 pm said:
It’s not good news from the agency. I was meant to get into China tomorrow, but the flight’s been cancelled – we need to start negotiations with the military all over again to get aid in. Aid workers in the Guanxi region have been recalled, but we had difficulty contacting them. It looks like they’ve restricted civilian W4 use in the affected regions, and taken some NGO socnets off the preferential list. I knew that the international protocols on the satellite network allowed for blocking W4 access regionally – that’s why your map apps will always know where you are, the first thing your set tells the satellite before it’ll connect you to any socnet is your GPS reading. It’s supposed to ensure bandwidth for preferential socnets (like military and medical) in a major emergency, but blocks aren’t to be used for periods longer than a couple of hours – lack of comms causes panic and doesn’t help anybody. Obviously some reports are getting out from the preferential socnets, and those reports aren’t good – you’ve no doubt seen them yourself by now. I should stress, though, it’s still very plausible that the larger towns are just isolated as a precaution, like they say, and the flu really is restricted to outlying rural regions. I have to say, I’m curious as to how your grandmother sent a SkIMp message from inside a blocked region.

Mei on January 20, 2026 at 5:16 pm said:
She used to make old handsets, mobile phones, in a Foxconn factory when she was young, and then when she is older she made a business doing set repair and “customising” – unlocking some features and socnets that need a subscription. If anybody can make a handset get into a preferential socnet, or maybe give a false location to the satellite, it is my grandmother.
They say they isolate the towns for a precaution, but the national newsnets say they do not block the communications, it is a satellite malfunction. They think we are stupid! They tell us do not panic, but they give no information on where is the outbreak, how many are sick, how many are dead, or why communication is stopped. Until today, I did not know they can block the W4 – I never hear of this before. How can we trust we are safe?

Ben on January 20, 2026 at 5:19 pm said:
Try not to worry just yet – it’s not unusual for the politics and communications side of things to be much less competent than the medical side. I’m sure that whatever’s happening in Anhui will be under control soon, and I’ll try to let you know more when I get there.

Kittyllama on January 20, 2026 at 5:40 pm said:
Mei, we’re all so worried for you! I hope your family’s OK! Keep telling us what’s happening! XX!!Hugs!!XX

AK_Hailstorm on January 20, 2026 at 5:52 pm said:
Your granma rocks!!!

Elaine on January 20, 2026 at 5:54 pm said:
What they said, but minus the exclamation marks. SkIMp me if you want to talk, K?

Jack on January 20, 2026 at 10:48 pm said:
Goddamn the Earth’s rotation and the whole EST zone – I didn’t see this until now! Mei, why didn’t you SkIMp me? You have to come to the US for the holidays now – just get to the airport before they ground the planes, if you need money I can borrow it from my
folks. If you can't get home, you're better trying to contact your folks from here than from Beijing.

Mei on January 20, 2026 at 10:51 pm said:
I am sorry, Jack, it will be difficult to get onto a flight, and I want to stay and get to my family if it is possible.

Jack on January 20, 2026 at 10:54 pm said:
You're crazy not to get out of there! Please, just get on any plane that's leaving China, and get to the US – we'll search the newsnets every day together. Don't you think your family would want you to be safe?

Mei on January 20, 2026 at 10:56 pm said:
Why do you think your home is so safe?

Jack on January 20, 2026 at 10:58 pm said:
You kidding? Nothing exciting ever happens here, it's the safest place on Earth.

Mei on January 20, 2026 at 11:00 pm said:
You think this is exciting?

Jack on January 20, 2026 at 11:05 pm said:
I didn't mean what's happening to you is exciting. I just mean where I live is so ordinary – boring, even, but maybe you could use a little boring right now? I'm sorry. I just want to help you.

Mei on January 20, 2026 at 11:11 pm said:
Jack, Xiuning is not a war zone, it is a very ordinary place to me. I can still get the newsnets from America here – why is the border closing with Mexico? I did not hear any case of flu reported in South America.

Jack on January 20, 2026 at 11:15 pm said:
Hang on, I'll SkImp you.

Elaine on January 28, 2026 at 5:51 pm said:
Hey Mei – haven’t heard from you lately. News on the epidemic’s going a bit quiet over here – you alright? Did you get the packages? SkIMp me if you need anything, Sugar-snap.
I spend two days now trying to find news of Xiuning and nearby towns. Independent newsnets and blogs are full of talk about why towns in Anhui province are cut off from communication. Official newsnets say there is a communication satellite overloading because of New Year plans, but everybody says they try to silence the full news of the sickness.

One report gives the first case of Avian Flu at 3am 20 January, another says hospitals are full by mid-morning, and a third says that the army patrols the streets, and tells people to stay in their homes. We still do not know numbers that are sick or how far the outbreak is spread, or why there is no official news from the isolated areas. We wonder if there is more reason than sickness that they block communications for this region – perhaps there is much panic, rioting, uprising?

There are many students on the campus who cannot go home. We begin to meet up and ask these questions together. It is good not to ask them alone.

18 thoughts on “Asking questions”

Kittyllama on January 22, 2026 at 6:16 pm said:
I’m glad you have friends there, that’s so important at times like this! XX!!Hugs!!XX

Elaine on January 22, 2026 at 6:26 pm said:
Hang in there, Mei. This might sound a little paranoid, but just in case whatever hit Anhui does get further north and you need to hole up for a while, you should make sure the cupboards are well-stocked.

AK_Hailstorm on January 22, 2026 at 6:29 pm said:
Yeah, get yerself prepped, girl!

Mei on January 22, 2026 at 6:31 pm said:
I already thought this, but I am not the first. The shops already put a limit on tinned food, rice, noodles and beans for each customer. Of course, everybody can just go to the next shop and buy from there, too. I did this with Li, so we can each hold the bags when the other goes into another shop, otherwise you have to go home after each one because they check even my handbag for food!

Sarah on January 22, 2026 at 7:03 pm said:
u need a strategy – 4 of u cud cover a mile rapid. 1 goes in the shop, 3 do relays back 2 campus, then switch an repeat. wen every1s done all the shops, put on wigs and do it agen.

Elaine on January 22, 2026 at 7:09 pm said:
I can just see Coll’s Beijing equivalent scrutinising the exterior cameras to check for tag-team ration-rustlers!

Ash on January 22, 2026 at 8:08 pm said:
I’m not going to ask where Sarah’s been developing these strategies. Mei, while the post’s still getting through, I’m putting together a package for you.

Mei on January 22, 2026 at 8:11 pm said:
Thank you, but really it is not so bad! Much other food is not rationed, so I save the dry and tin food and eat lots of fresh vegetable and meat – but not chicken! Nobody sells chicken now.

Ash on January 22, 2026 at 8:12 pm said:
The slaughtering of chickens is pointless and wasteful. It’s the human form of the virus that’s spreading.

Elaine on January 22, 2026 at 8:13 pm said:
Calm down Ash, nobody’s coming for your chickens. :P I bet if they got flu, you’d tuck them up in bed with a hot water bottle.

Ash on January 22, 2026 at 8:15 pm said:
I did originally intend a casserole when they stopped laying, but Sarah and Sue turned vegetarian the day they arrived.

Sarah on January 22, 2026 at 8:51 pm said:
that is so false, hed have those chickins eatin at the table and feed me on veg peelins if he cud.

Jack on January 22, 2026 at 10:12 pm said:
We saw him with the chickens at camp – I believe it!

Jack on January 22, 2026 at 10:10 pm said:
Well, I feel like I’m setting myself up for a smack down here, but I’ll say it one more time: the offer is still open. The whole offer, or as much of it as you want.

Mei on January 22, 2026 at 10:17 pm said:
Jack, it is sweet to say I can live with you, and I will go to see you soon, but I will say the same thing again – I want to stay living in China, at least until I finish university. Right now, I cannot go away.

Ash on January 29, 2026 at 8:17 pm said:
I just heard the news, Mei – hoping that your family are alright. Please do let us know if we can help in any way. We’ve made donations, but it all seems a bit distant – we want to do more, but... well, let us know, anyway.
Elaine on January 29, 2026 at 8:29 pm said:

Just want to make sure you’re OK. Don’t give up – your family might have gotten out before it got so bad, or they could have holed up in their house and been effectively quarantined, there’s any number of ways they could be OK – but you already knew that. Always here if you need me, K?

Jack on January 29, 2026 at 10:23 pm said:

It doesn’t look good, guys, but Mei’s OK from what I can make out. She’s got friends on campus, they’re all looking out for each other. I feel shitty not being able to be with her, though.
Trouble Brewing

If keeping a blog means posting more than once a month, I guess I've near broke that third resolution already, but I think I'm justified in saying I got a lot on my mind right now.

As some of you know, my girlfriend's got caught up in this insanity around the silent zones in China. Thankfully she's not actually in one, but she might as well be for the amount I get to talk to her. There's only a narrow window each day when we're both likely to be awake, and she's always either following up on a lead to some possible news from her home town or she's meeting with other students to organise some protest or petition – and I'm spending all my time just sitting worrying about her. Travel to provinces south of Beijing is already restricted and it won't be long before they ground all planes going into and out of China – I just want her to get out of there before it's too late.

Last time we spoke we had a kind of disagreement on whether the US is really a safer place to be – I get a bit confused about exactly where we clashed, but I do know I totally failed at persuading her to get on that plane. She told me the US was cracking down on
travel and immigration from Central America, and it was the first I heard so I checked with my Dad. Turns out she was right – in fact he’s cracking down on me about how I’m gonna have to pull my weight round here (again!) because if this doesn’t simmer down we won’t be able to get half the usual workers in for the spring harvest. Stupid thing is, we’ve SkImped the guys in Puerto Rico – and just so we’re on the same page, this isn’t some faceless agency trying to keep a contract with us, we know these guys, they’ve been coming here every year since as long as I can remember – and they say there is no new flu going around down there. Jaivin says he had a bad stomach thing, but I could hear Marelys in the background yelling he was just hungover again. They’re all fine, except for worrying what in the hell they’re going to do for work come April, and Dad’s wondering the same. We do ok here, but we’re only a small family operation and it’s not like we can afford local rates, not that there’s many locals who can even do this kind of work. Of course, every other farm in the garden state’ll be looking, too, which pushes the rates up more, and there’s a lot of family farms’ll get sold off to the big corps if this flu scare doesn’t blow over by harvest.

Dad says he’s literally betting the farm on me being able to bring in some cash with my illustration work, so I’m working on a new zombie comic – I need to update my portfolio to get online commissions. Dad did raise an eyebrow when I said I’d need to borrow his guns, but research is key, right? Plus I’m getting to be a crack shot with the Ruger 10/22.

13 thoughts on “Trouble Brewing”

AK_Hailstorm January 23, 2026 at 1:27 pm
Awesome. Destroy everything, dude!

Ash January 23, 2026 at 1:30 pm
It may have been naïve of me, but when you said it was a family farm I’d assumed you did everything yourselves – it didn’t occur to me you needed a workforce.
Jack January 23, 2026 at 1:32 pm

Most of the year we don’t – that’s the good thing about the Friendly Frankensteins, they come tailored to the conditions and pest-resistance is built in, so they practically take care of themselves. It’s just at harvest times we got a lot to do all at once, so we get 10 or so helpers in. If we didn’t, most of our crops’d rot on the ground. You researching for your own homestead yet?

Ash January 23, 2026 at 1:33 pm

I think my smallholding will be on a much more personally manageable scale than yours, but it’s all interesting to hear!

Kittyllama January 23, 2026 at 3:04 pm

OMG, Be careful with that gun!!

Mei January 23, 2026 at 8:01 pm

There is no point to talk about me coming to America – let’s not argue it again, OK? I hope you don’t shoot anything cute.

Elaine January 23, 2026 at 8:10 pm

Of course he will, he needs the blood and guts for his “research”.

Jack January 23, 2026 at 8:11 pm

For you, Mei, I’ll make it strictly tin cans. Unless I see some real ugly woodchucks. But not cute ones, I promise.

Mei January 23, 2026 at 8:15 pm

Woodchucks are cute! I know this because I just searched “Woodchuck” to find what the hell it is. Now I know – it is cute! No shooting woodchucks!

Jack January 23, 2026 at 8:16 pm

What about woodchucks that have been bit by zombies?
Mei January 23, 2026 at 8:18 pm
No. You can shoot a zombie that is bit by a woodchuck.

Jack January 23, 2026 at 8:19 pm
I'll see if I can work a zombie woodchuck into my comic.

Mei January 23, 2026 at 8:20 pm
Good. I like you with a pencil better than a rifle. <3
Greetings, shoppers! Here I am, blogging at you live from Colmart, where I have been given a rare half day off the air while security try to identify the source of a shrinkage crisis, meaning a group of swaggering primates who keep two-way radios holstered like pistols in their pants have commandeered my studio (well, closet) for their complex sting operation. At least it’s keeping Coll, head of security and the Columbo of Colmart, busy and out of my face.

For those who don’t know, Colmart is the major supermarket in my neck of the woods. It’s risen to the top of the Food Chain food chain by rebranding itself from a massive conglomerate to just another family corner shop – except, y’know, bigger. Colmart’s employees are one big, happy family – kind of like the Mafia, but without the job security, and worse pension prospects. My job as a Greeter is to make tannoy announcements aimed at disguising the relentless dreariness of the shopping experience behind a manic enthusiasm for mundanity.

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7 responses to Pushing Polenta

Kittyllama · January 17, 2026 at 10:33 am
You’re so funny, Elaine! XX!!Hugs!!XX

Jack · January 17, 2026 at 10:53 am
I’m so glad I’m always gonna be self-employed.

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You need a new job!

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I am sorry if you were worried for me – I have been too busy to blog. The situation is very bad now. There is now no travelling out of any province, and nobody allowed into or out of any city. Roads and railways are closed, and many millions migrant workers and students are stranded.

I do not give up hope that I will hear from my family. I spend a long time sitting at the workset, watching the feeds refresh again and again, waiting for a new message that I might recognise for somebody I know, before I decide to stop this. I know my family will get a message to me, and while I wait I must look after anybody else who I can help.

I now join the volunteers to find places to live for people stranded in Beijing for the holiday. I help to set up a forum and database so people can offer space in their home or look for a place to stay. Many students travel back to their homes before the lockdown, so dorms are free on the campus, and we invite migrant workers to stay with us for the Spring Festival. We are all separated from our family, and so we will all be family for each other this year. The barriers that keep student from worker, rural from urban people, begin to break down a little. Our community is very important to us now.
Kittyllama on January 31, 2026 at 12:10 am said:
You’re a really good person! :-) XX!!Hugs!!XX

Jack on January 31, 2026 at 12:12 am said:
Glad you’re feeling better about stuff. Just be careful who you let into your room, OK?

Mei on January 31, 2026 at 12:13 am said:
Li is here too, we are all OK. I am glad to not be alone.

Ash on January 31, 2026 at 12:36 am said:
Just don’t exhaust yourself with taking care of others. Save some strength for yourself. We’re all here for you, as much as we can be.

Elaine on January 31, 2026 at 7:31 am said:
Wow, you’re really getting stuck in there. By the time Ben gets access to the affected areas, you’ll have fixed everything and he’ll have to go home again. Hope you’re doing OK.
Which apocalypse I will survive...

Today, just a quick post – this quiz about how you will survive disaster is going around the students now. I know it will seem strange that we do a funny meme about disaster at this time, but I think the silliness of it helps us to deal with our fears. Here is my result:

You Will Survive: Nuclear War

Your disaster forces you to take refuge in some kind of sealed shelter – let’s hope you get on with your fellow survivors, because you’re going to be holed up together for a long time.
Your answers show you have a strong sense of community, and will keep the group from turning on itself. Given your distaste for any kind of violence or conflict, you wouldn’t survive out on your own – but then, you probably wouldn’t see the point in that anyway. You might even succeed in building a better society – but will you be able to hold onto it when the doors open and you face the ruins?

See the story behind this quiz at http://badinfluences.org.uk

Which apocalyptic disaster will you survive?

2 thoughts on “Which apocalypse I will survive…”

Ash on February 1, 2026 at 10:50 pm said:
Glad to see you’re keeping your spirits up. :)

Jack on February 4, 2026 at 11:21 pm said:
I did the meme – no surprises for my answer. I’ll call you tonight (tomorrow from your side of planet). Love ya.

← Previous Next →
Catastrophic Contingencies

This is my result for that apocalypse quiz that’s going round:

You will survive: A Cosy Catastrophe

Well, you are fond of your creature comforts, aren’t you? And maybe a little bit too smug about the possibility of Civilisation As We Know It going down the drain.

You’re just itching to create a better world now that the pesky majority of the population’s out of your way. I’m willing to bet that with a stiff upper lip, a healthy dose of denial and an unwavering determination to recreate a British pastoral idyll that never really existed, you could survive anything from Triffids to the Death of Grass.
All you need is a nice little farming community and an appreciation of the simple things to keep your spirits up. But what will you do when the simple things get complicated?

See the story behind this quiz at [http://badinfluences.org.uk](http://badinfluences.org.uk)

Which apocalyptic disaster will you survive?

And speaking of complications and catastrophes, we’re implementing contingencies at work in case of a Bird Flu outbreak in London. As frontline medical staff, we’ve been assured that we’ll get anti-virals, but we also know that these drugs were developed for a very different strain and we’ve no idea how effective they’ll be. We’ve got an isolation ward put aside and Type 2 biohazard suits for all staff – we’ll all look like we’re working in a nuclear power station. Hardly reassuring for the public, and not so comfortable for us, but hopefully it’ll provide some more meaningful protection than those flimsy masks they’re giving out.

On top of that, everybody has to sign up for a three hour training session over the next month, which sounds riveting and will no doubt do wonders for our other targets, not to mention patient care (nobody mentions patient care).

Oh well, I suppose when it all goes to shit, the execs will be able to hold up a document saying they made adequate preparations before retiring to their sealed quarantine facilities. The rest of us will just have to make do the best we can.

7 responses to “Catastrophic Contingencies”

Elaine February 2, 2026 at 12:17 am

Bit over-cautious, isn’t it?

Ash February 2, 2026 at 12:18 am

I sincerely hope so.
Ben February 2, 2026 at 1:30 am
Out here we've opted for ventilation masks, gloves, steri-sprays, anti-virals and crossed fingers. Just hoping it'll be enough.

Mei February 2, 2026 at 1:32 am
Ben, hi! Did you hear anything from Anhui?

Ben February 2, 2026 at 1:33 am
You'd be the first to hear if I did! I've been in Sichuan.

Mei February 2, 2026 at 1:34 am
Officially, there is no disease in Sichuan. Why are you there?

Ben February 2, 2026 at 1:35 am
Officially, I'm not. It's not too bad here, and we're hoping to keep it that way. The army are the ones taking care of containment, though; we're just trying to distribute food to the contained and deal with non-flu medical issues, to take some strain off the hospitals here. I'll keep you posted when I can.
Seasonal Vegetables of the Living Dead

My suspicions are confirmed...

You will survive: The Zombie Plague

You know how to keep a loaded gun by your side at all times, guard your perimeter and, above all, DESTROY THE BRAIN.

You’re a lone survivor, probably because you killed all your potential team-mates in your over-zealous attempts to defend your little piece of rock with a flag on it from the living dead. It is the fate of those who live by the gun to live and die alone.
You could get a dog, but I suspect it would end badly.

See the story behind this quiz at [http://badinfluences.org.uk](http://badinfluences.org.uk)

**Which apocalyptic disaster will you survive?**

Not sure about the lone survivor bit – I see myself as leading a team against the encroaching hordes – but hell, yeah! I’m ready for them.

**10 thoughts on “My suspicions are confirmed...”**

*Ray* February 4, 2026 at 10:40 am

Good to know. You ready for the GreenTech expo?

*Jack* February 4, 2026 at 10:41 am

I thought you and Carla were doing that?

*Ray* February 4, 2026 at 10:44 am

We got to be here to meet with the FF inspector – you and your mom are doing GreenTech! You’re supposed be packed up and ready. We did discuss this last night.

*Carla* February 4, 2026 at 10:43 am

Told you he wasn’t listening.

*Jack* February 4, 2026 at 10:45 am

I thought me and mom were staying for the inspection!

*Carla* February 4, 2026 at 10:48 am

GreenTech offered us a slot for a presentation at the last minute – you got to argue for Friendly Frankensteins as the future of sustainable small-scale farming against the Campaign for Real Organics and Action Against Fake Food mobs.

*Jack* February 4, 2026 at 10:49 am

WTF?! Nobody told me about this!
Ray February 4, 2026 at 10:50 am
Don’t tease him, Carla.

Carla February 4, 2026 at 10:53 am
Yeah, as if we’d trust you with that. You’re doing the samples on the stall while Mom does the talking. Hope you’ve ironed your apron, bro.

Jack February 4, 2026 at 10:55 am
On it. Man, this sucks.
It’s like they know me

Get my quiz result!

You will survive: Alien Invasion

Don’t question, just go with it. Whether it’s Martian tripods, big bugs with guns or body-snatchers with a political agenda, your innate sense of the surreal will allow you to drift on through with your wits intact.
While others may have difficulty adapting to a world gone mad, you're quite used to living without the aid of sanity, and will probably come up with some utterly random method of destroying them.

So they landed on a planet 70% Ocean and they're allergic to water – who knew? You did, that's who.

See the story behind this quiz at http://badinfluences.org.uk

Which apocalyptic disaster will you survive?

So I'm officially safe from alien invaders. Now I just have to work out how to deal with my boss.
I have seen the new reports from Guanxi, and the pictures too. There is still confusion about what happens there – a terrible disease, we know, but it may be something more. Is this a “Blood Flu”， like in Europe 1918, so the sick person bleeds through the skin? At our meetings, there is a group with many followers now; they say this is a lie used to cover a massacre, that there is an insurrection, and this is why the communications are stopped from the silent provinces, to stop the spread of revolution, not panic or disease. I do not know what to believe. Some information still comes from Anhui: they say the disease is not so bad there now, only they have very little food and people who survive everything else may die now from starving. Still so many questions, and no way to reach my family.

I try to be busy and not think of the worst things. I meet with other students and workers from these regions, and we protest why our homes are kept from communications for so long. Last meeting there is a student who speaks about the June 4th massacre. His name is Zhen. At first I think he is a new student, like me, but I find out he is 23 years old, a postgraduate student in economics. He looks down, blushing all over his neck and ears to hear his voice in the big dining hall – but he speaks loud and well, with the accent of Southern provinces. He says we have the W4 now, so they cannot block us from the free socnets unless they do what is done in Anhui and Guanxi,
and they will not do this in Beijing or they put everybody out of business. This fear is why they wait too long to impose quarantine – for our leaders, profit always comes before the health of the people. He says we have to rise up to save our own lives, that we can do better than Cairo, than London, than our parents, that now is our time. People listen to this, and they cheer, but when he calls for a march to Tienanmen Square we hesitate. The W4 will not stop tanks. Public gathering is forbidden for health and safety, should we march when there is a risk of disease? We all argue until very late. Everybody is angry, and afraid. There are few soldiers in the street, but many police. The army is busy in the Silent Provinces – they go out to “assist and defend brave health workers”. They all have anti-viral drugs – but Li tells me nobody knows yet if these are good for this type of flu. Li has become very popular, always speaking in meetings, answering questions on flu. She speaks with great authority, sometimes I think even if she does not know the answer, but she finds out more every day. She decided the flu will be her thesis. I do not speak a lot in meetings. What can an undergraduate student of painting say about disease or politics? But I listen.

7 thoughts on “What is behind the silence?”

Ben on February 10, 2026 at 9:12 am said:
Don’t have a lot of time to read blogs, but this stood out from my feeds. Hope you’re being careful who can read this, Mei – the “river crabs” aren’t so busy they can’t follow up on the odd search for their favourite key words.

Mei on February 10, 2026 at 9:16 am said:
Don’t worry about the river crabs (this is old slang for censorship on the internet) – I am on the Iceland socnet for my blog, because they have good encryption, and I use only one part of our names, so nobody can identify us.

Ash on February 10, 2026 at 7:43 pm said:
Would you be better off using a UK socnet, perhaps? It would be outside of the “river crabs” jurisdiction without looking as suspicious as Iceland.

Sarah on February 10, 2026 at 7:44 pm said:
ur infos stale, dad – uk socnets reek, icelands best if u want incog.

Jack on February 11, 2026 at 12:57 am said:
Dude, everyone knows that! The UK Government are the biggest spam-fishers in the world.

Ash on February 11, 2026 at 1:00 am said:
Children, please! I was giving my friends dire warnings about social networking security when at least one of you was getting tiny sticky finger-marks on your father’s brand new iPad... Being on socnets known for their privacy and encryption is all very well for ubergeeks and self-styled radicals in the West, but in Mei’s situation it might actually draw serious unwanted attention. Being on an Iceland socnet makes it look as if she's got something to hide.

Mei on February 11, 2026 at 8:57 am said:
I do have something to hide. Everybody has. I think you don’t know how many Chinese students use a private Socnet – it is like downloading a movie, illegal but what can they do? They sometimes make an example, but cannot stop everybody.
Virtual Valentine

Since the post won’t be getting through to Beijing any time soon, I thought I’d put this up here for Mei to see.
I woulda done that whole Zombie Woodchuck comic by now, only I had to go to that GreenTech Expo and give out FF Vitimillion Squash and Allergone Peanut Tarts, in an apron with that stupid grinning green monster logo that I coulda drawn better with my left foot. Bet the guy who drew Friendly Frankie doesn’t have to stand there being polite to humanities students who think small organic family farms are destroying the earth.

So this girl with a “No to Fake Foods” button and a fake flesh tunnel in her nose was spinning me the line about GM crops breeding with the local flora, and I was like, do you even know how many farms don’t grow GM now? Why don’t you go after the big corps trying to buy us out instead of the small farms who’ve gone to FF just to get by, ’cause at least we don’t use pesticides and our crops got health benefits, and yeah, sure FF give us non-terminating seeds that could breed in the wild, and we save them and don’t have to pay for the license and the stock and the stupid franchise shit every year, which is why I’m rich and don’t have to go to stupid Expos and talk to stupid people like you!

Yeah, I didn’t say that.

What I said was, “Mom, customer!” And she came over from networking with the Organicalise rep and she said all of that, more or less. Well, not the last part. She just sorta implied it.

Mei, you gotta meet my Mom one day. Hope it’ll be soon. Happy Valentines! xxx

8 thoughts on “Virtual Valentine”

Jack February 15, 2026 at 8:39 am

Jack: Is this showing up on anyone’s feed?

Elaine February 15, 2026 at 8:40 am

I see it, Jack – but I don’t think it’s meant for me.

Ash February 15, 2026 at 8:45 am
Very well-drawn as always, Jack, but don’t be too offended if Mei doesn’t react to this – she clearly has more pressing things on her mind. I’m sure she appreciates it.

*Kittyllama* February 15, 2026 at 5:40 pm
I think it’s really sweet! :-D XX!!Hugs!!XX

*Jack* February 16, 2026 at 11:43 am
Seriously, not even a “Sure, I see it, that’s cool”?  

*Elaine* February 16, 2026 at 11:47 am
Jack, have you looked at the newsnets for the last two days?

*Jack* February 16, 2026 at 11:51 am
Shit, well I’ve been trying to get through on SkIMp for the last three days and I’ve got no response.

*Elaine* February 16, 2026 at 11:58 am
Me neither. That’s why I’m up so late. But I’m guessing she must just be busy.

<< Previous Next >>
Bright Horizons
The ground, the sky and the things between

New Year and new tensions
Posted on February 18, 2026

We prepared for Spring Festival as the news arrived from Guanxi of many tens of thousands dead. Still there is no list of the dead from Hunan or Anhui. There is a public expressing of shock and grief, but also strange, unspoken feelings. Those without family support each other, and Beijing people support us, but this becomes more difficult. Before, we can reassure each other, say to hope for the best, stay strong. Now we know that many are dead, that the disease is worse than anybody thinks, like a plague from the old times, and there is nothing the doctors can do. There is more fear now, and with fear there is less trust. People want to shut up their house and stay alone with their family, but they have a grieving stranger in their home. There is sympathy for people from the silent provinces, but also there is some resentment. I live on the campus where we are from all over China, and all over the world, so I am protected a little, but I can feel it when I go outside of the gate. People turn away from students and migrant workers, pull their masks higher on their faces, like our sadness and anger is also an infection that we bring from the silent zones.

On New Year, and we celebrate as much as we can with so much fear, and restrictions on food. Normally we would have chicken, but there are no chickens to buy. Li and I cleaned out our room, and ate fish and bean curd and rice cakes with a couple from Hunan who have no contact from their parents and small son since three weeks. There are no parades – it is a public health risk, and firecrackers also are banned, but I cook dumplings and we play fire cracker sounds, and hope the year of the horse carries us
safely back to our families. We also think what we will do next, but I cannot say more on this now.

8 thoughts on “New Year and new tensions”

Jack on February 18, 2026 at 11:43 pm said:
I hope that horse has the energy left to carry you back to me, after. Take care, and Kung Hei Fat Choi.

Mei on February 18, 2026 at 11:47 pm said:
Happy New Year, Jack, and you be careful, too.

Kittylama on February 19, 2026 at 6:10 am said:
This is so sad. :-( I hope you guys can be together again soon!! xxhugsxx

Elaine on February 19, 2026 at 6:51 am said:
Strange to think we had Chinese New Year parades in Canberra and they're banned in Beijing. There were a lot of fundraising drives over the weekend, but I don't know if they're going to the right places.

AK_Hailstorm on February 19, 2026 at 6:54 am said:
I lit a line of firecrackers for you.

Ash on February 19, 2026 at 7:12 am said:
Hoping for a much happier New Year for you, Mei.
Ben on February 19, 2026 at 8:22 am said:

Just wanted to let you know, I'm headed into Hunan tomorrow, and if you Blink me the details I'll try to pass on some messages for your friends. I'm still hoping to get to Anhui, and I'll pass on what I can.

Luck to you all for the New Year.

Mei on February 19, 2026 at 8:23 am said:

Thank you, Ben, this is good news! Be very careful – I hope the anti-viral drugs are working.
Still hating work...

Did I mention lately that I hate my job? More specifically, I hate my co-workers; not that I actually work alongside anybody as such, but I’ve just managed to up the generalised levels of hate in the vicinity of the entire store, which is quite an achievement for a lunch hour in which I intended to walk round the block and eat a Cherry Cheesecake.

It started with a desperate attempt to avoid conversation with Coll. I usually wait until he’s distracted before heading through the security room, and he seemed to be engrossed in one of his nostrils when I made a dash for it. Just as I reached the outer door, though, his hand shot out to a monitor on which a toddler could be seen chewing on a sealed pack of Tim Tams while its mother scooped chocolate yogurts into the basket.

“How d’ya mean theft?”

“I know him. Seen him at it before. He’ll eat a couple and drop the packet somewhere so it won’t be on ’em when they leave. Reckons he’s disposed of all the
evidence, but this time I got a clear line of sight, all backed up and copied. Little bastard’s going down.”

I was searching for the words that would get me out of air-sharing distance in the minimum timeframe when Kris appeared at the top of the stairs and started on the usual “I know you normally have a little you-space at lunchtime, but Fliss and me were wondering—” so I jumped at the long-avoided lunch date.

It has to be said, she handled the shock well. I’d thought she only even asked anymore out of a misjudged sense of obligation, but it seems Kris and Fliss, who work the Leisure and Lifestyle aisles, genuinely wanted to get to know me better. Well, I sure made them regret that.

What I didn’t realise was that this was a special retirement lunch for Supervisor Sam (apparently there’d been a “Community Memo”, but I’ve got a filter to delete those.) By the time I realised it was not going to be three of us grabbing a Panini at the store café but a whole bunch of people, including Jezza, at a semi-fancy restaurant two blocks down, it was too late to do anything about it. I am not good with formality – I’m barely passable at informality, and most comfortable with no mality at all. But given that I earn a living as a loudmouth, people don’t get that. Elaine’s so funny and confident and loud – she’ll be the life of the party! So every time there’s a lull and people stop talking, they turn and look at me, like I’m meant to be entertaining them. That’s a lot of pressure for a Friday lunchtime. So naturally I started drinking.

Those of you who heard some of my whimsical anecdotes around the campfire after a couple of tinnies can probably finish this story for yourselves. I can’t remember exactly what it was I said to Jezza when he told me how much he’d appreciated my recent lack of deviation from the script, but it was specific, derogatory and involved polenta.

I’m still waiting for the comeback. I doubt he’ll actually fire me – not for this, anyhow – that’d make him look petty, and he’d hate to look petty. But the only reason he’s not fired me before now is the knowledge that he’ll get quizzed about it by my totally unsought and slightly unsettling fan club downstairs. Now they’ve seen me in action, up close and personal, I doubt he’ll have as much difficulty justifying it, and with Sam’s imminent departure putting a promotion in the offing, nobody’ll be wanting to cross Jezza. Guess my days here are numbered.
17 Responses to *Still hating work...*

**Mei** · February 20, 2026 at 11:57 pm

I never notice you find it difficult to make friends when I meet you. You are always very sociable in Vietnam.

**Elaine** · February 21, 2026 at 12:12 am

It was kind of a different situation. I guess cause we were outdoors so much of the time, I didn’t feel too cooped up with you guys. And you’ve got to admit, I did have my anti-social moments, especially with the group leaders. I think it was mostly my social graces that got us dubbed the Bad Influences.

**Jack** · February 21, 2026 at 12:29 am

You can't go taking all the credit – it was me influenced Mei to join us. ;-

**Ash** · February 21, 2026 at 12:31 am

I think Jack and Elaine joined forces in corrupting the whole expedition. Mei and I were both set on clean living and scholarly pursuits until you introduced us to the “Campfire Critters Drinking Game.” And I, for one, can't thank you enough.

**Kittylama** · February 21, 2026 at 12:32 am

OMG, I missed that!! What was the campire critters drinking game??

**Elaine** · February 21, 2026 at 12:34 am

Drink when you see a critter. Drink twice if it bites you. I think there was a variation where you had to drink as many times as it had legs, but for some reason I don’t recall much about that evening.

**Jack** · February 21, 2026 at 12:35 am

Yeah, then you started blinking everybody vids of millipedes.

**AK_Hailstorm** · February 21, 2026 at 12:36 am

Destroy brain cells!

**Elaine** · February 21, 2026 at 12:37 am

Good times...

**Ash** · February 21, 2026 at 12:41 am
Am I the only one old-fashioned enough to find something unsettling about the fact we could be in the middle of a rainforest, 20 miles from a village post office that couldn’t guarantee to get a letter home within a fortnight, all plugged into our handsets blinking each other wildlife vids?

Jack · February 21, 2026 at 12:43 am
Welcome to the W4, old man. You’re never out of range of a geosynched LEO satellite.

Mei · February 21, 2026 at 12:49 am
I always think this, until I cannot reach my family. I don’t remember any time when I don’t have internet in my pocket. What is it like for my parents and grandmother now? Even if they escape the sickness, they must feel like the world is gone away.

Ash · February 21, 2026 at 12:53 am
If they’re my generation, they’ll remember life before the internet, and they may even find other ways to get messages through. It will probably just take a little longer.

We’re thinking of you here and hoping for the best.

Elaine · February 21, 2026 at 12:56 am
Ditto that from here. You just take care of you, and when you do hear something, whatever it is, let us know what we can do to help.

Mei · February 21, 2026 at 1:23 am
There is little anybody can do to help, but I know you are all here.

Jack · February 21, 2026 at 12:58 am
I wish I could be there for you – well, I more wish you could be here, but you know that. SkIMP me soon as anything comes up.

Kittyllama · February 21, 2026 at 1:00 am
Big squishy XX!!HUGS!!XX :"){
Preparing and protesting

Yesterday we are supposed to begin lectures again, but nobody can travel and only students or tutors living in Beijing can come back.

We have a big meeting in the auditorium with students, lecturers, office staff, caretakers, canteen and cleaning staff, and decide we will keep the university running, with many student volunteers to do the work of staff not here. Most courses have no lecturers, but we continue to study for ourselves. The third year and post-graduate students also teach some classes.

Now Spring Festival is over, people want to know when they can return to their family, and we dare to break the ban on public gathering. There are calls for protests, but also for patience, to wait for a vaccine. After the meeting today, many hundreds of us have a silent protest outside the campus, wearing our flu masks and holding a banner with the words “End the Silence”. Nobody is arrested then, but some police come into the campus today and five students are taken for questioning. The police come to Li’s room when she is out. I live in the next room – because many rooms are empty now, we can have more space. I hear them look through all her notes and talking about her socnet records. They take away the workset in her room. I SkIMp her a message and hope so much that she did not leave a handset behind, where they will hear it. When I hear no sound from her room, I know she has her handset with her and I turn off my sound so that they will
not hear if she replies. I sit on the bed and hope they don’t come into my room. After a long time, I hear them leave Li’s room. I wait to hear the boots on the stairwell, but no, instead I hear the knock on my door! I do not know what to do – if I let them in, they may take my handset and see Li reply to me. If I do not let them in, they may break in and find that I tried to hide from them, and take my workset and find how I search independent newsnets for Xiuning every day. I cannot hide under the desk, because they will hear if I move the chair. I stay sitting on the lower bed, slowly pull up my knees and hold my breath. They try to open the door, then they talk – do we break in or come back later? They do not know who lives in this room, they only want to ask questions about Li. They will come back if they do not find her.

Li had my message and cut her hair and buys a new face mask before she returns to campus. Now, we both move into another building, and we are not in the next room to each other. A student volunteer who supports the protests is keeping the room keys, and lets us swap them without changing the record. Li is not afraid – she is angry and prepares to make a response to the arrests at the next meeting.

I do not like this room so much – it is on the ground floor, and I cannot see beyond the campus from my window, I must go to the roof from the fire escape to see the outline of the mountains on a clear day. Most of the migrant workers return to their Beijing accommodation after New Year, but some choose to stay on the campus and join the protest with us. No senior staff here, so there is nobody to say they have to leave or to pay rent, but we all decide together to stop normal rent, and everybody who stays on campus will pay a small amount that we use to buy food to all share. Food begins to be expensive, because there is a lot of precautions and difficulty in the transport, but if the canteen makes an order we can buy a lot at once, and it is cheaper for everybody.

8 thoughts on “Preparing and Protesting”

Jack on February 24, 2026 at 11:08 pm said:

This is getting way too real now. I know there’s no way you can get out anymore, but maybe you could get away from the campus and lie low for a while? Stay in a hotel or something?
Mei on February 25, 2026 at 8:20 am said:
I have my study and meetings here, and many duties on campus that I volunteer for. I will do all I can to not get arrested, but I will not run away. I think you don’t understand anything I tell you.

Ash on February 24, 2026 at 11:28 pm said:
It’s beginning to look as if you’ve got more pressing and immediate dangers around you than the Blood Flu. Make sure your identity’s protected – both online and at demonstrations. Time’s moved on, and perhaps you know better than I do what precautions you need to be taking, but do make sure you take them.

Mei on February 25, 2026 at 8:21 am said:
I will be very careful. We are considering in our next meeting what is the safest thing for us to do. I will tell you more soon.

AK_Hailstorm on February 24, 2026 at 11:41 pm said:
Fight the power, Mei!

Kittyllama on February 24, 2026 at 11:44 pm said:
Be careful! It sounds so dangerous there! :-O

Elaine on March 1, 2026 at 7:43 am said:
I’m hearing news of confirmed cases of Blood Flu in Beijing – are you OK?

Mei on March 1, 2026 at 9:22 am said:
I cannot say more now, but will blog soon. I will be OK – don't worry for me. But if the report is true that the Blood Flu spreads faster now, I think you all should be preparing for yourselves.
Exhausting day. I was on an early shift, so by the time Sue and Sarah get home I’ll just about have the energy to eat with them before I crash. If I try to stay up till bedtime, I’ll just doze off in front of the homset and wake up with a sculpture of used envelopes and teaspoons on my head. Still, at least it gives me a free afternoon, which I’ve been using to get the potatoes and onions in the ground. It was almost warm in the garden. Some precocious daffodils are poking their heads out, and it feels like spring. I let the chickens out of their run to have a peck around the lawn, found a couple of eggs in their roosting pod and contemplated an omelette. For an hour and a half, life began to feel pretty decent.

Then I came in to find this on the front doormat:

Dear Number 92,

We noted, today, that you continue to allow your Chickens to roam freely, in the Garden, despite the current Global Crisis, concerning H5N1 (Asian Flu/Bird Flu). We find this behaviour, to be highly irresponsible, and believe it to be creating a Health Hazard to our Community.

We kindly request, that you either dispose of your Chickens, in line with whatever Health And Safety Regulations may be concerned, or keep them secured in a suitable shelter, where they may not spread their Infections to Children; Wildlife; or Pets.

If we see them, roaming freely again, we will be forced to report the Incident to the Proper Authorities on such matters.

Kind regards,

Number 94

I responded:
Dear Neighbour,

I received your note, and felt I should clarify the situation. There is a great deal of misinformation circulating about the current H5N1 strain, chiefly the idea that it is primarily spread by poultry. I understand your concerns, but they are misplaced. For a start, I check my chickens daily for signs of any kind of infection or illness, and I can assure you that they are in excellent health.

Secondly, the avian strain of H5N1 is quite different to the human strain. You’re not in any danger of catching ‘flu from a chicken unless you get far more intimate with it than either of you would deem appropriate. Even then, what you catch would not be the strain you are thinking of, and it could not be passed on to other humans. When you look up the Health and Safety regulations concerning the spread of both the avian and human strains of H5N1, please do read them carefully. If I can be of any further assistance, please feel free to knock on my door and speak to me in person about your concerns.

Yours cordially,

Ashraf

I may live to regret that last part, but even having a public disagreement on the doorstep is better than passing paranoid notes between numbers. I wonder when this neighbourhood became so insular that we don’t even know the names of the people next door, or deign to speak to them like people at all.

7 responses to “I am not a number…”

Mei February 26, 2026 at 3:42 pm

You can expect this when people begin to be frightened. It may be the safe thing is to give up the chickens.

Jack February 26, 2026 at 3:45 pm

No way, nobody gets between Ash and his chickens!
Sarah February 26, 2026 at 4:09 pm
they tuch r chikns ill send em a messge

Ash February 26, 2026 at 4:10 pm
And yours will be better punctuated, at least.

Sarah February 26, 2026 at 4:11 pm
str8 ^ ill punctuate the tires on ther crppy 4×4

Ash February 26, 2026 at 4:14 pm
Let’s not go that far...

Elaine February 26, 2026 at 11:25 pm
At least, not on a public socnet. ;-)
I gotta get out of this place

So Blood Flu panic is heating up down here since that maybe-possibly-probably-not diagnosis in Cairns. You can't walk down a high street without getting half a dozen bottles of steri-spray thrown at you, and Jezza’s raving 'cause we just ordered a truck-load of the stuff and now every quack, god-squad and insurance peddler is giving it away outside the door.

I didn't feel like taking the lunchtime walk of shame to sit on my own in the caf today. I mostly eat in the DJ booth these days, which is a little claustrophobic but does mean I don't even have to pass Coll, though that doesn't stop him shouting me his latest plots and schemes, or his analysis on how liberal immigration policies will kill us all. At least he doesn't seem to expect a response.

I don’t know why he confides in me, except that I’m a captive audience given the room arrangement. He doesn’t tell me everything, though. I know where the security cameras are, and I’ve seen images on his monitors from places they aren’t. I reckon the creepy fucker spends as much time watching the staff as the stock. I take a careful sweep of this room at the start of the day, I tell ya. I’d dob him in, only I reckon Jezza’s in on it. It would explain his rumoured ability to hear a shelf-stacker whisper “union” from two floors away.

I got to get out of here before I lose sight of the last road sign back to sanity.

7 responses to I gotta get out of this place
Ash · March 1, 2026 at 11:45 pm
I hope work looks up for you soon. There's always a danger that a really poisonous workplace will turn you into the colleagues you hate. Are you looking for other work?

Elaine · March 1, 2026 at 11:59 pm
Always, but my CV isn't exactly a glowing endorsement. Something'll show up, though. And when I quit this place, book a ringside side. It'll be spectacular.

Ash · March 2, 2026 at 12:06 am
Are you going to blow the whistle on some nefarious financial corruption and send the entire Colmart corporation crashing down on itself?

Elaine · March 2, 2026 at 12:07 am
Much better than that.

Jack · March 2, 2026 at 3:13 am
You're gonna go postal on your boss with an uzi?

AK_Hailstorm · March 2, 2026 at 3:14 am
You're gonna torch the store?

Elaine · March 2, 2026 at 11:05 am
Maybe not as good as that. But I got plans.
Our quarantine begins

Posted on March 03, 2026

Today is the lantern festival, but like New Year public gathering is forbidden, we are told to stay indoors and not meet in big numbers. Still, people release lanterns from their windows and balconies. Why would people risk so much to break this rule? There is a lot to wish for. The socnets are on fire with virtual lanterns – so many people, all wishing for the same thing. For us, in the campus, we wish for the next 28 days to pass quickly.

Our last meeting decided we cannot wait when more Beijing people begin to fall ill. A medical advice team, mostly postgraduate students but also Li and even some lecturers, produce a leaflet about precautions. The face masks we all wear have little use, both the cheap and expensive ones – it is like holding out water with a sieve. They say we must quarantine the whole campus, and today we agree this and we close our gate. We have enough food. If we allow nobody into the campus for 28 days, this will prove that nobody here is infected, and then we will ask to be allowed to leave Beijing and go to our families. We plan this for a long time, but I could not say on even a private post to my friends. We know that there must be crisis outside before we can safely do this and be left alone for long enough to set up what we need.
If this will work, we must keep the campus secure. Others may try to join us, or police may try to remove us since we do not have the authority to take over the campus: this is not only a quarantine, but occupation. We hope the authorities will see that it is a good plan, and leave us alone, but we are prepared for them to try to take control.

Nobody is to come in the walls for 28 days. People can leave, but then they cannot come back inside. This morning, we close the gates and post signs saying not to come in, notices explaining what we do. We try to avoid any political words, as this will bring attention we do not want, but we know it is impossible to do this without opposing the authorities.

We did not tell the press before as we do not want the news to spread very fast – this will only bring people wanting to join us or stop us. But we know the news will spread, and we prepare to make statements when they come to us. I am a part of the press team – we will answer questions to the university socnet pages and we have a loud speaker ready to speak to journalists from behind the gates.

Inside the quarantine, we have agreed our rules, and these are put on leaflets all over the campus. Everybody now has a private room. This is a great luxury, when in normal term-time we are four people in every room – but also lonely, since we must all live very separately now, with no close contact. We have a rota for distributing food to the rooms, and a timetable for using washing rooms. When we leave the room we wear gloves and a mask – not to stop us catching the virus but to stop us spreading it by a door handle or light switch. We have a strict procedure for washing – use hand gel and spray the sink before turning the tap, then wash, then disinfect the sink, then disinfect hands before turning the tap again.

We communicate through a private forum on a secure Socnet – all the homesets in the rooms are now secure, and we all make sure our handsets are secure, too, and keep these charged up in case of a power cut. We have a medical team running the advice forum, also forums for sharing recipes and practical advice, a forum for every kind of studies where people can share notes and arrange lectures on SkMp, forums for social chatting and for playing games. This will keep us from feeling too isolated.

A new meme for the month: It is maybe a little depressing for you, but important to me now to know that my friends are prepared. When we first hear of the Blood Flu, we say
that this is just Vietnam, and I never think of it coming to China. Then it came to Guanxi, and I did not think it would come to anybody I know. Then there was Anhui, and everybody I know was cut off from me, and still I think Beijing will be safe. Only now is this real for me, and I know that many of you think, like I did, that this is a long way away, this is a China thing, you are safe. I hope you are right, but I want you to believe, for this meme, that you are wrong. I ask you all to say what you will do now so you will be safe when the Blood Flu reaches your country, and to do these things even if you think this is silly. This is the one thing you can do at this time to help me. I feel safer to know others will be safe.

16 thoughts on “Our quarantine begins”

Jack on March 3, 2026 at 11:06 pm said:
I knew you were planning something – but this is pretty epic! Perhaps being in all day will give you the time for more chatting on SkMp…

Mei on March 3, 2026 at 11:07 pm said:
Maybe, but I am very busy with all my duties.

Ash on March 3, 2026 at 11:11 pm said:
Well, you seem pretty well organised – but what will you do if they just decide to come in and arrest you all?

AK_Hailstorm on March 3, 2026 at 11:13 pm said:
You need a defence strategy. And guns.

Mei on March 3, 2026 at 11:14 pm said:
Some things, we accept we can do nothing, but we can start an idea and hope for it to spread. Other universities do the same already, and some communities, too. But maybe we surprise you – we are not completely helpless.
Kittyllama on March 3, 2026 at 11:16 pm said:
This is so awesome!! Good luck with the quarantine – the whole world’s talking about it!! :-D :-D

Elaine on March 4, 2026 at 7:18 am said:
Hey, I saw your campus on the ABC newsfeed! Didn’t see you, but was it your voice reading the statement?

Mei on March 4, 2026 at 7:21 am said:
Maybe – I read the English translation to the press just 30 minutes ago!

Elaine on March 4, 2026 at 7:22 am said:
I saw it a little too early, then. It must be from yesterday.

Ash on March 4, 2026 at 7:48 am said:
I think they showed Mei on the BBC – I recognised the voice.

Elaine on March 4, 2026 at 7:49 am said:
BLink it, BLink it!

Mei on March 4, 2026 at 7:51 am said:
The BBC report is also from yesterday. I don’t think the International press use mine.

Jack on March 4, 2026 at 7:52 am said:
Well, they suck. I wanted to hear your version

Mei on March 4, 2026 at 7:53 am said:
It is the same words. You hear my voice a lot. ;-}
Ben on March 4, 2026 at 11:04 pm said:

Just checking in to make sure your medical team’s read the latest WHO report on Reliflu. I believe they’ve stopped sending health workers through the blockades now, which means I’m not going to reach you – sorry about that, but I’m soon to be quarantined myself, in more comfort than most by the looks of it, and when I’m cleared I’ll be sent straight home.

If I’m not cleared, if it turns out I’m infected, I’ll have to stay on the anti-virals until a cure can be developed – that’ll be a disaster, there’s so many of us and nowhere to send us. I try not to think about what happens to the infected ones when we run out of Reliflu. I’m sure Red Meds will keep us stocked as long as it’s possible, but – yeah, like I say, trying not to think about it.

But I wanted to make sure the student quarantines heard it from someone who knows. I know it’s only supposed to be health workers and security forces who got Reliflu, but this stuff always gets around and you need to be aware of it. If anybody has taken Reliflu since the start of the quarantine, 28 days won’t be enough. Even WHO don’t know yet how long someone can remain infectious without symptoms on this stuff. Thing is, if they do stop taking it, and they’re infected, they could die, so an outright ban will be difficult. Anybody who’s taken it needs to either leave the quarantine or stop taking it and re-start the clock on their isolation.

Mei on March 5, 2026 at 2:41 am said:

Thanks Ben – we have the report and already have banned anti-virals from the quarantine. Anybody who wants to keep taking them must leave. There is no way to enforce this – they are easy to hide. But we have to trust one another, or what hope is there for any of us?
Like a Boy Scout

So Mei’s meme is, what are we doing to prepare ourselves for Blood Flu? It happens this is something I’ve put a little thought into – well, not for Blood Flu specifically, but y’know how it is when you watch those old disaster movies and you look around your place and you think, “Well, I’ll store my food supplies in the waterproofed basement and run a dynamo from the tank and keep a cache of weapons in that roofspace and split the ammo and fuel supplies between the buildings with thought to that vulnerable point on my perimeter where there’s no direct line of sight from the water tower and—” you get the gist. I’m not saying I think it’ll happen, but this is one of the ways I spend an idle hour. So I reckon I’m pretty well prepped.

I figure, I’m in a good place for it if it did happen. We’re way out from centres of population, and we can hole up here indefinitely – long as we learn to really like beans and squash, or maybe breed woodchucks. If the mains water goes we got the tower that sees to most of our irrigation needs outside of a drought, and would serve pretty well as a watch-tower if we had to defend the perimeter from looters, zombies or whatever. We got stores of food and the means to grow more. We got shelter, weapons, enough of us to defend ourselves and not too many to feed.
I guess the main thing I’d need to do is secure the perimeter a little better, cause at the moment it’s just a wire fence. I need to make sure I got a range of foods stored, and something to purify water that’s been sitting in the tank. I need fuel for the generator in case the electric goes. None of this stuff is hard.

So I guess no need to worry about me – I’m pretty much all set. If anything went down with the outside world, this is pretty much the safest and best place I could imagine being.

All that’s missing is Mei. But nothing we can do about that now except wait, and hope.

3 thoughts on “Like a boy scout…”

Mei March 4, 2026 at 7:31 pm
I, too, am in the place I need to be. Thank you, Jack – I am happy to know you have your family and a safe home.

Jack March 4, 2026 at 7:32 pm
Not rising to the Woodchuck bait, huh?

Mei March 4, 2026 at 7:35 pm
Oh, I see it. Yeah, no eating woodchucks! Sorry, I am a little busy since the quarantine begins!
Everybody must hear by now that W4 access comes back to all provinces and there is news from Anhui. On our Quarantine forum there is much joy and grief, much discussion, much speculation on what is true and what is still kept silent, but for me only one thing is important – my family are safe.

I spoke for an hour on SkIMp with my mother, father and grandmother. They are thin and very pale from little food, but not sick from flu. The flu was not so bad there as in Guanxi, they say, though still very many have died. The day I call from the station is the morning after soldiers came to my home – to every home in Xiuning. My father tells me they wear special suits and helmets with masks all the way around their faces. They leave a bag of rations and seal all the doors and downstairs windows of the house – nobody is to leave their home until they are given permission – they say anybody they find outside, they will shoot them. They say they will deliver more food, but they do not say when. Of course, immediately when the soldiers leave, they go to the homeset but find they have no connection. They do not know if this is only them, or everybody in the town, or in the province, or in all China, and there is no way to find out.

My family stay in the house for two weeks not knowing why, not knowing what happens outside. They hear the army trucks go by often, but no more food comes. When they have eaten the last of the rations, they paint on a sheet “3 people need food” and hang
this outside the window, but no more food is coming, and after two days my grandmother cannot stand this and climbs out from the upstairs window while my parents are sleeping. My grandmother is 68, but very healthy. She climbs onto a flat roof we have above the door and from here down to the ground, then she goes to the store. She finds this sealed up, like the house, but then hears a truck coming and hides behind the big waste bins. It smells very bad because nobody takes the rubbish away for a long time. She sees soldiers go into the shop and load boxes of food on their truck. She waits until they are in the shop to fetch another load, then goes to the truck. My mother is very angry with her when she tells me this, saying, “What if there are more soldiers in the truck? What if they forget something and came back?” but my grandmother says, “Then I die, and you starve. If I never try, we all starve. What’s the difference?” She took a big bag of rice and ran home. By now my parents know she is gone and are watching from the window, looking for her, but not daring to shout for her. They have knotted together sheets to pull her up so they do not have to break the seal on the door. If she did not risk her life for this food my family will have starved.

Now, with the Blood Flu spread so far, the army leave only a very few soldiers to secure Xiuning. People begin to spread messages between houses and apartments. They talk between windows or throw a paper wrapped around a stone, or hold up a message at a window. They spread the message of a date and a time: March 6, 6am. At this time, everybody leaves their houses with anything they can find to use as a weapon, and they chase the soldiers out of town and take back all the food. This is not in the newsnets – the official news says that Xiuning has completed its quarantine and the people come out to celebrate. Of course, then all the journalists at all the Chinese embassies ask, if the quarantine is over and the area is safe, why is the W4 still restricted? And they say this is a technical fault, and then in two hours W4 is back! When my family hear that PKU is in quarantine, they fear that the same thing has happened to me – we talk for a long time before I make them believe we make this quarantine ourselves.

It is so good to see them again, but I feel strange, tense, like it is not real, like I still do not know for sure they are OK. Why do I feel this way? SkIMp is like a movie – very real while you watch it, but just a story when the image is gone. I felt so happy and so much relief to see them, and now I feel empty, uncertain, afraid – and alone. They were here, but they are so very far away. And Li is so very near, but just as far away. I want to hold
somebody and take comfort, but I must stay alone for another 24 days. I do not know how I will do this.

I believe others feel the same. A strange communication between students has started itself, a game we make up as we go with no rules and no purpose except to say “I am here”. It is mostly in the evening, before we go to sleep, a person will knock on the wall, and the person in the next room will knock back, and run to knock on the wall on the other side, and the knock goes around the building and comes back again. We also knock on the floor, and climb on the bunk to knock on the ceiling. At first it is just knocking, then patterns begin, some made up, some following the rhythm of a pop song. Messages can pass this way without words, a line from a song that says how we feel. Of course, we can go on the forum and post song lyrics or even sing to the person next door on SkIMp, but this is not the same. A knock is a touch, you feel that the one who sends it is there, they have a reality. We are all alone, all afraid, all waiting to find out what will happen to us. We hold on to this small comfort and wait, together and alone.

6 thoughts on "Breaking the silence"

Elaine on March 7, 2026 at 8:40 am said:
Glad to hear everyone’s alright, beansprout. Stay strong.

Ash on March 7, 2026 at 7:36 pm said:
I know you say you’re on a Socnet that protects your identity, but are you sure it’s safe to talk like this online when it’s clear from context that you’re an organiser of the quarantine? You’ve even said when your voice was recorded. Be very careful, Mei.

Mei on March 7, 2026 at 7:39 pm said:
There are many young organisers who might be me, and I change a few details so I and my friends cannot be identified, like using only one part of our names. There are many blogs like mine, and now I have bigger problems. Maybe later, I
will be worried, but now it seems to communicate what happens here is the most important thing.

Jack on March 7, 2026 at 8:15 pm said:
I get that it's important, but I wish you'd go somewhere safer to do it. Can't somebody else do stuff for the quarantine? I hardly speak to you, and I worry about you getting arrested.

Mei on March 7, 2026 at 8:17 pm said:
Other people do as much as I do – I will do my part, always, and the quarantine must come first now. We do not think there will be raids yet – too much danger to spread the virus, and too much attention in the newsnets. They will leave us alone until our quarantine is ended, I think. But we will be prepared. Don't worry.

Kittyllama on March 7, 2026 at 8:35 pm said:
Be very careful, Mei! What would we do if you weren't there to tell us what's going on? XX!!HUGS!!XX
Community Cohesion – some assembly required...

Once again I find myself with a meme to answer. What will I do to prepare for the possibility of Blood Flu coming to the UK?

Well, I’m doing all the usual – stocking up on tins and dried food, bottled water, candles, wind-up torches and handset chargers, gas for the camp stove. I’ve even got our wood-burning fire up and running again, after a few false starts, and a store of logs in the back under a tarp. But there’s something harder to arrange that I can’t help feeling is going to be a whole lot more important, and that’s a little bit of community cohesion. My parents lived through a revolution, and had to escape it when they saw the tide turning against the free Iran they thought they’d been fighting for. If the community isn’t strong enough to overcome its fears, it will turn to ideologies of fear, and turn them on itself. If there’s one thing I learned from my parents, it’s that it won’t be enough to know what I’d do if a crisis came to the UK – I need to know what the people around me will be doing.

In China, despite horrific epidemics that have devastated whole provinces, students whose own families have been affected are calmly entering into effective, well-planned, self-organised quarantines. In the UK, on the other hand, people are turning on their neighbours at the first rumour of a nosebleed. Panic buying becomes looting, looting becomes rioting, rioting is put down brutally and sparks more rioting, and the hospital’s full of the injured before anybody even falls sick. There is altogether too much talk of closing borders and isolating areas and not enough coming together to plan and prepare. And we all know that it’s because nobody really thinks it’s going to come here – Blood Flu panic is just a handy excuse to disguise any underlying grievances as a legitimate public health concern.

So rather than simply list my own measures, I’m looking at putting together a community response group to ensure that, should my neighbourhood find itself cut off,
there are supplies and plans to distribute food to all who need it, and ensure communications with one another and the outside world. I haven't been involved in anything like this for years – I'll let you know how it goes.

**3 responses to “Community cohesion – some assembly required...”**

Elaine March 7, 2026 at 11:34 pm

Sounds logistical. How you gonna do it?

Ash March 8, 2026 at 12:07 am

Well, that's the issue, isn't it? Not everybody even uses the local Socnet, though I've started a thread there already. Next step is to call a public meeting and flyer it on lamp posts, shop windows and even door to door. The idea will either draw people together, or it won't.

Sarah March 8, 2026 at 12:10 am

yep ule get us chast outta town wiv pitchforks.
We are too late.

Posted on March 09, 2026

Of course, we are too late. I think part of me knew this already – we still have the mass meetings after the police come into the campus. They take the anti-virals, so may have spread the virus among us.

Twenty-four people on the campus are sick now. My neighbour in the next room was coughing all of last night. I make food for her and leave it outside the door today, and she takes it, but does not answer anymore when I call. The coughing stops now – I think she is sleeping. I will know soon, if there is a return when I knock on the wall. If there is no reply, she will not be the first to die, and there will be more. I do not know her, only her name. I ask on the forum if anybody knows who she is – her friends say they SkIMp her and will speak to her family.

There is no point to send a medical student – just like outside, they can do nothing. If somebody goes to the doctor now with flu, they put them in a secure ward. There is no treatment, no cure. Mostly it is young, healthy people dying. Children and elderly people do not get the virus so quickly – it takes longer and they can recover from the illness sometimes. But the most healthy person will always die. Li explains why this is to me, about how the virus uses the immune system to attack the body. It seems crazy, to be healthy makes you in the most danger. We fear our own youth and health now, but more than this we fear that our quarantine will be broken from outside. The army patrol
the street, shooting anybody who leaves their homes. They stay away from the campus so far – we think they are too busy to enforce our quarantine when we enforce it ourselves, but perhaps they will decide they need to patrol the street inside our gates, too. Then we cannot reach our stores – all our careful planning and rotas will be useless. Perhaps it would be better if we all keep a personal store in our room. Many of us did keep some personal food as well, but not everybody, and not enough for the whole quarantine.

When I finish writing this I know it will be time to find out if my neighbour is alive, and I do not dare to stop writing. This morning, as I go to fetch the food for my corridor, I meet a cat, following me all the way to the dining hall and back to the dorm building. I do not know where he comes from – maybe his owner is dead. I know the virus cannot travel through an animal, so I let him into the building. He follows me all the way to my room. I give him some rice and fish sauce and he eats a little, but mostly he wants to sleep on a human. Like me, he wants to feel a touch, comfort, company. I feel grateful that I have this, and guilty that others do not.

The girl next door to me must know that she will die, and she is alone. She makes little noise, she does not cough anymore. She does not talk. Is she so brave, to make sure she will infect nobody else? Or does she have no strength to go out of the room? If I listen, I can hear her breathing. It sounds so painful, like she breathes through water. I wish she will cough again. I cannot stand this sound. I don’t know how I didn’t hear before, it is so loud.

I cannot sleep when she sounds so bad. What will happen if I go in? I can put on my mask, and look at her, and hold her hand, then wash my hands very well. I might not catch the virus, and nobody will know.

13 thoughts on “We are too late.”

Jack on March 10, 2026 at 3:27 am said:

Jeez, Mei, stay in your room, don’t go over there! There’s nothing you can do for her. Tell me you didn’t go over there...
Mei on March 10, 2026 at 7:04 am said:
I did not go. I was too afraid.

Ash on March 10, 2026 at 7:07 am said:
You're right to be afraid, and to be cautious. You're doing all you can for the others in your quarantine. Just remember that you're more use to them alive. You need to take care of yourself in order to take care of others. I hope you managed to sleep.

Elaine on March 10, 2026 at 7:59 am said:
Just be really careful, OK? Don't take unnecessary risks. Are you sure it's safe keeping a cat? I know the cat can't catch the virus, but if somebody else is keeping the cat it could spread germs between you, couldn't it?

Mei on March 10, 2026 at 8:02 am said:
I am not sure anything is safe anymore, but I know that if I catch the flu from something through touch it is probably from a door handle, not a cat.

Elaine on March 10, 2026 at 8:03 am said:
Oh, that makes me feel so much better. Don't go touching any strange door handles, then. And just...I don't know, wrap up warm, take vitamins? I don’t know what to tell you. Just be safe.

Mei on March 10, 2026 at 8:04 am said:
I will. You also. I see the feeds about how cases spread down the East Coast of Australia.

Elaine on March 10, 2026 at 8:05 am said:
Yeah, we're getting pretty busy with the handspray and the masks here, but if it wasn't enough for you, it's not going to be enough for us.
Kittyllama on March 10, 2026 at 8:07 am said:
OMG, you have a cat? I want pictures!!

Jack on March 10, 2026 at 9:36 am said:
You have to get out of there now, before you get sick, go someplace safer!

Mei on March 10, 2026 at 9:48 am said:
There is nowhere safer. Of course people here are sick, people all over Asia are sick, soon people everywhere will be sick! But we have plenty of food and we are free to go around the campus by our own rules. And when somebody dies, as my neighbour has now died, we wait long enough to know the air is safe and the volunteer group who have special suits from the biology labs, they take the body and put it into the cold storage, and other people find out where the family is and tell them. We do things better here than outside, where people have little supplies, are shot in the street for leaving their home and nobody knows about the dead until the area is safe.
This is the best place for me to be. I cannot leave, and I do not want to leave. I will survive here, or I will die here. Can you understand?

Jack on March 10, 2026 at 9:49 am said:
I can’t understand why you didn’t leave when you had the chance. I can’t understand how you keep saying you’re better off there when people around you are dying.

Mei on March 10, 2026 at 9:50 am said:
Jack, please – my family read this blog. We will talk on SkIMp, later, when I finish my duty on the forum.
Quarantining myself

I can’t think of anything but Blood Flu lately. I try to imagine it coming here, like Mei’s convinced it will, but I can’t. I know something hit San Francisco, but I think that’s just folk being jumpy at every cough – there’s no way the infected can get past the closed airports and border quarantines. Then again, neither can just about all the seasonal workers the industry relies on, especially us small farmers. We’re just sitting here waiting to see what collapses first – the borders or the economy. Dad’s started calculating whether it’s better to branch out into bioplastics and lose our Friendly Frankenstein status or just sell up and be done with it. I kind of went a little mad when he said that. I grew up here, I don’t ever want to leave this place. So I just keep thinking it’ll blow over, and then refreshing my feeds and looking at more depressing stats.

It’s unbelievable how many people are estimated dead in Guanxi – it’s like, the entire population of New York City, or double the population of the whole of New Jersey, and that’s just in the one province. I just keep comparing the figures and then thinking, no, I can’t get my head round that. And then I just think of Mei and those students in PKU, surrounded by all that and holding out. It’s too huge. I can’t imagine it. I keep saying the wrong thing because I’ve just got no idea what it’s like for her.
So I’ve decided to do something that might sound dumb. I’m going to find out. I’m going to stay in my house, seeing no-one, until the end of Mei’s quarantine. Call it a romantic gesture, or a safety measure, or whatever. I’ll do my duties around the farm, but I’ll stay out of talking distance of everybody. I’ll eat on my own and only talk on SkIMp. I’ll see what it means to be isolated.

My family aren’t as keen as I thought they’d be to get me out their hair for the next month. My sis was the first to say I’d just use it to get out of work, Mom says she doesn’t get what it’s meant to achieve and Dad thinks it’s just another pointless gesture I won’t follow through on. Like that Zombie comic. Like all the comics and animations and cover illustrations.

So what do you guys think? Do you see what I’m trying to do?

16 thoughts on “Quarantining myself”

Ash March 10, 2026 at 12:59 pm
I can sort of see it, but perhaps the best way to prove that you’re serious would be to answer your family’s concerns before you start to closet yourself away. Maybe if you used the opportunity to finish your zombie comic?

Jack March 10, 2026 at 1:01 pm
Can’t really concentrate on it. All this has taken me out of the right mindframe. I want to prove to them I’m serious by doing this quarantine. I can do that, can’t I?

Ash March 10, 2026 at 1:02 pm
To an extent, yes. But like them, I’m a little confused as to what you’re actually serious about.

Kittyllama March 10, 2026 at 1:38 pm
I think it’s a really sweet gesture!! xxx

Elaine March 10, 2026 at 6:01 pm
Wasn’t one of your new year’s resolutions to socialise more?

Jack March 10, 2026 at 6:03 pm
C’mon, I think this is a little more important.

Elaine March 10, 2026 at 6:04 pm
Sorry mate, I just don’t get why.

Jack March 10, 2026 at 6:04 pm
I guess you don’t.

Elaine March 10, 2026 at 6:10 pm
O-kay. Well, I’m sure after a few hours of solitude you’ll be able to explain just how constructive it is. I’ll look forward to your next post.

Jack March 10, 2026 at 6:13 pm
Glad to give you something to look forward to. Nice to know I’m not the only one whose social calendar’s gonna be empty the next few weeks.

Elaine March 10, 2026 at 6:18 pm
Well, yeah, I’m pretty much an anti-social animal; but that’s ’cause I haven’t seen my family in three years and I hate everybody, rather than because I’m cheesed off with my family and I’m sitting in the shed and sulking.

Jack March 10, 2026 at 6:20 pm
It’s a house, we have two houses on our land, it’s not a goddamn playpen, why can’t you get your head around that? Whatever. I don’t see much of a difference between your family situation and mine.

AK_Hailstorm March 10, 2026 at 6:36 pm
It is kind of dumb, dude.

Mei March 11, 2026 at 4:04 am
I am sorry but I agree with your mother. How will it help me or the quarantine for you to sit in your house alone? I want nothing more than to be with my family now. You cannot find out how I feel by pretending you cannot be with yours when they are a short walk away. I hope you never find out how I feel, I don’t want anybody to feel this way. Be prepared for a quarantine when you need to, but don’t waste time you could spend with your family sitting alone.

Jack March 11, 2026 at 4:01 pm

Well, I guess that’s the end of that. I said everyone would think it was a dumb idea. I guess I don’t know what else to do.

Ash March 11, 2026 at 4:03 pm

Maybe something a bit more practical. A fundraiser? If there are any NGOs still able to do work that could help. Ben’s last comment wasn’t encouraging.
Many here are sharing the reports on how General Secretary Hong Xianhua praises the student quarantines for keeping order in the universities during the disaster. This makes me angry – that she can praise us and get praise, all over the world, because she does not send the army against us, and nobody asking about the silent zones, the protests, the police raids and the students arrested or dead. Does anybody know that the same students who organised the quarantines are the ones who were in the protests? And why do many of those students now accept a SkIMp call and shake a virtual hand of the General Secretary? I think for a scrap of praise and the promise of a good career in the CCP. We must see that Hong only praises us because it is to her advantage to control the student occupations. If we talk about how the army behave at Hebei University, where they threaten students and take away their supplies, how much will Hong praise our organisation and courage?

A lot of people are afraid for me because I blog about how our occupation defies the authorities. People have an idea about China that is not really untrue, but is a little old fashioned. The government wants to suppress dissent on the internet still, but what can they do since the W4? The Socnet I use does not share information, so I am safe if nobody who knows me gives me away. Also, I am not the only one who says these things. There is safety in numbers – they cannot investigate every blog and track
everybody who criticises them, especially when resources are taken with more important matters.

I am the wrong generation to be afraid of what I write on the internet. I was 13 when the Golden Shield, “The Great Firewall of China”, fell to the W4. I remember when the satellites are launched, my parents saying: “They will never let us have this technology – it will be for the government only.” But the technology is built into all the new computers, and we are building all the computers. For a little while, they try to make it illegal to own a W4 device without permission, but they are everywhere, and there is always a set available from a black market or internet site. Though many were prosecuted, the government get more from the tax on W4 devices than the fines on those they catch with an illegal set. Of course, we all must register to the National Socnet, but they cannot stop us using another Socnet, one that will take a fake name. Since the silent zones, I understand why they are so excited for the W4 at that time. To me it is just a new technology to do the same things I always did, but to my parents it was the first time you can use the internet anywhere, at any time, totally free to say what you want. None of us knew it could be taken from us so easily. Still, they do not do that here, in Beijing, while the world watches. Instead, they try to make us their pet, take the credit for our success, but we are not fooled, our words are still free.

Would I be more free in Jack’s farm in America than here? My parents always think that the West is some place where everybody has freedom, more than we do, but in my life I never see the evidence for this. Though some places have more rules and worse punishment for a small crime, everywhere is free or nowhere is free. Since the quarantine I feel more free than ever in my life. Though what we can do is very limited, nobody tells us what we will do – we decide the rules ourselves, on a forum where everybody has an equal voice. Everywhere else in the world, say the wrong thing, have the wrong ideas or the wrong background, or don’t have enough money, and somebody will make you less free.

4 thoughts on “The W4 and freedom”

Ash on March 13, 2026 at 10:11 pm said:
What you’re doing there is inspirational. But I know how it is when you’re young and you’re united in resistance, you have right on your side, and you’ve had a few victories... you feel invincible. And that’s when you’re at your most vulnerable. Perhaps I’m just jaded, and what these quarantines have built really will change China forever. I do hope so. But just in case, just for me, make sure there’s no trace of drafts or bookmarks to this blog or your forum on any of your sets. Be really sure there’s nothing to identify you as an organiser.

Elaine on March 14, 2026 at 6:29 am said:
Got to agree with the old chicken-dipper, there, Beansprout. No point in you taking unnecessary risks.

Jack on March 14, 2026 at 6:34 am said:
That’s what I’ve been saying all along! Mei’s in enough danger from the Blood Flu without getting wound up in a damn revolution.

Mei on March 14, 2026 at 9:11 am said:
Ash, I download a Set Cleaner app that will remove all traces of the Independent Socnet from all my sets, if I enter one code on one set. I also use my National Socnet account sometimes, for some innocent browsing, so it looks like I am not hiding another Socnet.
Elaine, No unnecessary risks, but some risks are necessary.
Jack, Don’t start. Please.
Making Preparations

So, looks like I’ll get my wish about moving on from this dump – I’ve been made redundant. As of today, I’m working my three weeks’ notice.

Worst part about it is I can’t even blame Jezza, though I won’t pretend the hint of glee under his faux-regret tone went unnoticed. Turns out the experiment with “Tannoy Greeters” has been officially designated a flop, and the Colmart family are disinheriting us all. They’re going to have announcements recorded weeks in advance by a professional polenta-pusher with an Equity card, and piped into all stores on the half hour, every half hour. Next time I pass by the Leisure and Lifestyle aisles and hear the rustle of a malicious whisper, I’ll remember that, and smile. Nothing else to do now but make preparations for my departure.

That in mind, I believe I’ve got a meme owing on preparations, and a little barney on a friend’s blog the other day got me thinking about isolation and quarantine. Everybody’s got their Blood Flu emergency box of beans and bandages, but nobody’s really talking about how they’ll avoid catching the virus – because, y’know, much as I’d hate to be caught without supplies, the first rule of survival is don’t be dead. In this case, that means being in isolation before everyone else thinks of it, so I’m going to take back my disparaging remarks about Jack’s attempt to isolate himself from his own family, even though there’s not a sniff of flu as yet on his half of the continent. Myself, I don’t pretend to be in anything resembling a “quarantine”, but reading about Mei’s situation gives me
an awareness of when I’m in contact with people, and I realise I’ve been living in pretty isolated circumstances as a matter of routine.

I always had to be self-reliant. My folks washed their hands of me the day I told them I wanted to go to drama school. Gifted with what my mother liked to call a face for radio and a body for truck-driving, I’m not exactly inundated with auditions, but I work and I manage. When anything’s gone wrong in my life, whether it’s with a contract or the plumbing, I’ve looked up how to fix it myself before calling out the experts. It’s partly a lack of funds, and partly, for want of a better word, pride – if I can do something for myself, I will. I live alone, work alone and generally avoid people. I shop online, drive to work, cook and eat alone, spend my leisure time walking and camping in the outback alone. In fact, at this point, I probably haven’t been in especially close proximity to another human being for longer than Mei. Which means that if the Blood Flu is, as we speak, spreading through Australia in its silent phase, I’m safe as a cheese sarnie at a vegan convention.

Could misanthropy be my salvation? Should I thank my parents for instilling in me a crippling social dysfunction? I am making some preparations, but just to be especially paranoid or mysterious or both, I’m not going to say on a public forum what they are. Let it be known, though: I got my ideas. I’m researching systems and squirrelling away supplies. I’m gonna be just fine.

14 responses to Making Preparations

AK_Hailstorm · March 17, 2026 at 1:54 am
You're gonna go postal, ain't ya?

Mei · March 17, 2026 at 1:58 am
Well, this is good news – I think. You always tell me to be sensible. I hope what you plan is...I do not know the right word...possible without great danger or difficulty?

Jack · March 17, 2026 at 2:00 am
Not completely insane?

Elaine · March 17, 2026 at 2:06 am
Speaks, Mr. Quarantine Solidarity.
Hey, you just said that was a good idea!

I did say something that sounded a bit like that, didn't I?

You must admit, though, Jack, you weren't proposing it for the reasons Elaine was suggesting.

I'm doing it for even better reasons now. Sponsored Quarantine to raise money for the occupations, or Red Meds, or wherever I can get the money to.

So people are paying you to stay away from them?

Yes. Yes, they are. Care to pledge $50?

Well, you're already 1,000 miles from me so it's not really necessary, but since it's 3am, I can't sleep and my brain's addled, I'll do you $3 a day.

Put me down for the same. I might suggest the idea to Sarah.

This is so nice! Everybody should be as good as you and we'll soon solve everything!!

It will not be so easy, I think.
Many people who read my blog want to raise money for the student occupations. We start a bank account, and many people and organisations give us money, but right now this seems a little pointless, as we cannot buy anything – there is no delivery service besides the army to get supplies into the quarantine now, and nobody can leave the campus. We must survive on what we have until the 28 days are over. But you can donate to the independent distribution networks that deliver where the army do not. These are not government or NGO, just ordinary people who get a transport and decide to do something. They have to keep very secret, but they have good communication networks and work inside communities, so can get food where it is needed and organise local distribution before they deliver. A whole neighbourhood in Wukan, Guangdong uses the same system we have here – a schedule for going to the pick-up place and taking food for your house, so that people do not come in contact. I don’t know how they avoid army patrols. Maybe people from inside the army give them information – it is very easy to join now, and soldiers, too, have families needing to eat.

Only the army now move freely in Beijing, and the army grows every day. Requests for volunteers are all over the national Socnets, and many sign up, some wanting to help others, some hoping they will get anti-virals, others just wanting two meals a day. They are given very hard work to do. There are many recruits the same age as the students, and we talk through the video-link to those who deliver food to us. They have complex
orders, but not regular, so we cannot predict their movements. Sometimes they come only once in two weeks, another time twice in one day (we think this is an administrative error). They want to know who is in the occupation, numbers of healthy and sick people. We tell them the numbers, but not names. So far we tell them we need very little, and ask them not to break our quarantine. So far, they agree – there is not yet a food shortage in Beijing, it is only distribution that is needed.

Now I can speak with my parents in Anhui, I know it is not the same there. There is very little food and people must leave the house to look for some. Yesterday, army food trucks are in my parents’ neighbourhood, delivering a ration for the next two weeks. After the food is delivered, there is knocking at the door. It is a woman with a boy 3 years old. She is from the next neighbourhood, they do not deliver there yet, but she sees the trucks have been close by, and asks to borrow some food. She can hardly lift the child, she says she has not eaten for three days. She promises she will bring the food back when they have a delivery, and my parents give her a little rice, beans and oil. After another ten minutes, another person comes, this time an old man alone. They give him a little of their own dinner they have just cooked, but nothing to take home – they have little for themselves and cannot give to everybody. They do not answer the door again, though many more people come looking for help.

The main problem with the distributing system is not enough information. Nobody knows where the food is, when it will come. Nobody can plan to ration what they have, and when they have nothing left they must break quarantine or starve. Many of us feel very angry at how this is organised. Many people in the occupation are youth members of the Party, but even they agree that enforcing the silent zones was dangerous and shameful. If we knew what is happening, if we organised our quarantine sooner, many others would be alive now. There is much debating and arguments the political board on our forum, but these go around in a circle until somebody calls for harmony, and then everybody unites to attack that person. It has become a joke on other boards in the forum: somebody will say “I call for harmony!” when there is a disagreement on which singer is best or how to cook a noodle soup. Some worry that there is nobody in charge of the quarantine, and ask who will make us keep our rules. But we all want the quarantine to work. Why else do we stay? More important is that when the quarantine is over, to keep safe we have to remain in occupation. Then we will need to decide how we organise, what are our tactics, and who is in charge.
9 thoughts on “Delivering food and keeping harmony.”

Ben on March 20, 2026 at 6:04 am said:
Just to add to this, the NGOs and charities are still trying to get supplies in but we can only go where the army tells us to. Can’t tell you how frustrating it is knowing that we have all these supplies and international donations flooding in, but there’s nothing we can do to get help to where it’s needed. Most of the foreign aid workers have been evacuated now – I’m still waiting for my clearance. Seems to be taking a while…I know what that probably means.
We lost a lot of trust and goodwill when people heard about how our anti-virals can spread the ‘flu. They say the army aren’t on Reliflu, but we all know they have to be or they’d be dropping like flies. Just don’t let them into your occupation if you can possibly help it.

Mei on March 20, 2026 at 7:02 am said:
We will not. I hope you get clearance soon, Ben. What will happen if you don’t?

Ash on March 20, 2026 at 7:04 am said:
Ben, does that mean you’ll have to stay in China until the pandemic’s over? When do you get out?

Ben on March 20, 2026 at 7:05 am said:
Couldn’t tell you. Just hoping for a vaccine to start working before the antivirals run out.

Kittyllama on March 20, 2026 at 7:14 am said:
Good luck, Ben, we’re all thinking of you!!

Elaine on March 20, 2026 at 6:12 am said:
So you’re still getting deliveries from the army? Doesn’t that break quarantine?

Mei on March 20, 2026 at 7:03 am said:
We have a video-link to the outside of the campus. They unload the food and then move away from the doors while we take it inside.

Jack on March 20, 2026 at 7:16 am said:
Can’t the viruses travel in the packages?

Mei on March 20, 2026 at 7:23 am said:
We are very careful when we take out the food and dispose of the packaging, and disinfect all plastic surfaces and wash our hands. Even so, we have plans for growing food ourselves on the campus for when we can come out of our rooms, so we will not have to always rely on deliveries.
Meeting and mobilising

The first meeting of the Community Disaster Response Collective is planned for tonight. I’ve posted it on all the relevant Socnets and put notices in shop windows and on lamp posts, and I even did a bit of door to door with those neighbours I’m on nodding terms with.

There was a bit of interest from the Whitbys and the Macgregors. I remember Linda Macgregor from some of the Autumn of Rage demos in 2015 and she still sometimes sidles up to me with a knowing “Wotcha, Comrade” at the deli counter in Sainsbury’s. I’m trying to play down that connection: I don’t want her getting (or giving) the impression this group’s going to be confrontational with the Borough Council. I’ve booked the Town Hall.

I had the opposite problem with the Morrisons – the chicken-worriers from next door. They moved here last year from the Cotswolds, where it seems they had long experience as semi-professional community busybodies. They asked who was coming to the meeting, and kept exchanging looks and tutting when I named a few neighbours. Then Geoff clarified that what they’d meant was: who’s coming that’s important: any MPs, councillors, local business owners. I told them I’d invited the Shapiros, who run Total Convenience, and the Kaplans at Kebab Korner – turns out this wasn’t exactly what they meant, either, but rather than elaborate on who counted as a legitimate local business concern, they suggested I should have the police there to consult on security matters. I tried to pick my words carefully. I’m envisaging the group’s purpose as being relevant to scenarios in which the big businesses and authorities would be somewhat preoccupied. “This is more about how we might have to take care of ourselves, and each other,” I told them. They exchanged a stony look.

“We can take care of ourselves,” Jane said.
“And each other,” I repeated.
“We’ve got security,” Geoff added, looking me up and down.
“As a community, I mean.”
“If you want to do something to protect the community from the Asi—from the ‘flu, you can get rid of those bloody chickens in your garden. They’re unhygienic.” He leaned in, and added, “We keep chickens on farms in this country.”

There’s no use trying to involve people whose idea of community organising is writing letters to the local papers admonishing MPs for ‘letting in the wrong sort’. There’s a malicious part of me that hopes they’ll have to come crawling to the CDRC for help, which we could either begrudge them or offer freely and sanctimoniously. But no – I fervently hope that nobody ever really needs our help, and that the whole thing’s a waste of time. Except it won’t be a waste, because if nothing else we’ll get the community into one room, talking and making plans together, recognising one another in the street, and even if that’s all that comes of it, it will be worthwhile.

5 responses to “Meeting and mobilising”

Elaine March 24, 2026 at 10:13 am

So how’d it go?

Ash March 24, 2026 at 10:15 am

Not so bad – we had 50 or so come along, and we’ve got plans in motion for fundraising, and for purchasing and storing supplies. Just a few for now, but more if any emergency situations are announced. It’s really bringing people together, I think. We’ll be having another, smaller meeting at my house to talk about how we’d manage food deliveries, and the wider group will be involved through a forum.

Mei March 24, 2026 at 11:35 am

You have looked at our FAQ!
I have, and it makes interesting reading – I’m especially impressed with your rota logistics, sharing the work while making sure nobody comes into close contact. That must have taken some careful planning.

Many, many long meetings on SkIMp! Also many working groups with the experience and skills for each task, and of course we all share ideas with other occupations. It is hard work, but the Quarantine Movement begins to make a change.
How we keep the power going

Posted on March 27, 2026

Today the power has failed, not just for 3 hours like it has before but all day and much of the night. We all keep a spare battery charging for an emergency, because we rely on the forum to organise without breaking our quarantine, but the forum is slow to load, too many panicking students. What if there is no more power? This is the end! We have to all take food supplies into our rooms! No, we cannot all go out or we have to start the quarantine again! Many begin to say that if power is off for 24 hours, all quarantine rules are no longer in use and we start again. This would be a disaster for us, after all the hard work to keep people in isolation while working together.

After 18 hours, the lights go on again, and we all calm down a little and begin to talk about what we will do if the power goes for longer, or forever. We begin to speak of places on campus where we can get wood for fuel – trees we can cut down, furniture we can break. We have SkIMp workshops on how to build a dynamo powered by bicycle, to charge batteries for our handsets, and we list solar-power sources around the campus and get volunteers to connect the residential buildings to this. A group of engineers talks about making a “bobbing duck” to put in the nameless lake after the quarantine. So the power cut that nearly breaks us apart now brings us together again, with more hopes and plans for the future. It is just four days before we end our quarantine, and we look forward to keeping our community going after this, and dealing together with whatever the future brings.
I also look forward to meeting the people I speak with and never see. Yesterday, I hear a crash from above me and somebody in the upstairs room screams – his arm is broken. He is changing the light bulb from the top bunk and fell – he was drunk, and thought it was the bulb, not the power, that is broken. So I request a medical helper from the forum, but this is a big problem because it will need somebody to go into his room, and then both must go back to the beginning of their quarantine. Some medical students agree to do this for emergencies, but nobody wants to do this for such a stupid accident, so I say give me the instruction, I will do it. Then a medical student says no, he will go, it is better to be somebody with training. After 30 minutes, I hear him arrive in the room above me. I mostly don’t hear what he says, but I hear moaning and crying, then silence. I call out “Are you OK?”, and I hear from the ceiling “He is fainted!” He shouts it is OK, he will set the arm more easily now. He asks me why I volunteer to help this man, do I know him? I say I cannot stand to hear him moaning with pain all night. It is the first conversation I have without a set, for three weeks, and it is strange to think only the ceiling separates us. I climb on the top bunk, turn my ear to the ceiling. We shout and repeat our words a little, but we talk – he says it helps him to work. His name is Jian. I tell him about the girl in the next door room to me, who died near the beginning of the quarantine. I think about her in the night, when it is quiet. I know she died only a few feet from me, and there was nothing I can do to help. I listen to her coughing, I leave hot drinks outside her door until she no longer takes them, talk to her, though she cannot speak loud enough to talk back. I tell her I am here, though I know it makes no difference. When I no longer hear her coughing, I post to the medical forum. For five hours I know she is dead on the other side of the wall, and I cannot sleep. I feel like the wall is glass, like she watches me. Then two students come in a ventilator suit with a stretcher from the medical labs to wrap her in plastic bags and put her in the freezer room. I know this, though I only hear the plastic suits scrape against the wall and the rustle of bags and the squeak from the tape. I cannot stand to do this again. It is my selfishness that makes me offer to help the boy upstairs. Jian says no, it is compassion. It is good to hear him say so. We keep talking until the man wakes up and we know he’s OK.

10 thoughts on “How we keep the power going”
Ash on March 27, 2026 at 10:37 pm said:
I'm sure you made a difference to her, Mei. The most important part of what I do isn't administering treatment or clearing up the mess, it's being there – that's what everybody needs in the end. Just knowing somebody was there and knew what was happening must have been a great comfort to her.

Mei on March 27, 2026 at 10:51 pm said:
I hope so, but who can know? Maybe she wanted silence, not babble from a stranger. Maybe I annoy her. But she always returned the knocking on the wall, in the evening. I miss that game.

Elaine on March 27, 2026 at 10:52 pm said:
I don't think you annoyed her. What would you have wanted, if it was you?

Mei on March 27, 2026 at 10:53 pm said:
I would want my family. But yes, I would rather have comfort from a stranger than no comfort. You are right.

Jack on March 28, 2026 at 4:32 am said:
I'd want you there.

Mei on March 28, 2026 at 8:39 am said:
I know.

Kittylama on March 28, 2026 at 9:46 am said:
That's so sad! :-(

Kittylama on March 28, 2026 at 9:47 am said:
BTW, your new friend sounds sweet... ;-)
Hey, so you out of quarantine yet? Let us know what’s happening. Have you met these new friends yet? Are they hot? Should I worry? ;- ) How come you changed your avatar?

Mei on March 31, 2026 at 11:17 pm said:

I am out of quarantine, but very busy! I will write more when I can. I just feel I want the sky in my avatar, a piece of sky from my painting.

← Previous Next →
And I Feel Fine

I want to savour this, because I probably won’t get to say it again for some while, if ever; so believe me when I say, cheeses priced on a popsicle, you will not believe the day I’ve had!

It all started with a newscast. It could have been just an ordinary day at the office, but someone decided to let slip that the deaths in Sydney last week were confirmed as blood flu, and this led to a series of events that placed me in my current situation: holed up in the security booth, the sole occupant of my former workplace, while Canberra goes to shit around my electronic eyes and ears.

Some local reports will tell you that I started the panic buying. That’s a lie – they were rioting before I even came on the air, I just turned a random stampede into a choreographed ballet of loot and run. Who knows how bad it could have been without me? I can relate word-for-word my almost-entirely-improvised announcement, because I recorded it for posterity. It was my finest hour, my greatest performance, my tribute to Boal’s Invisible Theatre and, in all probability, my legacy, and it went like this:

Greetings shoppers, I’m Elaine, and I’m here to enhance your looting experience on behalf of Colmart on this, our last day of business.

The recommended items of the day are cough-drops and booze, but I can see the more discerning shoppers are headed for the tinned goods and the pasta &
pulses aisle. As I speak, I see on security screen 2 that there’s an altercation going on over a 2kg bag of tri-colour fusilli, and — yep, clean-up on aisle — too late, there goes a shopper and a trolleyful of corned beef and — come on now, shoppers, no fair looting her while she’s down — instead, I’d grab your last carton of semi-skimmed longlife before the security guards grab you, yes, you with the oh-so-flattering cycling shorts, on your bike, they’re coming round the back of aisle 3, no, THE OTHER WAY, where the cereal used to be...that’s it, keep running! He got away, Dorothy, he got away...

Here come the reinforcements, and I can announce ... They’re coming for you, lentils and jellybeans, and the tills have been closed, I repeat, the tills are off, and staff are being evacuated. I’ve been asked nicely to get my arse off the air, but don’t worry, people, I’m barricaded in here with the shut-off switch, I can see the security screens for inside and out and I’ll be announcing when the cops arrive, so keep on looting — it’s like the Christmas rush and the January sales all rolled into one, here, people, you gotta stock up like there’s no tomorrow, because the rumour has it there’s no tomorrow.

At this point I left them with a stirring dose of an aptly-titled REM track, turning it up loud enough to drown Jezza’s frantic banging on the office door, while I finished off my own preparations.

I’ve been squirreling away supplies in the DJ booth for weeks, and I’d made out I was going camping after work to explain the sleeping bag, water containers, camp stove and large rucksack, which I’d filled with gas canisters, a small crate of tinned food, sundry luxury items, various locks, bolts and latches and a cordless drill. The aluminium sheet for securing the skylight had been hidden behind the sound desk about a week back. I’d already secured the office door, so I took care of the roof, removed the security tag and cork from a large bottle of vintage Moët and sat back to watch the show. When Jezza started using the fire extinguisher as a battering ram, I texted him a photo of myself, champagne and cigar in hand, D-locked round the neck to the door handle.

“Leave me be or it’s going on the store socnet,” I called. The story was already on the store socnet, as it turns out, and was doing the rounds of the local newsnets until they took down everything but the evacuation procedures.
Jezza was shouting that he didn’t give a fuck if it injured me, it was his fucking door and they should hack it the fuck down. He’d managed to wrangle the assistance of the fire brigade, but they didn’t seem too happy with that idea, and after telling Jezza they were a little busy to sort out his industrial disputes, what with the looting and rioting around the city, I heard their footsteps retreat. Twenty minutes later the security screens showed Coll striding towards the fire escape, blowtorch in hand, Jezza dragging himself along after with a face like a ripe tomato. I watched them climb roofwards.

There were several loud thumps from above before the smash and crackle of the skylight shattering onto the metal sheet, then the brief hiss of an oxyacetylene flame, but the aluminium didn’t even get glowy before it fizzled out into swearing. Coll’s tones were a little too low to make out, but after Jezza’s thundering “Whaddya mean it’s outta gas? Where the fuck do you keep the stuff?” I patted a desk drawer, smiled to myself and poured another glass of bubbly. Then I listened to Jezza alternately fume, cajole, threaten, plead and insult me for a full 43 minutes before he finally gave up and left me to it.

They cut off the cameras, then the power, and I’d just filled my fifth container before the water went, too. I got enough charged batteries to run essentials like a light and a handset for a few weeks. When I was sure they were really gone, I ventured out to turn the power and water back on, arrange the cameras to my satisfaction and secure several other doors on the way up here.

I hear that hostels and hotels are being secured and set up for quarantines. I prefer to sit out the epidemic from here. Whatever Jezza and Coll are doing now, I expect getting me out of this room has fallen a few steps lower on their to-do list. The days from here on in will be mainly uneventful, and also numbered. Don’t let me get gloomy, my macaronis; talk to me, sing to me, entertain me as I record my further descent into madness for your delight and edification. Let’s try to make the coming weeks pass like a fart, not a kidney stone.

14 responses to And I Feel Fine

Kittylama · April 1, 2026 at 9:13 pm
OMG, Elaine, what have you done??!! :-0

AK_Hailstorm · April 1, 2026 at 9:19 pm
This is mad awesome!

Mei · April 1, 2026 at 9:21 pm
Everybody will say this is a crazy thing, and there will be trouble later – do not listen, do not come out. You do the sensible thing, the right thing. Good luck.

Elaine · April 1, 2026 at 9:22 pm
Thanks Mei – hey, aren’t you out of quarantine today? How did it go? Are you doing alright?

Mei · April 1, 2026 at 9:23 pm
Yesterday, we finish the quarantine. I am too tired now – I will maybe write about it in a few days. It is bad here, but I am OK.

Jack · April 2, 2026 at 12:17 am
Haha, nice try Elaine! Happy April Fool’s to you, too! ;-P

Ash · April 2, 2026 at 12:22 am
Check your newsnets, Jack – the whole of Australia’s going into quarantine.

Jack · April 2, 2026 at 12:23 am
Yeah, I’m not doubting there’s an outbreak, I’m doubting Elaine’s taken over a megastore to ride it out.

Elaine · April 2, 2026 at 12:25 am
I understand your scepticism; I can still hardly believe it myself. You want to see the photo I posted Jezza?

Jack · April 2, 2026 at 12:25 am
How do I know you didn’t just set it up and pose for it in work, then go on to a nice quarantine hostel? I hear they’ve taken over five star hotels.

Elaine · April 2, 2026 at 12:27 am
Like I’d get into that kind of joint; compulsory’s not the same as complimentary. Believe what you like, Jack, I’m far too drunk to care.
This does sound a little extreme, but I'm sure Elaine wouldn't lie to us about something like this, not with Mei's situation as it is. I only raise an eyebrow at the part about feeling fine.

You're a sweet old pudding, Ash – I'm about as alright as can be expected, under the circumstances.

You don’t all seriously believe she’s done this? This is classic Elaine, she'll be crowing from the rooftops tomorrow that you all fell for it.
Keeping it going

So, harvest time approaches and with national borders all shut up, we have to accept that the usual help ain't gonna, and we're in need of some other way of getting 20 acres of Lean Mean X-tra Protein Bean™ picked and shipped. Mom's set up a meeting with some other small Friendly Frankenstein farms, and they're thinking of putting together the cash to run a transport from Texas, running 100 or so labourers up to NJ (no questions on immigration status asked). It's risky, and morally questionable, but if it works it might just save the farm. Hey, at least we're not going to have them gutting chickens in a metal trailer in 100 degree heat for $10 a day.

I'm not sure what I think about it all just now. It's like, one minute everybody's getting flu jabs and calling for a 28 day quarantine at every airport and state border, but as soon as it means profits might be down it's all just a minor inconvenience and we find ways to get around it. The general view in the town is that if we just get the harvest in, we'll be fine and it'll all go back to normal by next year. When I think about what's happened in China, what's happening in Australia, I don't see how it can ever be the same. Then I hear Mom and Dad saying that we're gonna lose the farm and it's like, we still got to carry on keeping our own shit together, don't we? Is that selfish? I can't even tell. I just
know if we get the harvest in, we have food to eat, we get food into the stores, the people who make the anti-virals and work on the vaccines have food, the aid workers have food, the food gets out to the places it’s needed, we keep the wheels turning, we keep the farm…and Mei will have somewhere to go to when the borders open up again.

6 thoughts on “Keeping it going”

Elaine April 2, 2026 at 5:27 pm
You big corn cake! ;-) But isn’t saving the farm for yourself and your family enough of a reason without bringing Mei into it? You need to take the pressure off of her for a bit. She’s got other concerns going on right now.

Jack April 2, 2026 at 5:48 pm
Hey Elaine, how’s your superstore apocalypse going? ;-) No offence, but I don’t think I’m going to take advice on my personal life from somebody sitting in a hotel room pretending on the internet that she took over a store. I realise you must be feeling scared and trapped in your quarantine hostel, and you’re looking for a distraction, so I don’t hold it against you; but seriously, you need to get a grip. And you have no idea about Mei and me.

Elaine April 2, 2026 at 5:54 pm
Woahoho, you got a whole herd of defensive running loose there, cowboy! Reign ’em in and pen ’em up before they stampede over somebody who gives a crap. I’ll return the passive-aggressive magnanimity and forgive you for not believing my situation. I realise it is pretty wild. Unfortunately for both of us – though more so for me – it's the truth. You don’t want advice on how you’re making a corn-beef hash of your long-distance relationship, fine, I’ll take it back and replace it with an “I told you so” at the appropriate juncture.

Jack April 2, 2026 at 5:54 pm
You have no idea how Mei and I feel – you’re just bitter and jealous of anybody who can connect with another person.

Elaine April 2, 2026 at 5:55 pm
Well, yeah, but I don’t see how that changes your situation. Not that you’ll believe a word I say, but I truly don’t want to see the two of you hurting any more than you already are. I’ll refrain from trying to help, though.

Jack April 2, 2026 at 5:56 pm

We’d both appreciate that.
Our quarantine ends

Posted on April 05, 2026

We are out of Quarantine five days now – this is the first time I have to write my blog. It is a very busy time, and a strange time for all of us. After the long isolation, we came running from our rooms for the big meeting, very joyful to see and speak with each other again. Many people I don’t know smile to me and then we run and hug each other, all modesty is lost in the joy to touch another person again, knowing it is safe. But when we reach the auditorium, the feelings soon change.

We take a register, to know for sure who has survived, and there are many missing. We go to check their rooms, and find sometimes they are dead, sometimes missing with no word, sometimes leaving a note to say they will leave the quarantine and go to a hospital, so they do not need to die alone and we do not need to clear the body. I think again about my neighbour, and how lonely these people feel as they die. We put on the forum many resources and support for survivors, but there is little for those who find themselves dying. We say stay in your room, post to the forum to say you are infected and we will leave food and drink outside the door until it is no longer taken. There are few doctors, and the medical forum must spend most time on those who they can help. We begin a counselling forum, but have not enough with the skills to run it. We should talk more about supporting people after they know they will die. We have lost so many who played their part in setting up the quarantine so that we could survive – we owed them more than to let them die alone.
Less than three thousand now remain on the campus. There is no celebration. We spend the first day with meetings, listing what we must do. Ideas that give us so much hope on the forum become more difficult now that we ask for volunteers, knowledge, materials. The next three days we are counting everything we have, searching empty rooms for more food, getting equipment ready for the food and power projects. Also, we are digging graves, packing up the possessions of the dead, contacting the families if we can. Then we have the burials, in Jing Yuan meadow.

We try to do this properly, with respect, even though some of the remains are rotted down very far and there are ten people in one grave. Most sickness was reported and the bodies are taken from the freezer, but after two weeks when there are fewer people left, there are some that have died too far away from others for anybody to know. We have to wear our plastic suits and ventilator masks, and wrap them in a refuse sack, then clean and disinfect the room. We fill each grave, and then move to the other side of the meadow, by the monument to the PKU students who die in the revolution. Here, the friends of those buried make a speech, and we read messages from the families, and read a dedication to our friends and companions of the Quarantine Movement. This is said too many times, and the burial becomes a mechanical process. I try to make myself feel regret and grief for every person, but yesterday and today I attend burials from morning until it is dark, and soon I cannot feel anything, I am like a worker in the factory, the product moves along a line, the process has no meaning, I even become used to the smell. We change shifts after five burials, so I am sometimes filming, sometimes speaking, sometimes moving the bodies on a stretcher, and sliding them into the grave. Many people take short digging shifts – we have grown weak from poor food and much time indoors, apart from a few who exercise all the time of the quarantine. Now, we all have exhaustion and depression – too much fear and sadness for ourselves to grieve for others. But we take comfort in those still alive, and we go on living.

16 thoughts on “Our quarantine ends”

Jack on April 6, 2026 at 6:42 am said:
I know you’re going to bite my head off for worrying, but I hope you’re taking all the right precautions for handling dead bodies – even if you’re safe from the flu virus, there’s all kinds of other stuff you can catch.
Mei on April 6, 2026 at 8:24 am said:
I don’t mind that you worry, Jack, only that you tell me what I must do to make you not worry, so you make your worry my problem, and I have enough problems.

Jack on April 6, 2026 at 8:26 am said:
That’s because you take on too much. You seem to be doing everything over there.

Mei on April 6, 2026 at 8:27 am said:
What else should I do? I am sitting alone looking at the set for four weeks. Now I can do something real as well.

Jack on April 6, 2026 at 8:30 am said:
What about your painting, are you getting much time for that?

Mei on April 6, 2026 at 7:56 pm said:
I change my banner here with another painting, students fetch water from the nameless lake in the morning. Also, we will make another memorial for the garden where we have the burials. The Jing Yuan memorial is a broken shape, a puzzle, in many pieces. I would make another puzzle, but smaller pieces, put in a larger area, each piece marking the name of one who died here, not only one point of focus but you will see a little of the sculpture wherever you look in the meadow. A group of us will work on this, when we have time and resources.

Do you still draw your zombie comic? I dream of zombies last night: they break into the campus, and we fight them, and when we kill them we think we have won, but then we begin to become zombies, not because they bite us but because we kill them.

Jack on April 6, 2026 at 10:11 pm said:
All that dealing with dead bodies, no wonder you’re dreaming of zombies. I’ve kind of got too much going on at the farm to carry on with the comic right now – it’s mad here, I’ll post about it soon. Maybe we can work on it together one day.
Elaine on April 6, 2026 at 7:44 am said:
I don't know why, but I'd managed to convince myself things would get better when you were out of quarantine. I wish I knew what I could do to help you.

Mei on April 6, 2026 at 8:23 am said:
None of us can do anything for anybody except ourselves and those around us.

Elaine on April 6, 2026 at 8:59 am said:
Yeah, I guess so. But the huntsman spider in the toilet doesn't seem to need my help as much as you.

Kittyllama on April 6, 2026 at 9:23 am said:
OMG, get rid of the spider!! :-0

Mei on April 6, 2026 at 7:57 pm said:
I will be OK. I have friends here. You need somebody else to help soon, but the spider is a good start. If it is not a poisonous spider.

AK_Hailstorm on April 6, 2026 at 7:58 pm said:
Destroy spiders!

Elaine on April 6, 2026 at 10:15 pm said:
Huntsmans are harmless – but I'm afraid my only companion met with a squishy end when I was refilling the water containers. Not such a good start, after all. Long as the next one's not a funnel-web or red-back, I'll try harder.

Ash on April 6, 2026 at 10:12 pm said:
Well, now you're saying that food from outside is obtainable I've sent another donation to the Quarantine Movement. Is it possible to get money to you personally, just in case?
Thank you, Ash – but if it is money or food, I will only put it in for everybody – it is cheaper and safer to share.
Sorting my lifetime supplies

My first week in isolation has been eerily undisturbed. The local newsnets fill with vids of people boarding up their homes and happily toddling down to their local quarantine hostel, and my CCTV screens show the odd hopeful looter making their way through the wrecked store. Here I am, all prepared for a desperate last stand, and the wailing sirens and ranged forces of law and order have failed to lay siege to me. I feel kind of snubbed.

I've been busy, though. We don't have a huge warehouse built onto the store, but there’s plenty here if you know where to look: the cafe kitchens are always well-stocked, and a week’s stock for the cafe is one person’s lifetime supply (that’s my favourite joke just now – I have a lifetime’s supply of all essentials, measuring a lifetime as the time until the supply runs out). The shelves weren’t entirely picked clean before the looters were ousted, so the supply situation’s not so bad. I’ve taken as much as I can reasonably fit up to my inner sanctum, and I’ve set up a sort of maze leading casual explorers away from the kitchens, to a little stock of goodies – a decent enough haul to persuade the average looter to get gone without poking their nose further. Plus, I found some wireless home security kits in the hardware section, so I’ve set up a network of cameras and alarms that’d make Coll cream his pants.

I’ve also had a little time to sit thinking about why I did this, and I can understand why it’s hard for some of you to believe. Thing is, I don’t expect to face the consequences. I
look at how this thing’s spreading round the world, with the whole of Asia and half the Middle East covered, and the newsnets talk like it’s just another flood or drought or war, but it’ll be under control before it gets to the English-speaking white folks. It’s bullshit – you know how we’ve kept it back so far? We haven’t. We’ve ignored the signs. Because to really be safe, we’d have had to stop the wheels turning, give out all the food, crash the markets. Instead we just got corporations to sponsor steri-sprays and face-masks, and those sponsors wouldn’t want the advice leaflets to say “Don’t work, don’t shop”. Now it’s too late. This is where it all comes down. Holing myself up here, it’s not really about survival, except in the short-term. If I’m going to go out coughing blood, or gasping my dehydrated last by an empty storage tank, I want to do it without fighting past hundreds of others for the privilege. Mei’s part of something bigger, but I’ve got no real reason to make it through into whatever’s left of Canberra after the quarantine. I’m here because I’m not getting herded into a make-shift prison to die at the government’s convenience. If we’re all going to hell, I’m taking my own damn handcart.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not looking to go out any time soon. I’ve got it pretty damn sweet here, just now. I’m running two 50” homesets, drinking the most expensive wine in the store and figured I’d best use up the Deluxe range sirloin steaks with a whisky-cream and organic shallot peppercorn sauce. Tomorrow I’ll nab a fryer from the household isle and make some chips. I have a lifetime’s supply of potatoes and I should use them up before they start sprouting.

9 responses to Sorting my lifetime supplies

Jack · April 8, 2026 at 11:17 pm
OK, so I believe you’re actually there. I don’t know how much of the rest of it I believe, but you’re just about crazy enough to hole yourself up in a store.

Elaine · April 8, 2026 at 11:50 pm
Who’s crazy? It’s a great location!

Jack · April 9, 2026 at 12:10 am
Good and defensible, and resources-wise, it’s not bad short-term. You will eventually need some outdoor space for growing, though.

Ash · April 9, 2026 at 12:20 am
You know, sprouting potatoes gives me an idea. Keep some back, and put a couple of bins of compost on the roof. I’ll Blink you some information on growing potatoes, it’s incredibly easy. See what other seed you can find – roof gardens can be quite productive.

Elaine · April 9, 2026 at 12:22 am

Only problems I can see with that are the notoriously drought-prone Canberra summers and my inability to keep any plant I’ve ever known alive for more than a week. Nice idea, though.

Ash · April 9, 2026 at 12:23 am

I imagine you’ve previously had more distractions. You can set up a rain barrel quite easily – in fact, I’d advise it if you think the mains water might go off again.

Elaine · April 9, 2026 at 1:27 am

I dunno, Ash, nothing says “Looters wanted – enquire within” like a massive allotment complete with irrigation system on your rooftop. I could bear to keep a low profile until I’m certain the authorities (or even Colmart security) aren’t going to do another sweep of the area.

Mei · April 9, 2026 at 11:24 am

This sounds a good idea. As long as you have supplies, to be hidden is the best defence. But I would be afraid to be so alone.

Elaine · April 9, 2026 at 11:25 am

I kind of like it. I can do pretty much whatever I want here, provided I don’t want to go anywhere.
Bright Horizons

The ground, the sky and the things between

Making Manifestos

Posted on April 11, 2026

Outside the campus, people continue to die from the flu. The power often is out for many hours now. We have set up the solar array on the library building to charge batteries and the UPS for the forum servers. Though we can hold meetings now in the big auditorium, the forum is used to record decisions and rota changes that are too complex to keep on paper, so it is very important we save our batteries for this. We each have a bicycle generator to charge batteries for handsets and homesets in an emergency, but this also uses our food energy, and we strictly ration the remaining supplies. Food from outside is very expensive and risky to collect. Agriculture students will grow crops in all green spaces on campus. We pull up many flower beds and ornamental grasses to make space for cabbage, potatoes and beans, add some earth from the sides of the lake, and even plant some weeds in the water that have many vitamins to eat and make the water more clean. When we filter the water for drinking, the sediment is used for a fertiliser. It is very clever, but it will be many months before we can eat what we now grow.

We did not yet announce to the press that the quarantine is finished, but of course many tell their friends and family and it is reported in Beijing Newsnets. Some plan to return to their families, even though they risk infection. Most of us wish to keep the campus as a safe haven, and continue the Quarantine Movement. There is a big debate in our meeting now: will we set up a quarantine area to allow others in and let them join us
when we know they have no disease? Some are against allowing in others, as we cannot
know if they use anti-virals and remain infectious, or if they will try to take over. We
argue for many hours, but we know that others can use force to get in. At least if we set
up a way for others to enter safely, we keep control of the campus.

We will have endless meetings and discussions, and then nominate those with the best
ideas to make a manifesto for running the campus. There is a group of party members
we were afraid will want to bring in the authorities after the quarantine, but even they
agree an election will be the best and quickest way to decide who is in charge now. They
want all students to join the party so they may vote, and all candidates to work with the
party. It is more practical than really political – a compromise to do what we will do
anyway, but not antagonise the party outside. Many of us are still very angry at how
they treat us before the quarantine and we refuse to join the party, so this will cause
conflict. So much has broken down outside, there is a large group within the Quarantine
Movement saying it is time for a revolution, to overthrow the party – they do not decide
yet whether it is a revolution for democracy or for communism or for something else. I
think we made decisions more easily on the forum, with an open discussion, and
although we argue a lot we can all say what we want to, and then take a poll to decide. I
say this to Li, and she says I should make this my manifesto. I laugh, really laugh for the
first time in five weeks, until I am crying. I already moderate three forums, design the
memorial garden, organise the cooking rota, write many press releases and answer
hundreds of e-mails every week, as well as all the security, food, water and cleaning
duty I have on the rota. Where will I find time to be a leader? I am too busy running this
place!

So this is my meme for April: What is your manifesto for living in a time of disaster?
How should your government respond to a Blood Flu outbreak? If you are in charge,
what will you do? Or if you do not want to be in charge, then what is the manifesto you
will trust? Who will you vote for?

19 thoughts on “Making Manifestos”

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 9:24 pm said:
So this is like a massive change in Chinese politics, and everybody's gonna be able to vote now?

Mei on April 11, 2026 at 9:34 pm said:
We already can vote. It is complicated, but everybody can vote for local government if they want. The lower level People's Congress elect the higher up people's congress, but really nobody gets to power except if the higher up congress allows it.

Elaine on April 11, 2026 at 9:35 pm said:
Sounds much like the rest of us, really.

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 9:35 pm said:
Not so much – we get to vote for our presidents.

Elaine on April 11, 2026 at 9:37 pm said:
Oh yeah, especially if they’re the sons of previous presidents.

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 9:38 pm said:
Come on, it’s not the same. Just cause we vote in assholes, doesn’t mean we’re not a democracy. At least we get the assholes we want, and a corrupt elite doesn’t step in and say who can and can’t stand.

Elaine on April 11, 2026 at 9:41 pm said:
They don’t need to when it takes a billion dollar election campaign to get a look-in.

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 9:44 pm said:
That’s why you need independent businesses to be free to fund campaigns! We’re going back to that argument we had at the camp. Sure, it can go wrong, but it’s not the same as the corruption in China. Don’t know how it is in Australia, but here just about anybody can stand locally.

Mei on April 11, 2026 at 9:45 pm said:
It is the same here – locally, there is less corruption now more ordinary people are party members. But higher up, there is more corruption and nothing most people can do to challenge it, and the higher up power can override the local power, so it is all just marks on a paper. Is it so different in America?

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 9:45 pm said:
It helps if you got more than one party to vote for.

Mei on April 11, 2026 at 9:47 pm said:
So this is how it works here. Mostly everybody who wants to oppose a policy joins a faction inside the Party to try to make a change. It is not very different from a small party in the West who never will have power itself but can influence the bigger party when it has support. Most people can join the Party now. There is more democracy than maybe ten years ago, but perhaps not enough, still.

Ash on April 11, 2026 at 9:48 pm said:
While here, there’s less and less. You should see the forms you have to fill in and the agreements you have to sign to register a community group, let alone ask for funding.

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 9:49 pm said:
What’s that got to do with democracy, they wanna know how you voted?

Ash on April 11, 2026 at 10:37 pm said:
Nothing so concise: “Include a copy of the proposed agenda for your initial meeting and describe, with examples, how discussion will be led for each motion, and the expected/desired outcomes of these discussions.” And if they can detect a whiff of politics on any of your answers, it’ll be a dozen more forms and get a party to sponsor you or you’ll be on the list of illegal unaffiliated political organisations.

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 10:43 pm said:
Hey, they gotta be vigilant, make sure terrorists aren’t trying to operate in the area.

Jack on April 11, 2026 at 10:44 pm said:
That is, not that you guys are suspicious or anything, you’re totally legit. I mean it’s just a precaution and procedure and stuff. You know what I mean.

Ash on April 11, 2026 at 10:46 pm said:
All too well.
Though I’m not sure why terrorists would be trying to book the town hall for their meetings. Apart from anything else, the paperwork’s a nightmare.

Elaine on April 11, 2026 at 10:48 pm said:
So, who you gonna vote for, Mei?

Mei on April 11, 2026 at 10:57 pm said:
I think I give my vote to Zhen, the one I write about who spoke at the meetings before the quarantine. He does not tell anybody what to do, he just says the way things are, and what will happen if we do one thing or another thing. Though he sounds shy, and people laugh at his accent, he was right about everything that happens from the first protest to now.
Manifesto for nothing much

So, Mei’s meme this month is Disaster Manifestos. What emergency measures would you enforce if a pandemic broke out? It’s a tough one – I’ve thought a lot about what I’d do, just for me and my family, but I guess I never thought much about anybody else, or what everybody should do. I just wanted to make sure everybody I cared about would be here, so I wouldn’t have to worry about it. I look at what the governments around the world are doing with quarantine camps and communications lockdowns, and I can see it’s wrong, but I can’t really see what else to do. Honestly, I can’t think of a good solution that’ll work for everybody – most people are fucked, it’s pretty much just the ones who get out of whatever plans the government put in place who are going to survive. So I guess I’d say everybody for themselves. And even I wouldn’t vote for that.

I really hope the US government have come up with something better, cause I guess you all heard about the confirmed cases on the West coast. They reckon it’s the slower-moving Eastern European strain, not that virulent Australasian one, so I think we should be OK. Airports and national borders got closed up beginning of the month, and now State borders are shutting tight. It makes sense, but pretty much screws us for the Spring harvest. Not only have Marelys and Jaivin’s gang not been able to get out of
Puerto Rico, our back-up plan is now no go. We’ve been trying to get a loan to pay local workers, but we can’t find enough (money or workers) so we’re resorting to tourists. My voluntary quarantine’s been cut short, and I’ve had to vacate my house so it can be used as a holiday home for cheapskate city families who get a free country break in return for 4 hours a day harvesting – and jeez, they’re slow, you’d think they’d never seen a damn beanstalk before, and I swear they’re eating more than they put in the basket. We’ve pulled in every favour and drop of goodwill from friends and family, too. No good asking neighbours – they all got the same deal themselves. I haven’t even been able to speak with Mei for a week cause I have to be out in the fields 8 hours a day picking beans and beets. I look like a damned beet.

Carla was talking about selling the necklaces Granma left her to get in a stock of antivirals from a drugstore on a “genuine“ medical socnet, but I told her not to trust that shit. For a start, it could be anything, and even if it is real Reliflu, it won’t stop you catching shit, it’ll just suppress the symptoms a little longer and let you spread it. Better to spend it on stocks of tinned and dried food and keep away from people. She said, “Guess you’re right, Jack,” then she did it anyway. Why do I bother?

Seems like everybody’s keeping a stock of Reliflu or something like it “just in case”. Next time we get a head cold going round here everyone’ll start chugging them like candy, and we’ll probably breed some kind of superbug. Maybe that’ll fight off the bird flu, like Godzilla. That’s about as near to a plan as we got round here. I’m just not leaving the farm.

11 thoughts on “Manifesto for nothing much”

Kittyllama April 15, 2026 at 3:27 pm
That’s a shame, everybody’s losing their nice things because we’re all so scared. :-(
XX!!Hugs!!XX

Elaine April 15, 2026 at 6:12 pm
Seriously Jack, this might sound flip, but that’s just how it started here: a few isolated cases, people nervous and travel restricted but mostly business as usual, then suddenly it’s everywhere. Get ready. I mean it.

**Jack** April 15, 2026 at 6:18 pm
Touched by your concern, Elaine, but I think we learned from Australia’s mistakes and got roads and airports closed quick enough. It seems limited to the cities between San Francisco and LA, and they’re pretty sure it’s contained.

**Elaine** April 15, 2026 at 6:25 pm
I thought it was in Mexico, too?

**Jack** April 15, 2026 at 6:29 pm
That’s a different pocket. All the same, I’m ready to shut up the farm, soon as harvest’s in.

**Mei** April 15, 2026 at 6:19 pm
You must tell your sister, if you wait for symptoms before taking the anti-viral, it is too late.

**Jack** April 15, 2026 at 6:22 pm
I told her that! She says she’ll start taking them when other people get the virus.

**Mei** April 15, 2026 at 6:23 pm
But when you know they have the virus, they are infectious for days already.

**Jack** April 15, 2026 at 6:24 pm
I know! She says she’s going to Jersey City after the harvest to find work, anyhow. She’ll probably start taking them before then.

**Ash** April 15, 2026 at 6:30 pm
Going into centres of population, right now? That doesn’t sound like a very good idea.
Jack April 15, 2026 at 6:32 pm

Yeah, she says she's not going to hang around the sticks with no money. If we can't sell our harvest, looks like we'll have to live on it.
So much for community spirit

There’s a Disaster Manifesto meme going around – how would I save the world from Blood Flu? To be honest, even if I did have the authority to force communities to organise together, they’d only be torn apart by arrogant, paranoid self-promoters, terrified of losing face by deferring to others but equally reluctant to take any actual responsibility for anything. They prefer to repeat that the police will take care of us, the supermarkets will feed us, the authorities have it all under control. Well, the authorities certainly have it under control in Australia, and just ask my friend Elaine how well that’s turned out. And things have actually got better for ordinary people in most of the Chinese provinces where the government’s lost control. And the US West Coast is so well under control we can’t even get figures on the numbers dead.

The Community Disaster Response Collective is finished. We (well, I) got into a bit of an altercation with the Neighbourhood Watch committee, who felt they should have been put in charge from the beginning. They’ve decided we’re treading on their toes, and they’ll deal with issues of security should the need arise, and threatened to report us under the Terror and Radicalism Act. Sarah was all for defying them, but I gave in and dissolved the group. Those poor kids spending three years in jail for occupying a Tesco Metro could tell you why. Jane Morrison actually called that an armed robbery! Robbery because they distributed a few bags of rice and tinned tomatoes, and armed because they “had metal sticks in their banners”. Even the courts didn’t go so far as to try and stick armed robbery on them – they didn’t hurt or threaten anybody, so they did them under ‘Conspiracy of Silence’ when those arrested refused to identify those who got away. I’m still haunted by that CCTV footage – some of the ones being battered, tasered and dragged from that shop were younger than Sarah.
Sarah finally forgave my reluctance when I reminded her that I was at the “Storm in a Kettle” in ’15, protesting the passing of the bill that led to the TRA. I have good reasons for not wanting to get on the wrong side of that act. She doesn’t really remember the aftermath of that day – two police dead, and 54 protesters, and many more still in jail despite the lack of evidence. I didn’t really want to bring it up again – it’s not a day I like to remember – but these things must be remembered, I suppose. She dredged up a recollection of Sue worrying because I hadn’t come home, and of being told I’d been in an accident, and not to jump on me when I came in. She’s angry, now, that we lied to her. I said, “You were only six, what were we supposed to tell you?” She said we should have told her the truth, and if she didn’t understand then she would have understood later. I see a lot of my parents in Sarah, and I’m not sure whether it makes me proud or terrified.

Anyhow, since we’re all too aware of how easy it would be to present the CDRC as a “Group unaffiliated to a registered electoral party, whose aims, actions or literature promote illegal activities or incite public disorder”, we elected to disband. The Neighbourhood Watch say it only worries people to go around asking if they want help. “We take care of our own” is the response – but who are our own? Judy at no. 17 was happy enough to be part of the CDRC when we first called round, but when the Morriscans told her it was radicals and asylum seekers looking for handouts, she came asking for her money back.

It got to the point where there were so few of us that everybody decided to just take their own share of the supplies, and I got left with what nobody else wanted. I tried to give the remaining food to a homeless shelter, but apparently they’re only allowed to accept cash donations, so I’m currently keeping 30 tins of beans and a 10kg bag of pasta in the caravan.

What a pointless waste of time. I think now that what I’d really do if I had the power – if I didn’t have to answer to anybody, or worry about keeping my job – I’d get my family the hell away from here and set up in a small-holding, taking care of ourselves as far away from anybody else as possible.

8 responses to “So much for community spirit”
Elaine April 18, 2026 at 2:37 pm

Sorry to hear your community group didn’t work out, Ash. I might have told you this before, but people are shits.

AK_Hailstorm April 18, 2026 at 3:02 pm

Destroy people. Seriously.

Ash April 18, 2026 at 3:29 pm

I’m beginning to come around to that perspective. But only temporarily. I couldn’t do my job if I didn’t have some sort of faith that it was worth helping people, and if I didn’t do my job...well, that would be the end of it all, I suppose.

Elaine April 18, 2026 at 4:12 pm

The end of what?

Ash April 18, 2026 at 4:13 pm

Oh, you know. Life as I know it.

Elaine April 18, 2026 at 4:14 pm

At the moment, life as you don’t know it sounds a lot more appealing.

Ash April 18, 2026 at 4:14 pm

I think it’s a little too soon to be giving up everything on a whim.

Mei April 18, 2026 at 5:14 pm
If this is what you think, it is exactly the right time. You must act when it is too soon, not just after it is necessary.
I'm a Quarantine Refuser

So, everybody's got a Disaster Manifesto, even if nobody really thinks it'll work. Here's mine – hole up where you can't be found and sit tight until everybody else is dead. It's working for me so far.

The newsnets have dubbed the likes of me "Quarantine Refusers". Thankfully there's so many unidentified dead that they haven't yet been able to make an accurate list of us out of the missing. And there's a use of the word "thankfully" I didn't think I'd see myself making. Misanthropic curmudgeon I may be, but that's a new low. As penance or punishment – swear I didn’t cut and paste:

I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.
I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.

Not cause of heaven or hell or karma or any of that shit, it'd just be nice to feel like I'm any kind of loss to the world.
Anyhow, turns out us quarantine refuseniks have good reason to stay away from the hostels, if the blogs from those who’ve escaped them are anything to go by. The ABC newsnets are claiming they’re set up to work on similar lines to the successful quarantines in China, with new arrivals isolated and given food until it’s safe for them to join the green-lighted people inside. The escapees, however, tell tales of hotels crammed to double capacity, healthy people being forced into rooms with those already coughing blood, being locked in, food not arriving, handsets confiscated, families broken up… and all enforced by police supported by a network of Emergency Support Officers recruited mostly from security firms. I wonder if Coll’s finally living his dream.

I also wonder how much of this is a botched attempt at containment of the disease, and how much is just population control. Maybe those who’ve been sitting in their luxury bunkers for weeks just want to limit property damage and ensure there’s more food left for them when everybody else is dead. Maybe the authorities had my manifesto. Is that paranoid? It’s difficult to tell these days. I’ve always held that no conspiracies are necessary for powerful people to be arsewipes, but it does seem like this snapped into action like a sprung trap the instant the riots started. Perhaps I should be out there, smashing up the security stations, instead of in here washing down the last of the chocolate fondant puddings with a bottle of Prosecco.

I must learn to give a shit about other people before I die.

But I’m not dying just yet.

24 responses to I’m a Quarantine Refuser

AK_Hailstorm · April 23, 2026 at 12:04 am
Destroy. Just destroy it all.

Ash · April 23, 2026 at 12:52 am
Don’t let them provoke you into putting yourself in danger. You’re in a good position to wait it out there, and you’ll be needed as much when it’s all over as now.

Elaine · April 23, 2026 at 12:55 am
Truth to tell, I think the idea of going back to the world and facing the rap for quarantine refusing while making Colmart my personal fortress scares me more than dying of the 'flu, but I'll take my chances.

Jack · April 23, 2026 at 12:57 am

Most of the survivors will be the ones who didn't go into quarantine. What kind of rap can they make you face if it turns out refusing was the reason you survived?

Ash · April 23, 2026 at 12:59 am

Let's not be too pessimistic about the chances of those in quarantine – but it's true that if refusers make up a significant proportion of survivors, and you all stand together, they'll have a hard time punishing you.

Elaine · April 23, 2026 at 1:00 am

So you're expecting all the misfits who didn't follow the herd to stand together? Sounds unlikely.

Mei · April 23, 2026 at 1:01 am

This is a good idea! You can find other quarantine refusers in forums, and nobody can trace you, but you can share information and support each other, now and after the quarantine.

Ash · April 23, 2026 at 1:02 am

It couldn't hurt.

Elaine · April 23, 2026 at 1:03 am

I'm not a joiner. I'm a liability. Seriously, they're better off without me.

Ash · April 23, 2026 at 1:04 am

You joined the Bad Influences, and we're all still here.

Kittyllama · April 23, 2026 at 1:45 am

Except Ben. :'-(

Jack · April 23, 2026 at 2:25 am

What? What happened to Ben?

Elaine · April 23, 2026 at 3:15 am

Last we heard he was waiting for clearance to leave China. I've messaged him a few times, heard nothing. I'm afraid I can only think of one explanation.
Ash · April 23, 2026 at 6:37 am
Shouldn’t we try to get some confirmation from Red Meds before we bury him?

Jack · April 23, 2026 at 6:58 am
Yeah, this is a bit of a leap. I mean, come on. Ben can swim leech-infested waters and down a mug of rice wine in a single gulp. He’s Ben.

Mei · April 23, 2026 at 7:54 am
I ask at the Red Meds e-mail, they say they cannot confirm anything if you are not a relative, but they say if he is cleared to travel, he will be home now.

Ash · April 23, 2026 at 8:26 am
If he were home he would have told us.

Jack · April 23, 2026 at 8:27 am
He could be busy. Or recovering. Or in a secret quarantine with no handset.

Elaine · April 23, 2026 at 8:28 am
I think it’s time to assume the worst. There’s no Vietnamese ruou here, but I’m going to drink a bottle of Saki to him. To Ben – always the first to set out for the unknown. When we catch him up, he’ll have set up camp and got the fire going.

Mei · April 23, 2026 at 8:30 am
I have a little wine saved for the end of quarantine, but we did not drink then, so I will drink now for Ben. He came to help, and did not go home. I will miss him.

Ash · April 23, 2026 at 8:31 am
I’m opening my souvenir ruou. Goodbye Ben – you were the best of the bad influences.

Jack · April 23, 2026 at 8:32 am
I don’t believe you guys have just given up on him.

Mei · April 23, 2026 at 8:34 am
Jack, many people here have died, many more people will die. This is how it is now, for me and for Elaine. If you do not hear from somebody, somebody is dead. You say goodbye, and you keep going.

Jack · April 23, 2026 at 8:35 am
Fuck, fuck the flu, fuck everything. I guess this is what Ben gets for trying to make a shitty world better. Let that be a lesson to all of us.
Low on many things

Posted on April 26, 2026

I only write a short update today, because there is now little electricity from the mains and I must save the battery of my workset. Worse, water supply is also cut off for days. There are rotas now to collect and chemically sterilise water for each block. This is another difficult duty for us, on top of many others – the water collectors must get up at 5 am and each make five trips, carrying 40 litres each time on a bicycle trailer from the lake.

Today, there is a dust storm, so I make the journey each time with a scarf wrapped over my face and dirt in my eyes. These storms are not so bad for the last few years, but we think the “Great Green Wall” must not be tended to this year. I don’t ever remember storms this bad inside a city, though many say it was worse at one time.

Much food is growing, but not yet ready to eat, and supplies get low. I still have my cat visitor, but no longer enough food to spare for him. Still he comes, just to spend time with me. Then he disappears for many days. I wish I could know where he goes to.

16 thoughts on “Low on many things.”

Elaine on April 26, 2026 at 9:34 pm said:
I’m keeping a store of water in containers while I work out how to collect rainwater without putting a big, obvious barrel outside that I’ll have to leave the store to collect it from anyhow. I try to rotate, but it means I have it standing around for a while before drinking. How’re you sterilising your water?

Mei on April 26, 2026 at 9:35 pm said:
Iodine. You have a chemist in the store?

Elaine on April 26, 2026 at 9:36 pm said:
It’s pretty wrecked from the riots, but I think they might have left the iodine alone.

Jack on April 26, 2026 at 10:06 pm said:
I don’t want to be morbid – just sort of practical – is water from that lake going to be safe since you buried all those people on campus?

Mei on April 26, 2026 at 10:12 pm said:
We bury the bodies a long way from the lake. You know, we have many very clever people here, and we do nothing without a meeting to decide how it will be done. But even if there is a problem with the lake water, what else should we do, not drink until the rain? We make everything as safe as we can.

Ash on April 27, 2026 at 12:17 am said:
Can you get rain barrels for the buildings? It will still need sterilising, but it will save you trekking to the lake for all your water.

Mei on April 27, 2026 at 12:25 am said:
Yes, we think of this already, but there is not lots of rain until the summer. Why is all the world my father now?

Ash on April 27, 2026 at 12:33 am said:
I didn’t mean to patronise. But you are only a year older than my daughter.
Elaine on April 27, 2026 at 12:37 am said:
Y’know I had the same impulse before it all went to shit here – you want to help, and you can’t, so you’re all “You should do this, you should try that, tell me I’m helping.” When the flu hits where you are, you stop thinking about what other people should do and just get on with it.

Jack on April 27, 2026 at 1:14 am said:
So when are you gonna stop telling people what to do, Elaine?

Elaine on April 27, 2026 at 1:16 am said:
When something worth watching comes on the homeset. How about you? I thought you were out in the fields all the live-long day, Farmer Jack?

Jack on April 27, 2026 at 1:17 am said:
What, I can’t even take a lunch break? Jeez, you’re worse than my dad.

Fiona on May 2, 2026 at 2:09 am said:
Thank you for letting people around the world know what has been going on, Mei. Your blog is a very important document of survival. Good luck to the Chinese students and everyone else out there.

Mei on May 2, 2026 at 7:41 am said:
Thanks, Fiona, I hope this blog is useful to others and helps them to plan for if they have an outbreak. Where do you blog from? Do you have a plan yet?

Fiona on May 2, 2026 at 10:29 am said:
I am in Canada. It’s not so bad here now but I am worried about the future. For now I mostly stay in my house. Luckily my job is already telecommuting. The town has a disaster plan but reading Elaine’s blog about how things went in Australia got me worried.

Elaine on May 2, 2026 at 7:03 pm said:
Staying at home as much as you can is a good bet right now. The worry’s whether you get to stay in your house once they start the round-up.
Nursing Grievances

01 May 2026

Open for visitors

Things were just calming down a little when the BBC newsnets announced a week’s national holiday, to prevent the spread of the flu. Not for me, of course – frontline medical, security and a skeleton of power and haulage workers have been issued with our Reliflu and are expected to Keep Calm and Carry On. Confidentially, I haven’t taken them. If I get Blood Flu, I want to know about it as soon as possible, not hide the symptoms and spread it to my colleagues, patients and family. It was manic at the North Mid today. Half the shift was missing, either called in sick or just disappeared, and emergency protocols were enacted about twenty times, rushing everybody with flu-like symptoms into isolation. There were no confirmed cases, though.

We’ve been advised not to go to shops but to order food online, and the retailers will be assisted by the TA with deliveries. Airports have been rather belatedly closed, and people advised not to travel unless necessary.

Just to rub our noses in it, the Neighbourhood Watch have had leaflets printed and are now warning people to be on their guard against radicals, asylum seekers and looters coming into the neighbourhood in search of handouts or easy targets. I was so angry, I used up every scrap of paper in the house printing a response, saying anybody needing shelter and food can camp in my back garden. I’ve posted it to every tree and lamp-post on this and the surrounding roads, and I’ll leave the back gate and caravan unlocked over the coming week. Perhaps a foolish token gesture of defiance, but I refuse to be a hostage to paranoia. They can’t do me under the TRA for that.

10 responses to “Open for visitors”

Kittyllama May 1, 2026 at 3:26 pm
You’re so sweet! :-) But be careful!! xXhugsXx

Jack May 1, 2026 at 4:04 pm
Woah, you sure that’s wise? Anybody could come in!

Elaine May 1, 2026 at 5:25 pm
Yeah, I think that’s the idea, Jack. It’s a noble gesture, Ash – just keep the back door to the house bolted tight, eh?

Ash May 1, 2026 at 5:27 pm
I’m too used to being mistrusted myself to take much notice of warnings about the bogeyman. But yes, of course we lock our doors, though I like to think we’re still prepared to open them if somebody knocks.

Mei May 1, 2026 at 5:47 pm
This is what we decided, in the end, why we allow new people into the quarantine. What is the point to be safe if the world falls apart around you? Dying people will break down your door if you do not let them in. It is not so bad yet where you are, I hope.

Ash May 1, 2026 at 5:48 pm
Not yet. I’m sitting here looking at these little Reliflu pills, and thinking of Ben.

Fiona May 1, 2026 at 6:14 pm
Great blog. I applaud your sentiments, Nurse Ash, your community organizing plan was the right thing to do and shame on the obstructionists. Have there been any confirmed cases in the UK yet?

Ash May 1, 2026 at 6:37 pm

Good to hear from you, Fiona, and many thanks. This morning, I suspected the extended May Bank Holiday idea was prompted by repeated false alarms, but this afternoon I heard from an old colleague in Bristol who says she’s seen some pretty convincing symptoms. It’s all very worrying, and I’m keeping an eye on the newsnets.

Elaine May 6, 2026 at 11:39 pm

Hey Ash – saw the news that they’re starting to set up exclusion zones not far from you – just checking in to see if you’re all OK.

Ash May 7, 2026 at 10:42 am

We’re not ill – as to whether we’re OK, I’ll try to write more later. It’s turning out to be a very strange day.
Celebrating Youth Day

Posted on May 04, 2026

Today we have a small and strange Youth Day celebration – no parades, but much singing and there were deliveries of food to the occupation, some official, some not. There is a lot of pride and gratitude in what the Quarantine Movement have achieved. Young soldiers and emergency volunteers are also celebrated on public newsnets, and this makes us angry, though I do not think our new leaders will say anything. Zhen wants to criticise them, but he has to think of the party members – he needs their support, to keep us working together.

We are in a difficult place. Students have been talking to soldiers, from a distance, since the end of the quarantine. They are mostly young people like us, and we have the same worries about our families and our future. We know that communications with their commanders are less often and less reliable the last few weeks, and their supplies are not always so reliable, too. They still bring food when it arrives, and when it is low we sometimes give some back to them if we have enough, but we always refuse them to come into the occupation because we know that they have taken the anti-viral drugs. Now we are worried about running low on food for ourselves, and our relation with the soldiers here becomes less friendly. They say we must feed them, because they keep infected people out of our quarantine. We did not ask them to do this, we are always prepared to defend ourselves, but of course if we tell them to stop, they will come in and we will have to have another full quarantine. Requests and favours become threats and
demands. We have a safe place and power from our sun, water and bicycle generators, but they have guns and bullets. It is a terrible thing to hope, but I hope they will run out of anti-virals before we run out of food.

Food is very much on my mind now, and I cannot help thinking of food all the time. This meme for the month is also for Elaine, always calling people by food names. Tell me, what food are you like, and why. Not “what food do you like to eat” but what is the food that is most like you. Elaine always calls me “Sugarsnap” or “Beansprout” because she thinks of me and she thinks young, sweet and Chinese. I do not see myself this way. I have discovered, since the quarantine, that I am a mango – yes, there is sweetness in me, but I have a thick skin and hard at the core. I am tougher than I knew. I think, when this is over, when we meet again, I will be a very different person than you knew in Vietnam.

10 thoughts on “Celebrating Youth Day”

AK_Hailstorm on May 5, 2026 at 12:34 am said:
We all gotta toughen up now.

Ash on May 5, 2026 at 5:56 am said:
I’ve been reading about how expensive food has become in China. Do you have enough money? When everything here’s up and running again next week I can try and organise a fundraiser of some kind.

Mei on May 5, 2026 at 7:43 am said:
Money is not the problem – we have many donations – only getting the food here. We have some very brave runners, who go out to buy food (it is very expensive and most of it illegal), and then bring it back and go into the quarantine house. Their reward is that they have no duties for another 28 days.

Jack on May 5, 2026 at 7:58 am said:
I hope you’re not gonna do that.
Mei on May 5, 2026 at 7:59 am said:
I want to, maybe just to get a rest, but it is more important I can go to the meetings.

Elaine on May 5, 2026 at 10:59 pm said:
Sorry for doing you down with the beansprout thing, Mango Mei. I always knew you were hardcore.

Mei on May 5, 2026 at 11:01 pm said:
We all change a little in the last few months, I think. Is the quarantine ended now in Australia?

Elaine on May 5, 2026 at 11:02 pm said:
Well, there’s the thing. It should be, but there’s nobody coming out of the hostels, and there was zilch on the newsnets until yesterday. It’s supposed to have been a more virulent strain here, and because of all the refusers and runaways (hey there) they’re extending it, just to be sure. There’s got to be a lot of angry people locked in rooms now, wanting out.

Fiona on May 6, 2026 at 2:36 am said:
Thanks for the update, Elaine. How can they possibly be feeding all those people, I wonder? Sounds like food is getting low for everyone in China, no doubt, because, as with your friend Jack in America, the farms have lost their workers.

Mei on May 6, 2026 at 7:30 am said:
So far there is enough food in storage to keep going, but this will soon run out. May rural areas are still OK, but many more have few working farms left now. This is why we begin to grow our own food on the campus – but we fear it will not be enough.
07 May 2026

Having a strange day

Looking back, I can see the hysteria’s been building for weeks. Riots and looting aren’t unusual at this time of year, but in the past supermarkets have been the last resort once the electronics and fashion items are gone, not the primary target. Another borough was put under quarantine yesterday and of course everybody’s afraid it’ll be their own neighbourhood next, but it all seemed distantly hysterical until we lost Margot and Barbara. The sight of two inexpertly slaughtered chickens on the back doorstep this morning seemed to bring it all home a little. Of course, there’s no proving who it was, since I told the whole neighbourhood I’d be leaving my gate open, but the over-punctuated note, informing us that in the absence of council resources for pest control, the author saw fit to take steps against any “possible sources of contagion”, is something of a clue. Poor Margot and Barbara. They were good hens, and they deserved better.

Hospital staff have been on double-time as an incentive not to leave, and under threat of a serious black mark if we don’t either make it into work or show up on a stretcher. We’re wearing those ridiculous suits at all times now, bloody uncomfortable as they are, and everything stinks of disinfectant, even more than usual. There’s still no definitive word on the incubation period – it seems to vary wildly. Some are saying we have a busy few weeks ahead and then a gradual return to normality, others that it won’t be long before we’re so swamped there’s no point in even coming to the hospital. As it is, there’s very little we can do beyond palliative care. There’s no cure, no effective treatment that does anything more than delay the inevitable.

I’d been keeping most of this to myself, trying not to cause panic, but people aren’t stupid – especially not my family. This morning, the car wouldn’t start, and Sarah said she couldn’t fix it, and of course there are no buses or taxis. I was already late by the time she’d admitted to sabotage. She said she’d fix it when I promised not to go into
work again. Sue swore that she wasn’t in on it, but she supported the move. And I thought, if we’re not going into work, and the chickens are dead, what are we sitting around here for? We’ve decided to get out of the city. We spent the rest of the day packing the caravan full of food, fuel and hardware, and we’ll set out at first light tomorrow, while the roads are clear. I suppose it doesn’t really matter where we go as long as it’s away from centres of population, but we’re heading for the lakes where Sue’s cousin has a field we can camp in. We haven’t been able to get through to her yet, but I’m sure she won’t mind. She’ll call us paranoid lunatics, but she won’t mind. We’re in danger of coming up against road blocks, and we may have to take some circuitous routes, but we have everything we need to spend a night or two on the road if it turns out to be necessary. At least it gets us out of this poisonous neighbourhood, and it feels strangely like packing for a holiday. I can’t help being a little excited.

As to Mei’s meme, I am clearly a humble potato, a solid, reliable sort that flourishes underground. Not impressive at first glance, but adaptable and full of slow-burning energy.

10 responses to “Having a strange day”

Sarah May 7, 2026 at 5:26 pm
Get im in hot water fr 10 mins and hell turn to mash under a bit of presher.

Elaine May 7, 2026 at 5:32 pm
And good with chickens! Sorry Ash, no disrespect to Margot and Barbara, but with all my fresh supplies being long gone and no power to the freezers, I can’t bear the thought of them going to waste.

Ash May 7, 2026 at 5:33 pm
Too late – they’re buried by the patio. Not that deep – foxes will probably get them, so at least somebody will come out of it well.

You’re up late, aren’t you?

Elaine May 7, 2026 at 5:35 pm

So I am. Day and night are kind of merging into one for me now.

AK_Hailstorm May 7, 2026 at 7:01 pm

You got the plan, Ash. Stay mobile, keep ahead of the outbreaks. Road trip!

Fiona May 7, 2026 at 7:12 pm

Sorry about your chickens. So mad for you because people just don’t get it!

Wish I had chickens right now.

Ash May 8, 2026 at 12:25 pm

So do I: they are a very reassuring presence. Do you have room to acquire some?

They take up less space than you might think.

Jack May 7, 2026 at 10:22 pm

You’re just abandoning the house? What about your crops?

Ash May 8, 2026 at 12:26 pm

Leaving the veg patch at this time of year is a bit of a wrench, but I’m sure I’ll be able to salvage something when we get back. We don’t intend to be away that long – just until it’s safe to return.
Mei May 8, 2026 at 3:00 pm

Good luck! I wish I could do this with my family.

← Previous Next →
Looters

In answer to Mei’s “what food are you” meme, it’s tempting to go with lemons: bitter and twisted and at my best with a gin & tonic, but that’s too obvious. I think I might be Cherryade, with a fizzy & bubbly surface, loud and attention-grabbing, leaving you with a sour aftertaste and the nagging concern that you’ve absolutely no idea what I’m really made of (though it sure as hell ain’t cherries). I’m concentrating on drinks, for some reason. There’s not a whole lot left in the Booze aise.

Speaking of which, I have looters in as I type – it’s quite exciting, after the monotony of the last coupla weeks. I was afraid, at first, that the police would be coming to clean out the store to supply the quarantine hostels (or whoever is still safe enough to be running the hostels, which still aren’t officially letting people out), but it turns out to just be a group of kids, none of them older than 17 by the look of it. I’m watching them on the monitors right now – I never saw anybody looking so frightened while acting so tough. They’re following the path I set, looks like they’ve found the prize. That’s all the Tim-tams and crisps gone...oh, and one of them has the sense to take the rice and beans – I’ll have to re-stock the bait after they go. They’re still hanging round talking... come on, fellas, appreciate the company but it’s time for you to turn around.

Fuck it, one of them’s looking through the gap in the shelving – I’ll have to block that from behind after I’ve seen them off. Yep, they’re gonna try and climb over. Time for a tannoy announcement...
14 responses to Looters

Ash · May 8, 2026 at 11:38 pm
What did you say? Did they go? Is everything alright?

Elaine · May 8, 2026 at 11:39 pm
I said: “Take what you’ve got and scram, or I start shooting.” They did. They’re still hanging around the car park, though; I can zoom right in on them.

Jack · May 8, 2026 at 11:40 pm
What are they doing?

Elaine · May 8, 2026 at 11:40 pm
Trying to decide whether I’m bluffing, I think.

Jack · May 8, 2026 at 11:41 pm
You got any weapons?

Ash · May 8, 2026 at 11:41 pm
You are bluffing, aren’t you?

AK_Hailstorm · May 8, 2026 at 11:43 pm
Don’t waste the ammo.

Elaine · May 8, 2026 at 11:57 pm
Got a toy rifle, looks pretty real. Took down the security sheet and stuck the barrel out the skylight at them. They took the hint.

Mei · May 8, 2026 at 11:59 pm
If they are so young, why not help them?

Elaine · May 9, 2026 at 12:01 am
If they’re anything like I was at that age, they wouldn’t want me around, and given there’s more of them than me I don’t see that ending well.

Kittyllama · May 9, 2026 at 1:21 am
You’re too tough!! Poor kids! :-(

Elaine · May 9, 2026 at 1:34 am
It’s not that I’d mind them taking more, I just didn’t want them thinking they could stay here. I doubt they’ll bring me any trouble, but they won’t be the only
ones wandering the streets looking for stores to loot. Another trip to the hardware aisle may be in order tonight.

Fiona  ·  May 9, 2026 at 1:28 am
Wow, girl, you've got some guts!

Elaine  ·  May 9, 2026 at 1:40 am
Nah, I just got a toy rifle and a tannoy. If I had guts I’d let them in.
Sorry Mom!

So, first thing I have to blog today is abject apologies to my Mom, cause I've been so wrapped up in this shit around the farm and around Mei and all that I completely forgot it was Mother’s Day, and didn’t get around to doing my usual heartfelt, hand-drawn card.

I blame Carla – she usually gives me a heads up on this stuff, but she’s been out of town going for some fancy corporate agriculture job in Jersey City, so I didn’t catch on till I saw her card on the counter when I came down for breakfast. Mom was pretty pissed, but we all had to get to work and not waste the daylight. I picked her some flowers from the path on the way to the fields (OK, some weeds, but pretty, flowering weeds), and she said “That’s a 3 for effort, a 6 for resourcefulness, and a 9 for sheer nerve. Get your quota picked today and you might just get some dinner.”

Ironic, huh? When I take the time to make a nice gesture on Valentine’s Day I get brushed off, when I forget to make one on Mother’s Day I get chewed up. What am I supposed to do?

25 thoughts on “Sorry Mom!”
Elaine May 10, 2026 at 12:54 pm
Set a reminder on your calendar?

Carla May 10, 2026 at 12:57 pm
Hey, there's an idea! Glad you've got some friends who can teach you some basic life skills, Jack. Second Sunday in May, same every year, learn it.

Jack May 10, 2026 at 12:59 pm
Oh, you couldn't leave me a sarcastic comment yesterday?

Carla May 10, 2026 at 1:00 pm
I ain't your secretary, dude.

Jack May 10, 2026 at 1:01 pm
No, you're Santo's secretary now – sellout traitor.

Carla May 10, 2026 at 1:02 pm
Yeah, not even. Didn't get the job – I'll be home tomorrow.

Jack May 10, 2026 at 1:03 pm
Sucks – you could've bought the farm and employed us on slave wages.

Carla May 10, 2026 at 1:04 pm
Better than playing at fantasy farms on a socnet.

Jack May 10, 2026 at 1:05 pm
Not too different, I hear.

Carla May 10, 2026 at 1:06 pm
Except for getting paid.

Jack May 10, 2026 at 1:08 pm
Which you're not. So get home and get your ass in the beanfield.
Carla May 10, 2026 at 1:09 pm
You still haven’t finished getting the beans in? What, are you trying to guide them off the stalks with a remote?

Jack May 10, 2026 at 1:10 pm
I’ve been out there 8 hours a day! Anybody calling themselves a “friend” want to chip in to defend me here?

Elaine May 10, 2026 at 1:10 pm
Sorry, I went to get popcorn.

Kittyllama May 10, 2026 at 7:58 pm
Jack’s a very good boy! I’m sure he’s working really hard!!

Fiona May 10, 2026 at 10:21 pm
I forgot two important dates recently. I think everyone has a lot on their minds these days.
Hello Jack, by the way. I’ve been following your friends’ blogs to see how people around the world are coping with the flu crisis.

Jack May 11, 2026 at 9:25 am
Hey Fiona, welcome to the International Crisis that is my blog. You’ll have to excuse me a minute, Beijing’s just broken off diplomatic relations.

Mei May 11, 2026 at 3:32 am
You are right, Jack – I have not the time and resources to appreciate you as you need me to now, and you find it too difficult to support me so far away. I think it will be easiest for us both to be only good friends now, so you do not have to worry about me so much and can spend more attention on your family. Your worry doesn’t help me, and your family need you more than I do.
So I just woke up to find I've been dumped on my blog, and now Mei's not answering her SkIMp. This is fucked.

**AK_Hailstorm** May 11, 2026 at 9:33 am
Burned, dude.

**Kittylama** May 11, 2026 at 9:35 am
xXHugsXx

**Ash** May 11, 2026 at 11:54 am
What's the time in Beijing? She has been doing some exhausting work. Give her a little time and space, Jack.

**Jack** May 11, 2026 at 12:00 pm
Space? She's as far away as she can get, and the little bit of crossover in our daytime she's always busy. We need more time and space together.

**Elaine** May 11, 2026 at 12:28 pm
Perhaps there just isn't enough time and space for the relationship you want with Mei. It might just be time to let it go.

**Jack** May 11, 2026 at 12:31 pm
You know, it might just be time for everybody to mind their own goddamn business!
14 May 2026

The Journey Begins

It appears we’re going to be on the move, sporadically, for a good deal longer than we thought.

We were lucky to get out of London at all. We hit the first blockade when we’d barely passed Brent Cross. As the ‘Slow’ signs and flashing sirens emerged from their forest of cones, Sue narrowed her eyes and said, “Well, so much for getting out early.”

Ahead of us, a steady stream of traffic was guided through the central reservation and back towards London. There was nowhere to go except up to the checkpoint, where one of the three armed police officers approached my window and asked where we were going. I told him we needed to get to Windermere, and he looked at me like I’d just told him I was aiming to fly to the moon.

“You want to go on holiday in the middle of a National Crisis, do you, sir?” he said. I thought about pretending we couldn’t go back home because of an outbreak, but luckily I thought better of it, even though we didn’t know about the quarantine camps at this point – nobody did except those who were in them – I just had the feeling that going back to any major centre of population wouldn’t be wise at this juncture. Instead, I said, “We’re trying to get home – we’ve been on holiday, and we need to get back to my elderly mother.”

He went off and spoke to his superior officer, then murmured an incomprehensible stream of words and numbers into his radio and listened intently to the incomprehensible crackle that returned.

“You can get to the M1,” he said, “but you’ll only come up against another road block before you get past Birmingham, and I don’t fancy your chances of getting there tonight.”

“We have a caravan,” I pointed out.

“Well, you can’t camp on the M1.”
The whole country was in the process of being locked down, and he wasn’t having any argument. He said we’d be given somewhere to park the caravan in the city.

“Go back to Brent Cross, and they’ll escort you to a safe waiting zone – I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

He opened up the near barrier and pointed us through the gap to the southbound lanes, while flashing sirens warned us from attempting to go further North. But as soon as we were underway, Sarah looked up from her handset with other ideas.

“Get off at Junction 4 and take the A41. We’ll see how far we can get out of London avoiding the motorways,” she said, with more confidence than I’d expect of somebody who I was initiating into the arcane art of road navigation less than three months ago.

“Set the W4PS to check for updates from UKfluweb for towns that’ve been locked down,” she told Sue. “It looks like we can still make it past Birmingham tonight if we hurry.”

Despite my little deception, this level of civil disobedience hadn’t quite occurred to me. I wasn’t sure whether to be shocked or impressed, but I was definitely a little wary at the suggestion we actually go on the run. Sue made the necessary decision.

“We didn’t just pack two months’ supplies into a dilapidated caravan so that we could be herded into a secured scout hut to die within a week”. She’d been silently catching up on socnet statuses from her cousins in Wood Green, where the clampdown on travel had come in quickly and ruthlessly that morning. They’d been at their grandmother’s when what they called “pigs in spacesuits” came door-to-door, grabbing anybody who so much as took a breath deep enough to cough with. They were demanding to see everybody registered at the address; thankfully Kelly had the presence of mind to hide, but Tracey had stomped out to give them a piece of her mind when they began interrogating her gran, and they’d been dragged into a van full of aged neighbours. They were given face masks for protection. “It looked like they were being gagged” was what Kelly said after peering through the curtain to see her sister and grandmother bundled into a police van. Sue shared this with us sombrely as I followed Sarah’s directions.

For the first three hours, I drove while Sarah tapped away in the back with a workset, the W4PS and a road atlas, negotiating a route around the exclusion zones. Then Sue took over the driving and I did the navigation, while Sarah kept track of newsnets, having been refused a turn at the wheel.
That’s taken us as far as here – a field in “Wedgnock” which is precisely the middle of absolutely nowhere, identified by Sarah as being set far enough back from the road or any inhabited building that we can safely stop for a few nights without being reported. Our assessment is that we’re in for the long haul. I’d never appreciated how much geography is bypassed by simple means of a motorway. It could take us another two days to get as far as the Lakes, and that’s if a) all these little roads are traversable with a trailer, b) no extreme weather makes them impassable and c) no more of them get closed off in the meantime. Then there’s the possibility of hitting traffic again. We’re not the only ones who turned refugee just before it was too late. What will they do if the roads get blocked with us? Herd us into quarantine camps? Leave us to walk home or starve?

But I’m getting morbid, and that does none of us any good. So, it’ll take a little longer than we thought. It’ll be a journey to remember, whatever happens.

9 responses to “The Journey Begins”

Elaine May 14, 2026 at 6:23 pm
Looks from the reports like the UK snapped into Quarantine State mode almost as fast as we did. You guys are Quarantine Refusers, too. Congratulations :-). Course, I’ve got no idea what it’s like to be doing this on the move. Hope you guys can get where you’re going without being seen.

Ash May 14, 2026 at 8:00 pm
Quarantine hasn’t been made compulsory everywhere yet, but travel is severely limited.

AK_Hailstorm May 14, 2026 at 8:23 pm
Destroy checkpoints! Drive right through!
this app FluKeys keepin track of roadblocs & infecshuns. shld b ok to go rnd blocs for time bein. wen theres 2 many rckon we find a lay by & sit tite, restock at night on ft.

Wow, this sounds like an adventure ...Good luck.

Travelling will be very dangerous, very soon. But I know you will be careful. Good luck!

Be safe! xXHugsXx

Still driving, Ash?

It’s a little dangerous to be seen on the roads at the moment, but yes, slowly making our way Northwards whenever we can discern a clear route that’s not likely to be blocked or patrolled, and locate a safe stopping point at the end of it.
Making it up to Mei

The holiday-makers have gone home, so I’m back in my house, and we got most of the spring harvest in – well, enough to get by, maybe, just about, if we find buyers. It’ll be a tough year, and we’re ass-deep in debt, but if we do well in the fall we won’t have to sell up. Hey, if we can’t get buyers, we’ll just have to live off the land for a year.

It’s quiet here today. Carla and the folks are away doing a stall at a series of food fairs, along with most of the town – some famous vidcast chef’s doing a promo on growing, picking and shooting your own food (like he invented it) and just about every suckass in the county wants to get their produce or their face on the set. I’m taking care of stuff back here, but I got a cold, so I’m taking a well-deserved rest and spending a few quality hours with my ImmerXen Gamesphere.

After that, I’m going to take back some time to concentrate on the important things, and I want to try and be there for Mei more than I have been, get up earlier so we can be on SkIMp for longer, see if we can keep things going. I didn’t even answer her last meme, so here it is: I’m a deep-pan pizza – a little cheesy at first glance, but plenty going on under the surface. I’m at my best at home in front of the homeset, with friends and family. You
can cut me into pieces, but you'll never finish me off, and when you leave me cold, you'll be back for more in the morning. And if that don't work for ya, there's this:

I don't believe you would-chuck me.

9 thoughts on “Making it up to Mei”

Ash May 16, 2026 at 8:05 am
Jack, I’m sure we all have every sympathy, but is your blog the best place for this? Wouldn't it be best to contact Mei privately?

Kittyllama May 16, 2026 at 8:12 am
I wanna see it! That's really cute, Jack!! xXHugsXx

Elaine May 16, 2026 at 8:14 am
Never mind making it private, why don't you just back off? You seriously can't see that Mei doesn't need this shit right now? If you had any respect for her you'd
get over it and move on. I believe you had an “I told you so” owing, so consider it delivered.

Jack May 16, 2026 at 8:15 am
Yeah, you’re right, you are intruding on something private. I’ll send this stuff direct to Mei from now on.

Elaine May 16, 2026 at 9:45 am
OK, so I got a message from Mei and it turns out I’m making things worse. I apologise for sticking my oar in where it wasn’t needed. Mei wants us all to stay friends and I’ve got no call telling Jack how to relate to her. She, however, does, and I’m sorry if I made that more difficult.
Given the whole world’s gone to shit, I guess I should be doing something more important than interfering in my friends’ personal lives, but y’know, I’m kind of isolated here, and you guys are important to me. I guess I’m obsessing a bit. I need to get out more. But I can’t. So here I am. Sorry.

Jack May 16, 2026 at 9:48 am
Yeah, and I told you so, too. Now we’re even. Apology accepted. I think we’re all under a lot of stress right now, I’m sure things’ll get back to normal once...well, y’know, once things get back to normal.

Elaine May 16, 2026 at 9:52 am
You think things are ever going to be back to normal for Mei? Jack, you got to realise most of us are never going to see normal with a telescope again. Every continent in the world is locked down, a billion people have died. The only reason you can even think about normal is that this hasn’t reached you yet.

Jack May 16, 2026 at 9:54 am
Hey, that’s not fair! It reached me when it reached Mei.

Mei May 16, 2026 at 9:57 am
It did not reach you when it reached me. You were many miles away and did not understand – nobody did, nobody could. Now, Elaine can, and Ash soon will. Maybe one day you will, too – but I hope not.
What just happened?

What do you call a looter who doesn’t loot? Seriously, I need to come up with a name. I think I’ve had breakers and auditors. Breakers and auditors with guns.

They came in through the Open Invitation and wandered the maze through the designated route, like good little rats, but they didn’t take anything – just made a lot of marks on a clipboard and then got gone, even boarding up the window they came in through before they left and putting some fresh locks on the doors. I left the locks, but took the board down – looking too secure invites more thorough investigation – I’d rather keep my Open Invitation open.

Don’t get me wrong, may all my future looters be so civilised, but something makes me think they could be back for more than an inventory.

6 responses to What just happened?

Fiona · May 21, 2026 at 3:46 am

Oh boy, could these be The Authorities? Are there any authorities anymore? What’s going on over there anyway? Nothing I hear makes sense.

Elaine · May 21, 2026 at 8:43 am

Hard to tell... what they were wearing could have once been uniforms, but I’m given to believe uniformed types generally wear the same uniforms as their
colleagues, and these were kind of a mismatched set.

As to what's going on over here, the newsnets aren't giving away a whole lot. There are reports of frustration with the extended quarantine, calls for refusers to come forward. The official reports stress that the atmosphere inside the quarantines is calm and orderly. I don't buy it for a second.

Fiona · May 21, 2026 at 10:30 am
They didn't notice you in your hidey-hole, that's good.

Elaine · May 22, 2026 at 12:03 am
Yeah, the Inner Sanctum remains inviolate, for now. Makes me nervous, though – I may have to add to the defences.

Jack · May 21, 2026 at 7:32 am
So what you gonna do, clear out?

Elaine · May 21, 2026 at 8:44 am
Nah – any luck, if they're after supplies they won't bother exploring the upstairs offices. I'll just take as much of it as I can up here, keep a 'specially close watch on the approach alarms, and made sure to cut the power and lie low while they clean out whatever I can't hoard. Hopefully they'll get gone once they've cleaned out the shelves, and mark the place down as deserted.
Well this sucks

Some weird shit is going on. My folks called to say I couldn't come up to the house for dinner tonight – got this new idea that I'll start pulling my weight better if they just start refusing to cook for me, with no warning. I mean, I'd get it if it was any other time, but I've been seeing to myself while they were all out at the produce fair, and last night I was clearing a pretty intensive quest on Bailout (Zombie Edition), so I haven't even seen them in a week.

Then Carla comes on camera, says she's got something important to tell me; she heard from Laura, who we used to hang out with five years back, says she used to really like me. She just thought I'd like to know that. Again, WTF? I'm in the middle of a blazing row with Mom and Dad, and she's telling me now I coulda got some back in high school if I hadn't been an ignorant jerk? So she passes me back to Mom, who carries on lecturing me on how she won't be cooking for me no more, and I got to start taking responsibility. Then she disappears without a word, and Dad picks up the set again, but I couldn't hear what he was saying 'cause Mom was coughing behind him. I offered to just go up to the house tonight and order pizza, but he cut me off with this major list of
stuff needs doing on the farm, stuff that’s not even my job, tells me write it down, then logs out on me.

I don’t get my family. Must be some kinda crisis going on up at the Big House, and they’ve all got it into their heads to blame me for it. I’ll go up there tomorrow and see what the trauma was – I got laundry to take up, anyhow.

On top of all that, the damn pizza place is offline, and I’m hungry. Guess I’ll be breaking into my emergency store and eating macaroni and cheese out the tin again.

3 thoughts on “Well this sucks”

Mei May 23, 2026 at 7:31 pm
Jack, I am so sorry.

Jack May 23, 2026 at 8:04 pm
Hey, that’s OK. You OK? What happened?

Mei May 24, 2026 at 3:21 am
I saw the newsnets for North America. You did not see it yet? I thought, when your family makes you stay away, and they have been to a fair with lots of people, and your mother is coughing. Maybe I am wrong and they are OK. But do as they say, stay in your house and only talk with them on SkIMp until you are sure.
Seasonal Vegetables of the Living Dead

This can’t be happening

So, I saw Mei’s comment this morning and it finally clicked, because I am such a fucking dumbass. Mei could see what was going on from 10,000 miles away, and all I could do was moan about not getting my dinner. So Mom was right: I am a spoilt little schmuck who needs to grow up and take responsibility.

Fucked up way to say goodbye, though. I mean, she couldn’t just say: “Don’t come up to the house, son, we got flu,” and, you know, “I love you,” or some shit.

I guess I knew something was up, but I couldn’t place it – maybe I just didn’t want to. There was something strange about that SkIMp call – not the lectures, I get that crap all the time. But the first thing Mom asked was: “How are you? How are you feeling, Jack?” And she sounded kind of intense. So I said, “I’m fine, Mom, it was just a head cold.” I didn’t ask how she was. I don’t think I ever asked how she was, all my life. She was just Mom. Her job was to be fine, to be around when I needed her, to look after me. I never thought she could be sick, let alone dead.

Dad and Carla are still sick. I’m checking in on SkIMp every ten minutes or so. Whenever I get through, I just say “Do you need anything?”, and they say, “You asked that already,”
and start coughing again, and it hurts them to talk and we don’t know what to do, so we turn off the SkIMp again. Dad doesn’t want me to see him on the camera. Carla says he’s been crying blood. She’s coughing up blood now. They have enough food and water in easy reach, there’s nothing they need – nothing that’ll help. Mom locked and bolted all the doors and windows when she saw they were sick, and they all agreed that before any of them got delirious she should hide the keys. She must’ve thought I’d bust in, or that they might run out the house and go looking for me.

Dad just wants me to keep the farm going, and Carla only says “Sorry, I’m so sorry,” and I don’t know what she’s sorry for, or if she’s saying it to me or Dad or Mom or God or nobody. She might be sorry for leaving the farm, for going to that job interview, for selling Grandma’s necklaces for fake anti-virals. Maybe she thinks she brought the virus to the fair, but it could’ve been anybody, could’ve been Nature’s Chef and his Recipes for Disaster, everybody there must have had a bowl of cream of nettle soup from the vidtent. I’ll SkIMp and tell her that. I’ll say I saw it on a newsnet, that Nature’s Chef is patient Zero of NJ.

There’s no help in the town. I called 911 and that got us a quarantine seal across the front gate faster than the confirmation message that we’re on a waiting list for medical attention. Police are blocking up all the roads, but it’s broken out in NY now so that’s where all the attention’s gonna be. I’ll just be sitting here waiting to see if Dad or Carla pulls through. They both have pretty good immune systems, hardly a day’s illness in the last ten years. I just remembered why that’s bad news.

I don’t know what to do now. Perhaps I should go round the edge of the farm, secure the perimeter. I never thought it would be like this. I got guns and ammo and canned food and bottled water, got bandages and penicillin, got barbed wire on the fences – but I never thought the living dead would be my family. I didn’t think I’d be doing this alone.

7 thoughts on “This can’t be happening”

Elaine May 24, 2026 at 10:54 am

Shit, Jack, I’m sorry. Let us know if there’s anything we can do.
That’s the quote of the year, ain’t it? “What can I do? Tell me what I can do!”
That’s all any of us say anymore. There’s nothing any of us can do.

:'( xXHugsXx?

You may be right. I am so sorry to hear about your mother, Jack, and I fervently
hope the rest of your family pull through. This pandemic is worldwide now, and
we’re all just surviving, and there may be nothing we can do for each other. But
we can read one another’s blogs, and reassure each other that we are still here,
share our ideas and perhaps encourage one another to keep going.

I doubt I’ve been that encouraging. I’m starting to doubt that keeping going is
even the right thing to do. But I don’t know what else to do, so it’s all I can
recommend. For better or worse, I reckon there’s more than one of us still alive
because of Mei’s influence.

It’s so fast. It’s so fast, It’s news, then its’ rumours, and then, it’s here, and
everywhere

Mei is my only reason to keep going now. Dad and Carla died an hour ago, within ten
minutes of each other. I’m going to be offline for a while – give me a day before
SkIMping me. I need some space.
Today I buried my family. I SkImped all the relatives in my Mom’s contacts – got about five answers, none of them close enough to offer more than condolences. I didn’t want to try the neighbours just yet – they’re probably going through the same thing. There won’t be any emergency services or undertakers on call for a long time yet, so I dug the graves myself, and wrapped each of them up and buried them. We’re not what you’d call a church-going family, but Mom and Dad would sometimes say a prayer when times were tough, and Carla was a pretty keen curser, so I put together some crosses to mark the graves. I thought about calling a priest to do funerals, but it’d be better not to have anybody come in, in case of infection – mine or theirs.

There are a ton of funeral service templates on the socnets right now, did you know that? You can just fill in the names and a few choice memories and download pre-recorded services, complete with music. I didn’t do that. I used some of the questions they give you about the “departed” to put together my own. I pulled some good recent photos off my skystore and added the names and dates, then printed and laminated them to staple onto the crosses. Worst bit was when I couldn’t remember the year Dad was born and almost got out my handset to SkIm Carla. The last thing I did was
promise them I’d take care of the farm. It’s their legacy, my inheritance. It’s all I have left of them.

When you’re alone it’s easy to go into denial, and it still feels like they’re away at the produce fair or sitting up in the house, not lying under the ground by the herb garden. I catch myself forgetting all the time, not wanting to believe it. You get distracted, doing the daily chores like normal, it’s difficult to focus on. You just have that feeling of something missing, like there’s something you forgot to do and it’ll come back to you any minute, but you’re not gonna think about it yet, you’re gonna get on with what you need to do first. I’m getting the farm in order, tending the crops for autumn, preparing to plant the winter root veg, looking up any fertilisers or sprays they’re gonna need. It’s all about putting things in the ground. That’s what I got to do now. Just get it all buried.

9 thoughts on “Getting it all in the ground.”

Elaine May 25, 2026 at 12:54 pm
You dug three graves already? That’s unbelievable! It’s nearly 3am here, so you must've been working through the night... Take it easy, Nutloaf, and don’t forget to give yourself some downtime – we don’t want you following them.

Jack May 25, 2026 at 1:02 pm
No, now that you demand the gory details, I dug one grave and put them all in together. Does that paint a clear enough picture for you? You want me to describe the discoloured patches of skin where the blood vessels burst? Are there any other details you want in fucking Blu-ray High Definition before I carry on mourning my entire fucking family?

Mei May 25, 2026 at 2:16 pm
Jack, I am so sorry for you, and I understand you feeling this way. My family did not die, but many of my friends and neighbours, at home and in the campus, are dead. You feel angry with everybody who asks the wrong question or tells you to do something you don’t want. But I do not think Elaine means to say you are not truthful. She is worrying – and I am worrying – that you put so much hard work
on yourself at a very bad time. I am glad you did not – you must take care of your health now.

**Ash** May 25, 2026 at 3:14 pm

Jack, I am very sorry for your loss. I was also concerned that you'd put yourself through such a risky physical ordeal in the midst of an emotional one. Grief is exhausting work. I’m sure that’s all Elaine meant.

**Jack** May 25, 2026 at 3:54 pm

So nobody cares I’m being insulted and doubted. I don’t expect any of you to understand how I feel. None of you has lost family.

**Elaine** May 25, 2026 at 5:46 pm

Ok, fair point. I didn’t mean to doubt what you were saying, and I didn’t mean to make you feel like you had to justify anything. I should've put in the sympathies and condolences before the shock and concern, and that's my bad. I am sorry to hear about your family, Jack, and I'm willing to do whatever I can, given the limitations, to help you stay strong and get through this. But you might want to consider that we've all got family and friends unaccounted for. I don’t know whether my folks are dead in their bed or dying slowly in a quarantine hostel. They might even have headed for the hills and survived for all I’ll ever know. It must be hell to see it in front of you, but take what comfort you can that you know for sure what happened to your family and could lay them to rest.

**Jack** May 25, 2026 at 5:48 pm

Sure. I know for certain I’m alone in the world. That's a great comfort.

**Mei** May 25, 2026 at 5:59 pm

It is also very difficult to find comfort when you do not know what happens to the people you love. It is maybe the wrong time to say it to you, but I understand what Elaine says very well. You do not have to be alone, Jack. There must be other people who suffer what you do, who would be happy to help you keep a farm and have company in their grief.
You've made it pretty clear, I do have to be alone. I'm not having strangers on my family's farm. But don't worry, I've got everything I need. I can take care of myself.
Protected: What’s up with Jack?

Hey Ash – sorry to pull sneaky private posts on you, I know it’s not your style, but I need to bounce some suspicions off your level head. What do you reckon to the whole deal with Jack? Is this standard grief with snappy and scared on top or is there more to it, you think?

12 responses to Protected: What’s up with Jack?

Ash · May 26, 2026 at 8:22 am
Well, he’s not the embodiment of tact at the best of times, and at the risk of understatement, this is not the best of times. Perhaps he’ll be calmer and more reasonable when he’s had time to come to terms with his loss. Why, what more do you think there could be?

Elaine · May 26, 2026 at 8:23 am
No, you're right, I'm being unfair. I think I'm going a little stir-crazy, too, reading shit into shit that's not even shit. Ignore me.

Ash · May 26, 2026 at 8:25 am
Now, come on, I'm not so very level-headed that you can just leave it at that. Your overly suspicious mind got you into a relatively secure situation – it's probably
worth paying attention to every now and then. I’m not telling or judging: what do you suspect?

Elaine · May 26, 2026 at 8:25 am
Have you looked at the Newsnets for the US? I’m not seeing a whole lot about Blood Flu in rural New Jersey.

Ash · May 26, 2026 at 8:27 am
They can’t report on every new outbreak – it’s everywhere, and the press travel more than most, they must be dropping like flies. Some of the official newsnets are barely functioning anymore. You don’t think Jack would make all this up, do you? What for?

Elaine · May 26, 2026 at 8:29 am
I know, it’s a really horrible thing to think, and I’ve been trying to put it out of my mind. But something about it all doesn’t ring true for me. He said “graves”. Plural. And the defensiveness at every question or comment, like he thinks I’m trying to catch him out. It suggests he thinks he has something to be caught out on.

Ash · May 26, 2026 at 8:30 am
Maybe he just suspects you mistrust him because he mistrusted you?

Elaine · May 26, 2026 at 8:31 am
Maybe I do mistrust him because he mistrusted me. Maybe I’m losing it holed up in here – I haven’t even had a decent looter to play with for days. But I am so damn sure he’s hiding something.

Ash · May 26, 2026 at 8:32 am
Well, he’s too far away for us to ever know about it if he is. Take him at his word or don’t, it seems like a bit of a moot point from where I’m standing. And he’s not obliged to blog every detail.

Elaine · May 26, 2026 at 8:34 am
I suppose. Where are you standing these days, by the way? You’ve hardly posted since you took off.

Ash · May 26, 2026 at 8:34 am
I’ll let you know soon.

Elaine · May 26, 2026 at 8:35 am
Don't you start with the mysterious! Somebody better do something interesting and blog about it soon, I'm going batshit here...
29 May 2026

On the Road

We’ve been continuing North, along the B-roads and byways, doubling back when we hear of roadblocks ahead through Flukey, though even that information’s getting sketchy and unreliable. I’m not going to give away our location, but it’s irrelevant anyway since we’ve all but given up on reaching our destination. We just stay in driveways and lay-bys, as far as we can from any areas being patrolled, and move on when it looks like we might be discovered.

There’s hardly anybody on the roads anymore, except for emergency and military vehicles. It’s pretty clear that we don’t live in a detached house where we’d be able to apply for self-quarantine – if we did, we’d be driving a jag, not holidaying in a caravan with orange and brown curtains – so the “Just on our way home” line has limited currency now. We’ve been pulled over twice in the last week. They ask to see my licence, and I reach into the glove compartment and hold the little packet of Reliflu tablets up to the window. Of course, they’re all issued with their own for personal use, but a blister-pack of six tablets has a market value of £300, and while it would be suspicious for a copper on blockade duty to be caught with a wad of cash in his pocket, there’s nothing untoward about frontline forces carrying anti-virals. They’re the perfect bribe. However, I was issued with a limited supply, and we can’t afford to get stopped again.

Everybody who lives in a dwelling that touches another dwelling on any side has been moved to a Quarantine Home, which seems pretty pointless given that they just get packed in even tighter, but I suppose the point is to ensure each individual stays in a separate room and that there’s nobody wandering the streets unauthorised. The vids look very comfortable – all brand new homesets in clean hotel rooms with showers and kitchenettes, the month’s food supply neatly packaged into daily doses in the cupboard,
even family rooms where there’s perspex with intercoms between each unit. Once the tinny drone of Sarah’s headphones stopped last night, and we were fairly sure she was asleep, Sue asked me if I thought we should just go quietly. I do not, but I can’t explain why. It’s not that I’m comfortable with being on the run, but I’m less comfortable with giving up.

I think about how it would be if this had happened just a few years ago, if Sarah had been younger, putting her in a room alone, watching through Perspex as she falls ill, not being able to bring her a hot juice or put a damp flannel on her forehead. Or falling ill myself, with Sue and Sarah looking on, unable to reach either me or one another. Would I press my hand against the Perspex and say goodbye, or pull the curtain over so they didn’t have to see? I think of Jack’s family, shutting him out of the house to save him, not telling him they were ill. I wonder, would we have the strength to do that for Sarah? Would we let her die with us rather than push her away forever?

It’s getting harder to keep going. Most of the petrol stations were closed before we set off, so we’ve been siphoning fuel out of stationary vehicles – never the whole tank, we wouldn’t want to leave anybody stranded. I’ve persuaded myself that the owners of four-by-fours deserve it. It hasn’t taken much to make criminals of us, though I’m concerned to discover Sarah’s expertise in breaking fuel caps. She assures me she hasn’t actually done it before, she “just thought it would be useful to know”, as if it were a transferable skill she’d been developing for her CV. Perhaps it is, now.

For now, we’re on the road, and looking for a spot to pull off it, eat a tin of beans and some pasta and crawl into our sleeping bags. I’m trying not to think about the day we have to replenish our food supplies – I don’t know whether I’m more afraid of breaking into a shop or of Sarah already knowing exactly how to do so.

9 responses to “On the road”

Elaine May 29, 2026 at 12:34 pm

Here’s hoping you pick a store doesn’t have somebody like me sitting in it. Look out for booby traps, prop doors open behind you, and for the luvva god, don’t open any fridges.
Ash May 29, 2026 at 12:36 pm

I’ll bear that in mind...

Jack May 29, 2026 at 3:09 pm

I reckon you’re right to stay on the run and not get put in a box. I’d rather be able to reach my family, even if it meant risking the Flu myself.

Mei May 29, 2026 at 3:31 pm

It is terrible to be trapped on the other side of a wall from somebody you love, no matter if the wall is plastic or plaster or bricks or the screen of a set.

Ash May 29, 2026 at 5:12 pm

We’re going to keep going as we are for as long as we can, and hope to find somewhere out of the way to stop for longer and begin growing and foraging. We’ll stay out of the comfortable boxes.

Fiona June 2, 2026 at 3:35 am

Glad to hear you are still surviving, Ash, Elaine, and Mei. So sorry about your family, Jack. Of course I hear a lot of tragic stories these days, but that went so quickly I’m starting to fear that the blood flu is becoming yet more virulent as it sweeps across North America. Best wishes to everyone, all we can do is hang in as best we can, as those we love would want us to.

Ash June 2, 2026 at 1:38 pm

Good to hear from you again, Fiona. How are you faring in Canada these days?
Fiona June 2, 2026 at 11:18 pm

Well enough, better than many. Up Vancouver Island, we've managed a bit of the community organizing you were hoping to implement in London. Coordinating everything through SkIMP so no-one has to meet face to face but we can keep track of who's still alive. Just been making the rounds with a fish truck.

Ash June 3, 2026 at 5:11 pm

That's very good to know – perhaps there's some hope for us after all.
Uninvited Guests

So, I’ve had a fun day. Three nasty-looking looters set off the proximity alarm early this morning, blokes in their late 20s or 30s. Most looters I’ve seen so far are very young or very old, half starved and terrified. These looked like they’d been doing alright for themselves and had a fair bit of experience. I watched them clock the open invitation and the rat maze for distractions in less than a minute – they didn’t even stop to take the free food. They’d bust through the shelves and started heading for the kitchen store almost before I’d silently buzzed the locks open, and the bastards even shot a couple of my cameras en route. I was lucky they chose to investigate the kitchen before the stairs, or they might have made it to the Outer Inner sanctum, and I’d be scrambling away over the rooftops with my bug-out bag. As it was, I caught them in penalty box number one – straight through the store cupboard and into the walk-in fridge.

As I was telling my mate Ash only the other day, if you’re ever looting a store, prop open the doors as you go; just cause they opened when you pushed them, doesn’t mean somebody isn’t sitting up in a control centre ready to lock them behind you. The noisy buzzers can easily be taken out of those remote-locking intercoms, and you won’t know anything about it until you hear the click. You’ll be relieved to discover that there’s an inside handle on the fridge, but when you try the door, just to reassure yourself, and find that it doesn’t open, even when you barge it with your shoulder and use creative language on it, confusion will quickly turn to panic and you’ll curse whoever’s with you for getting you into this, and they’ll curse you back, and it’ll be hilarious for anybody
watching on hidden cameras in the shelving. Walk-in fridges are pretty tough – those insulated walls can take a hell of a pounding and, it turns out, even a bullet or two, but you don’t want to do too much of that, cause shooting through an industrial-size tube of tetrafluoroethane in an airtight space would only be funny for a minute. I’ve got to admit these guys know their stuff, cause one of the gang grabbed the rifle off of Trigger Happy before it was too late and yelled at him to save his ammo for the bastard fucking with them. I took that as my cue for the tannoy announcement.

“Welcome to the Big Sister house. Day one: the housemates arrive and settle in. After ten minutes yelling at each other about who let the door close, they realise they’re in an airtight box where shooting is likely to release poisonous gases. It’d probably be an idea for them to get rid of those guns before they do each other an injury.

“The housemates’ first challenge is an act of trust, to gain Big Sister’s approval. Outside the fridge is a secure storage area. In half an hour, Big Sister will open the door and let you out there. Do not try to open the door of the storage area. Leave your guns, bags and jackets in the storage area. Turn out your pockets and leave the contents there. Go back into the fridge, and close the door behind you. If you successfully complete this challenge, half an hour later Big Sister will open the door again and you will find food and bedding in the storage area for your use.

“You really want Big Sister’s approval right now. You do not want to fuck with Big Sister. Big Sister has spent the last two months turning this store into Fort fucking Knox meets the Temple of Doom. If you complete all your challenges without being an arsehole, Big Sister will reward you and let you leave. If you want to find out what happens if you’re an arsehole, be an arsehole.”

They laugh, of course. It is kind of a ridiculous situation, and as many have noted, I am hilarious. Trigger Happy begins to suggest shooting the other door, but the smart guy who took his gun does that looking around talking thing they do when they haven’t figured out where the cameras are yet.

“Big Sister, I take it you can hear us as well as we can hear you?”

I decide not to engage in conversation until I’ve got their guns. If they think I can’t hear them, so much the better.

“Give me the guns,” he tells the other two. I’ve counted two pistols and a rifle on them so far, and I’m nervy, cause anybody with that many guns on display’s got to have a few more hidden. I’m glad when his boss says, “And the rest, come on,” and Trigger Happy
takes another pistol out his jacket. Trigger Grumpy gets grumpy, though.

“I’m not giving all my guns to some psycho bitch on a tannoy!”

And the boss forgets I heard him talk about saving ammo for “the bastard who’s fucking with us” and goes all Trigger Tranquil.

“Big Sis is just being cautious, that’s all, am I right? Anybody’d be nervous, bunch of guys with guns busting into their safe house. We’d do the same, wouldn’t we, fellas? We came looking for food, not trouble. So here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna give the guns to Big Sister, so she can trust us. But we’re gonna keep the bullets, just on this shelf, here—,” the camera judders as he empties the rifle chambers and slaps the pistol clips down on the shelf, “—so that we can trust her, too.”

“Big Sister will consider your offer,” I say, and put on a Blandest Hits of 2020 playlist interspersed with Colmart jingles on repeat. Cruel, but I have to cover the noise of the drill while I put some extra security on the outside of the store cupboard door, and the condescending fuckhead was pissing me off.

When I get back to the Inner Sanctum, I check over the footage I’d missed to make sure they haven’t put the ammo back in the guns, then turn the tannoy back on. They’re visibly relieved when the music stops.

“Big Sister will open the door now. If you leave the guns and the bullets, you’ll get three tins of stew, three tins of beans and three sleeping bags. If you leave only the guns, you’ll get what I consider to be a fair swap. Do not touch the door on the other side of the storage area. You have been warned.”

Click. Like a shot, Trigger Grumpy’s through the door and launching himself at the electrified handle of the store cupboard door. Trigger Grumpy gets very grumpy, and uses some language that causes me to start peeling labels off the tins I’ve put aside.

Then Trigger Happy pulls a loaded pistol from his boot and starts shooting at the door. I was really hoping they wouldn’t do that, because my planned response is a bit of a bluff. By now, though, they’re nervous enough to back away from the fog machine smoke that starts billowing under the door, and when the flash-bangs go off, cracking open the bottles of almond essence, Trigger not-so-Tranquil-anymore yells, “Get back in the fucking fridge,” throws the guns down behind him and slams the door.

Big Sister wasn’t entirely happy with the way they handled that challenge, but at least the gun that Trigger Happy sneaked through was loaded, so I got more out of it than Trigger Cautious had hoped. I am nothing if not magnanimous, and gave them two label-
less tins of dog food and one tiny tin of beans, two adult sleeping bags and one child-size bag with pink flowers on it, a gallon of water and a bucket. My entertainment’s sorted for tonight, I think.

What else shall I do with the Triggers?

17 responses to Uninvited Guests

Ash · June 2, 2026 at 11:02 pm
You’re not really going to leave one of them without a jacket or proper sleeping bag in a fridge overnight, are you?

Elaine · June 2, 2026 at 11:07 pm
Probably should’ve mentioned, there’s no power to the fridge, or to the store for that matter – hasn’t been for weeks. I’ve got the lighting and the security on a Lithion battery on a dynamo rigged to an exercise bike out of the leisure section – I’ve never been so fit in my life. Everything else is chargeable from the battery or hand-wound, plus I got a couple of solar chargers that’ll be more useful come summer, and my stove runs on spirit fuel. Heating’s an issue for me, and ski-jackets are the fashion in the Inner Sanctum, but the guest room is pretty well-insulated and the Triggers seem to produce enough hot air to not be shivering. I’ll need to think of a challenge to set them every few hours, though, or they’ll use up all the oxygen, not to mention changing the bucket.

Mei · June 3, 2026 at 12:28 am
This is very bad. You cannot keep them there forever.

Elaine · June 3, 2026 at 12:29 am
Yeah, I know. But you said I should get some company.

Mei · June 3, 2026 at 12:30 am
This is not so funny, Elaine – what if they escape?

Elaine · June 3, 2026 at 12:34 am
If they escape, it’s the same as if I didn’t catch them in the first place. They take over the store, I have to run for my life. You won’t give up your campus the first time somebody tries to take it, will you?
Mei · June 3, 2026 at 12:34 am
This is why we have a process to quarantine people and let them join us.

Elaine · June 3, 2026 at 12:35 am
Not so different. I’m just quarantining them for signs of murderous intent. If they can go 28 days without killing each other, I’ll let them go.

Jack · June 3, 2026 at 4:26 am
What kind of guns did you get?

Elaine · June 3, 2026 at 5:34 am
Beyond “four pistols and a rifle” I have no idea.

Jack · June 3, 2026 at 5:48 am
BLink us some photos and I’ll BLink you back some info on how to use them. Sounds like you’ll need it. I plan to keep looters off my farm, not take them in as pets.

Elaine · June 3, 2026 at 5:49 am
Wait until you get some looters – when it’s a 12 year-old girl and her little brother, it doesn’t seem quite so clear cut.

Ash · June 3, 2026 at 5:50 am
As someone in imminent danger of becoming a looter, I wouldn’t much like my chances with either of you.

Elaine · June 3, 2026 at 5:51 am
Long as you don’t come in tooled up playing commando with your mates, you’ll be fine with me. Jack would shoot you at the gate, though.

Jack · June 3, 2026 at 6:10 am
Thing is, you guys haven’t seen death yet. You holed up or got out in time. The Blood Flu, it’s not real to you, it’s on the newsnets. I saw what it did to my family. I don’t have anything against somebody who escaped the quarantine camps out looking for food, but I can’t risk them infecting me or emptying my stores. You’ve got to look after number one before you can take care of anybody else.

Fiona · June 3, 2026 at 8:42 am
OMG you are brillaint.

Ash · June 4, 2026 at 2:13 am
She is, but don’t encourage her! ;-)
Whenever we get used to our lives now, there is a new threat to us. The government want to make student campuses into a base for the army. They offer us money, food and electricity in return for this, but we provide these things ourselves now. Our first crops are ready to eat, and science students breed their laboratory animals for some meat – rabbits and others that eat grass are easy for us to keep. The cat is very pleased about this because I can feed him some small piece of rabbit or guinea pig, but I hope he will stay away from the rodent runs. Somebody on the forum says they have seen cats on the campus – I did not say I have been feeding him, as many would see this as a waste, and maybe think the cat is dangerous or can spread disease. I say cats should be allowed to live on campus because they kill the rats and mice, and these spread disease and will eat our food stores.

We wait for as long as we can, but today, we send our answer to the army – we say no, we will keep control on the campus. Soldiers may join us, but they must give up their weapons when they come in, and we will search them for anti-virals and put them each in a quarantine room for 28 days. We wait for their answer, and prepare for what they may do next, but their numbers are small now – many have died in the uprisings in Southern and Eastern provinces. Zhen spoke in favour of refusing the army at a general meeting, and we voted with him. The party members resent that he wins the election and refuses to join the party. They start to say it is weakness that Zhen cannot make a
big decision without a vote, that he is not confident in his opinion without the students behind him and will not act like a leader when it is what we need. They begin now to campaign for allowing the army to take over the campus, and say we will have a better organisation this way. Most do not listen to them – we never have any problems with organisation so far – everybody does their jobs well, or tells us if they cannot so we can find somebody else. I say “we”, like I am one of the leaders, and I think many see me this way. I am not in an elected position like Zhen and Li, but I am always with them and do so many organising tasks, and they talk to me about their decisions and respect what I say. They say I must stand in the next election, and I feel more confident now, but still I don’t think I want to do this. I almost want to be back in the quarantine, when all the decisions happen on the forum and everybody is just trying to make the campus work, not to win against another person.

I do not worry about the Party. They fall in many provinces, and they do little now for the people in Beijing. Food growing and delivery is run by local people as much as the army, and is more efficient and a better quality. There is a will to resist, and in the past weeks many speak of 1989. Normally, we cannot commemorate our past resistance, but there is nobody to suppress student protest this year, and so we honour our parents’ resistance and celebrate our own, with hope for the future.

Thinking about hope for the future, there is another quiz from the person who did the disaster meme. Which Utopia are you Building? My answer:

**Anarchist Communism in a scarcity environment, e.g. Anarres in The Dispossessed by Ursula Le Guin**

![Anarres Map](image)
You know that society will never be perfect, but you also know that it can be a lot better than it is now. You can’t eliminate human fallibility, but you can put processes and fail-safes in place so that a society can weather a reasonable amount of petty-mindedness, self-indulgence and indolence, without resorting to the hierarchies that make vices or privileges of them. Most importantly, you recognise that the revolution is never over, and a utopia is not a stagnant society but one that’s free to change and develop its ideals, its processes and its technology towards ever greater freedom for all.

See the story behind this quiz at http://badinfluences.org.uk

Take the quiz: Which Utopia are you building?

8 thoughts on “Building for the future”

Elaine on June 4, 2026 at 11:57 pm said:
I hope my taunt about not giving up the campus wasn’t prophetic. What do you think the army will do now?

Mei on June 5, 2026 at 12:04 am said:
We cannot tell. Maybe they will have orders to take the campus anyway, maybe they will obey those orders or maybe they will see that it is better for them to turn against those orders and join us. We watch the gates and walls at all times.

Jack on June 5, 2026 at 2:06 am said:
My perimeter’s pretty secure now. Thanks for the specs you Blinked, Elaine – I’ve got it set-up much like your place, but with a few explosive surprises as well as the silent alarms, and without that “open invitation” thing going on – I’d rather scare them off from the start than invite them inside and then turn on them.

Elaine on June 5, 2026 at 9:20 am said:
The open invitation's saved me from having to defend myself at all up until the Triggers came along, but if you’re OK to risk a child meeting with an “explosive surprise” you know your business.
Jack on June 5, 2026 at 9:31 am said:
I only hope the rest of you are as safe. You can’t be so sentimental about these things, it’ll be the end of you, all of you. Mei and her friends will invite the army in, feed them for 28 days and then they’ll take over and probably kill the leaders and anybody who’s been supporting them. Elaine’ll get run out of her store because she won’t do what obviously needs to be done and kill the looters who were going to kill her. Ash has the right idea in getting away from other people, but you’ve got to get yourself a base soon – that trailer’s going to get noticed wherever you go. You guys all need to wise up and start putting yourselves first, there’s nobody else out there to look out for you anymore.

Ash on June 5, 2026 at 6:56 pm said:
Except you, eh, Jack? I’m sure we all appreciate the concern, but there’s no need to be so heavy-handed with the judgements. We’ve each made informed decisions. We’ll each live with the consequences, or not, as it may be.

Elaine on June 5, 2026 at 7:13 pm said:
Oh, and forgot to say thanks for the info on the guns, Jack – I’ve been practicing. It’s a good thing you’re out of range, eh? ;-}) One thing confuses me – you’ve planted, what, some kind of homemade claymores round your farm? Where did you get the stuff for that, or learn how to do it? I mean, I had a pretty well-equipped store, and I looked into explosives and decided it was impractical. And flu’s only hit your state recently, there’s still panic in the streets from what I read, and any stores you could have got that stuff were emptied pretty quick, either by the army or the owners. When have you had the time to do all this?

Jack on June 5, 2026 at 9:46 pm said:
You reckon you’re the only one with practical skills, Elaine? I don’t want to show all my cards on the internet, but let’s just say I was prepared.
Big Sister: Day 6

I got the bullets off the Trigger boys in the end, in return for another adult-size sleeping bag and two more buckets. Sensible trade, on their part – the last thing they needed was to be fighting each other for the basic comforts. It didn’t take them long to find the cameras in the fridge, and they keep accidentally throwing stuff on top of them, the scamps. I’ve said if any go dead, they don’t get dinner or fresh buckets, and so far they’re not pushing me, cause they don’t know how far I’ll go, and frankly neither do I.

We’ve killed some time this week with “Store-room confessionals”, a good way of getting to know your looters. I told them their dinner would depend on their answers.

Trigger Grumpy went first. I expected him to be the most trouble, but once out of the fridge with the door closed behind him, fuck me if the bastard didn’t look straight into the camera and start weeping.

“This isn’t me,” he kept saying, and he looked younger than I’d thought, early twenties maybe, with hair just long enough to curl and a little chin-dimple that was beginning to be lost to stubble. He begged me to get him away from the other two, said he’d lost his family to the Flu and escaped a quarantine hostel (though he was hazy on the details of how he’d done that) and they just picked him up and made him start looting with them. “Seems a lot of effort for them to go to,” I said, “when they could just kill you and keep more for themselves. Guess you must have some special skill they wanted you for.” Turns out he’s military, trained in ammunitions, and he knew where to get the guns.
from. Which begged a few questions, such as why take them to the armoury if they didn’t already have guns to make him? Why was he in a hostel if he was qualified to be guarding it? Why stay with the others when he had as many guns as they did and more practice at using them? He clammed up after that. I gave him macaroni cheese, for effort.

Next was Trigger Happy, who didn’t want to talk about his past or how he’d fallen in with professional looters, but was happy to spend the next fifteen minutes explaining what he was going to do when he found me, swearing almost as much as Jezza on a Monday morning. Eventually he ran out of ideas and started smashing up the store room, which didn’t contain much besides empty tins and full buckets at that point. I left him a bucket of soapy water and disinfectant, a mop and the threat of no more bucket changes til it smelled of roses down there, and later watched him grudgingly cleaning it up under the watchful eye of the third Trigger, who’s been keeping the other two in line since the beginning.

His confessional was interesting. Before I even asked him about his situation he threw a challenge at me, and put me on the defensive. Who am I to keep them there? Who am I to hold an entire storeful of food to myself? And probably because I’ve been asking myself that question on a daily basis for the last couple of months, I responded quicker than I should’ve.

“I let people take what they need,” I said. “You saw the setup I had when you came in, you could’ve gone on your way with a week’s supply; you didn’t have to get greedy and go looking for the source.”

“What gives you the right to the source?”

“What gives anyone the right to anything anymore? Possession’s ten tenths of the law now, and that was suiting both of us pretty well until you walked into my fridge – at least I didn’t get here by waving guns around.”

Which I shouldn’t have told him. I was supposed to be gauging how much of a threat he was. I tried to keep a bit of control after that, and when he wondered how I did get here, I told him, “You first.”

Then I got the full story of the gang. Trigger Grumpy was a soldier, but he wasn’t a resident at the hostel, he was a guard. The three of them were security, and after the order came not to release people on the 28th day, parties were sent out to collect more supplies, since the depots were almost empty by now. They were given firearms (it was
a risky business, with looting gangs and quarantine refusers out there) and they were
given a list (no doubt compiled by my “breakers and auditors”) and once they were far
enough away from the hostel they figured why keep going back with this stuff? The only
real reason would have been for the anti-virals, but the supply of those had to run out
sometime, and they weren’t the first guards to desert before it got to crisis point. If they
didn’t go back, they’d be presumed dead or diseased, and nobody would go after them,
so they stole the lists and went freelance. They were going to take this place over for
themselves. They didn’t know it was occupied already, but the set-up was enough of a
clue to prepare them for the possibility. I didn’t press him on what they’d been planning
to do about that if they hadn’t got locked in a fridge, cause I was more interested in the
hostels.
“So why aren’t they letting people out?” I said.
He laughed, or maybe choked.
“What’s going on there, not too different to what you’ve got going on here. People’ve
been kept in shitty conditions too long, not given information, unreliable food, taunted,
messed with. The quarantine managers are afraid to let people out in case they go for
the remaining supplies, take it all back.” He paused long enough to let me take that one
in. “Not many left to let out, anyhow,” he continued, “but enough for riots when they see
how few security are left.”
I couldn’t resist responding, “Yeah, I hear some of those deserted.”
“I saw an opportunity to get out of the round-up, and I took it, just like you. You got
lucky, is all. I wouldn’t have been working for those fucking flag-wavers if I was sitting
on a storeful of food, either. I did what I had to.”
“Sure. And more besides.”
“You’d know about that, wouldn’t you?” he said calmly. I decided I wasn’t compelled to
justify myself to him, and let him fill the silence. “You had to keep us from finding you,
sure, but you wouldn’t be doing all this Big Sister shit if you weren’t enjoying it.”
Well, a little.
“Not at all. I’m just wondering how to get rid of you without compromising my safety.
Easiest would be to turn off the cameras and look the other way while you run out of air.
Riskiest would be to let you go. What would you do?”
He dealt with that one pretty creditably. Ran a hand through his hair, looked straight at
the camera and said, “I’d keep me on. I can help you get the others out the way. We’d
both rather they were gone but not dead. Two of us could watch in shifts in case they
came back. You’re smart, and you’re handy, but I don’t think you know how to fire a gun. I’d be good security – I’ve got experience, and a man’s voice is more threatening to a gang of looters – that’s their prejudice, not mine. Reckon we could both do with the company, too.”

Not a bad pitch, all things considered. I considered all things.

“I mix a mean Martini, if that’s a decider,” he added. It wasn’t, but the rehearsed half-smile to camera was.

“Big Sister will keep your CV on file, but for now we regret we have no suitable opening for a person of your skills.”

That broke his calm, but he didn’t kick himself half so hard as I did. I should’ve made it plain from the start that I wasn’t alone here. They didn’t need to know that. I could’ve been the spokesperson for a whole armed gang. I’ve been an idiot to let them see me as a weak, lonely woman. Not his prejudice, no, just his veiled threat to intimidate me into thinking I need him.

As he went back into the fridge, he asked, “Did I earn tinned stew or dog food for that?” Honestly there’s not much difference between the two, I think the dog food tastes a little better – less salt. I gave him the dog food, in a plastic cocktail glass with an olive in it, but I gave him a tin of beans, too. It’s nice to have somebody to talk to, even if he is a skeezy bastard.

9 responses to Big Sister: Day 6

Fiona · June 8, 2026 at 12:29 am
Wow. This is very interesting.

Mei · June 8, 2026 at 2:41 am
It is! Maybe Elaine should let him stay, a little while anyway. She has the guns and can send him away any time.

Ash · June 8, 2026 at 2:46 am
That’s true. What do you really think of him, Elaine? Does he seem trustworthy?

Elaine · June 8, 2026 at 2:49 am
You mean apart from breaking into my store with an armed gang and trying to take it over?
The world is different now. You've locked them in a box and played humiliating games with them, does that make you untrustworthy?

I guess it sort of does. I trusted few enough people before. The world hasn’t really changed that much, it’s just the stakes are higher. I have the gun, so I could trust him until I had to sleep. And the longer I keep him living under a gun, the less inclined he’s going to be to trust me, the more he’s going to plan to take over when he can. I mean, I would. Wouldn’t you? And there’s still the issue of the other two. It’s all too risky.

Got to agree with you there. You can’t trust anybody anymore.

Notice how his proposal involved jettisoning his two associates. Nah, I don’t think any of the three sound trustworthy, so to speak, but they haven’t really done anything to deserve the easy solution, either. I’ve no idea what I would do, but I’m in awe of Elaine and I’m sure she’ll think of something.

At the moment I’m thinking invent a matter-transporter and send them far into the outback. I should probably get some sort of back-up plan. Honestly, I don’t know what I’m going to do when the water supply starts running too low for the four of us.
My utopia

Oh yeah, and I got this from the quiz Mei memed us. Guess I’m not getting there any time soon.

Hi-tech, Post-scarcity Anarchist Individualism, e.g. The Culture in a number of the novels of Iain M. Banks

You’d rather skip the inconvenient practicalities of social development and revolution, and go straight to a society in which resources and possibilities are limitless, and who can blame you? Why mess about with complex social systems when you can have all-powerful sentient machines with a sense of humour and recreational sex till the bovine protein synthesisers reach their point of origin. And if you get bored with having your every imaginable desire on tap, you can always join Contact and agonise about whether it’s more unethical to go around imposing freedom on less utopian societies or to continue to exist while not imposing freedom on them.
See the story behind this quiz at http://badinfluences.org.uk

Which Utopia are you building?

2 responses to *My utopia*

Fiona · June 8, 2026 at 12:31 am
I thought you wouldn't be able to resist the sarcastic robots.

Elaine · June 8, 2026 at 9:19 pm
The idea of machines that can do conversation and heavy lifting without having squidgy needs like oxygen, food, water and toilet facilities is kind of appealing right now.
Seasonal Vegetables of the Living Dead

Where I belong

Meritocracy, e.g. A Modern Utopia by H.G. Wells.

A place for everyone, and everyone in their place. This is just a little sinister, but of course Wells was writing without the benefit of hindsight that we now have about "socialists" who favour rigid hierarchies with a faint whiff of eugenics. Meritocracy is
often a very appealing concept to those who get to define merit. Freedom is being satisfied with your allotted place.

See the story behind this quiz at http://badinfluences.org.uk

Which Utopia are you building?

So, on top of my life falling apart, I get a meme calling me a fascist just cause I think people should do what they're good at. Figures.

I guess it’s difficult for people to get where I’m coming from. Kids who grow up on farms are supposed to spend their teens longing to get away to the big city. My school buddies did. Carla did. But I was happy with where I was and what I had. I knew I was where I belonged. Mom and Dad never got that. They always wanted me to have some ambition beyond the farm.

Way I always saw it, I had the W4, why did I have to go anywhere else to do what I wanted? Why would I go to college to draw comics when there’s hundreds of online vidcast courses I could do from here? I only agreed to go on that Extreme Research thing to get my folks off my back about “new experiences” and “meeting people”. Sure, I enjoyed it, I had new experiences, I met people. But what good is meeting somebody you never get to see again? What good is wanting to be somebody you’re not, and going looking for things to want other than what’s right in front of you?

Now, all those opportunities everybody bugged me to go chasing after are gone, and all anybody wants is to know where the food’s coming from. Everybody’s got to re-evaluate their ambitions. A farmer is pretty much the best thing you can be now. Staying here turns out to be the best career move I ever made. It’s just a shame my family will never know it.

12 thoughts on “Where I belong”

Fiona June 10, 2026 at 3:10 pm

Good points, Jack
Ash June 10, 2026 at 4:27 pm
I was envious of your farm even before the fall, as you know, but I always got the impression that you found your duties a bit of a chore. Perhaps your parents wanted you to pursue your artwork because they thought that it was what you were best at. I'm sure they only wanted you to be happy.

Jack June 10, 2026 at 4:35 pm
Sure, farming is hard work, but I never said I didn’t like it. I guess now nobody else is making the decisions and nagging me about it, it all seems more important. I got to step up and take on the responsibility, and that’s OK. It makes me feel sad, but also closer to my folks, like I’m doing what they were doing.

Ash June 10, 2026 at 5:04 pm
I’m glad you seem to be coping with it all so well.

Elaine June 10, 2026 at 8:02 pm
I’m with you on the futility of ambition. All that time I wasted trying to make something of my life, it’s almost a relief nothing came of it. This could only be worse if I’d had a life I was fussing on giving up.

Jack June 10, 2026 at 8:03 pm
Hey, it’s not over yet. You got a store, you’re a big success now. I’d say you won, if you weren’t wasting your supplies on a bunch of looters.

Elaine June 10, 2026 at 8:04 pm
Yeah. Talking of responsibilities and stepping up… with great secure shelters full of food comes a heap of trouble, and no matter how well you reckon you’ve prepared there are no easy answers. No doubt you’ve got all this to come.

Mei June 10, 2026 at 8:06 pm
I am glad I meet you all once, even if we never meet again, just like I am glad I go to Beijing and help to start the Quarantine Movement, even if the army will take
it from us. If we can no longer have the things we once hoped for, we have the influence those hopes gave us to take into our future.

Jack June 10, 2026 at 8:07 pm
I get that you need to believe that. It’s hard to let go of the idea that we can make a difference, even if we can’t do anything for anybody except ourselves now.

Mei June 10, 2026 at 8:12 pm
Yes, it is very difficult to believe this when I see every day the people who make a difference to me, and know that outside are the people who can choose to destroy everything we build or join us to build something greater.

Elaine June 10, 2026 at 8:14 pm
Yeah, I gotta say, since the Triggers came along I've not had the option to ignore the future or the fact there's still a lot of other people out there. At the very least, you start thinking about how things'll work now, and where you're going to fit in that picture.

Jack June 10, 2026 at 8:15 pm
As long as I can keep them “out there”, I'll be just fine.
14 June 2026

Going Nowhere

There are a lot of patrols out on the roads now – an attempt to round up stragglers, we think – so we’ve found somewhere we can remain relatively concealed and we’re staying put.

To amuse myself I thought I’d try out that Utopia quiz. I suppose I can live with the result. I read it once, and it certainly reminds me of a few people I used to know. Well, we were right that another world was possible. It just isn’t the one we expected.

Pastoral/Primitivist Anarchist Communism, e.g. News from Nowhere by William Morris.
We don't need money, hierarchies or laws. Neither do we need structures, processes or new technology. This kind of utopia appeals to those who find conflict frightening, and prefer revolutions that have a definite end resulting in a static society with no further change or development required, ever. The harvest never fails, nobody resents anybody else's foibles and everybody is happy in their work. Doesn’t “work is play” have a slightly Orwellian ring to it?

See the story behind this quiz at http://badinfluences.org.uk

Which Utopia are you building?

5 responses to “Going nowhere”

Fiona June 14, 2026 at 6:05 pm
We may yet be living in the early days of a better world.

Ash June 14, 2026 at 7:36 pm
It’s difficult to see it that way at the moment – watching motorways and towns through my binoculars, it’s as if all variety and colour has been drained and only green and hi-vis yellow remain, in both clothing and vehicles. I’m waiting to see what will happen when the quarantines are officially ended here, if we don’t just go the way of Australia. After that, I suppose, we find out whether the existing powers reassert themselves, or new ones emerge. Is anybody in charge in Canada anymore? I hope the fish trucks are still getting around. Who’s catching the fish? You seem very organised there!

Fiona June 15, 2026 at 9:43 pm
After negative reports got out about the quarantines in Australia and elsewhere, there was great clamouring to NOT have that here. So in general they’ve let people stay in their homes and each district manage their own logistics. With mixed results, but up here – central Vancouver Island – we’ve always had a lot of
people interested in sustainable living and it’s been the saving of us. You’d be in your element.
Nominal authorities at the federal and provincial levels do still exist but are preoccupied with the ongoing disasters in the cities to the south, and more and more we’re left to manage on our own. Haven’t been any trucks or ferries coming to restock our supermarkets for a while now. Inshore fisheries aren’t what they used to be, but they’re one of our best bets for local food resources at this time of year, so anyone with a boat is out there every day.

Elaine June 16, 2026 at 10:43 pm
Well, they say if you can’t be a good influence, you should be a dire warning. Guess I’ve succeeded in that much.

Ash June 16, 2026 at 10:53 pm
I’m glad to hear it’s still working there. When I read about Toronto and Montreal I was concerned.
Fishing – now there’s an idea! There are plenty of streams and rivers out of the way here where we might be able to supplement a diet that’s now almost exclusively tinned food and pasta or rice.
Wondering who’s out there

Thought I should probably post to let people know I’m still alive. When I sit around too much I begin to get morbid, so I’m keeping busy.

I want to feel like I’m not letting my folks down, so I’m keeping up with my chores, drying out beans for long-term storage, learning to make bread, checking the water tower for leaks. I’ve also been looking at using a stream that runs a little way out past the fence as a water supply and maybe a backup power generator – it’s not a strong current, but it’s constant and a wheel on a couple of small dynamos turning 24/7 can cover all my lighting and communications needs. Technically, it’s not my stream, but it’s only a hundred yards into the neighbor’s land and I didn’t see them since before my folks died. I’ve been trying not to think it, but somebody from every farm in the county went to that produce fair. I might be the only one left. I SkImp the New Jersey flu helpline every day and get the same recorded message: stay calm, follow the advice, they’ve received my message, I’m on the list.

I don’t have permission to break the seal, but I’m running low on gas, so I got to go into the town sometime. Guess I’ll find out then how many others are left alive out here.
10 thoughts on “Wondering who’s out there.”

Elaine June 20, 2026 at 5:30 pm
Well, sounds like you’re doing pretty well, all things considered. Welcome to the survivors’ club, Jack.

Jack June 20, 2026 at 5:50 pm
Yeah, guess I’m managing OK. So, how are all you guys doing? Seems weird, doesn’t it, that the four of us all survived? We met just North of where it all started, and here we all are, still going, when it’s spread round pretty much the whole world, estimated death toll ticking past the second billion. That’s some coincidence, don’t you think? It’s like we’re special, like it’s destiny.

Ash June 20, 2026 at 6:03 pm
Technically it’s not such a great statistical anomaly that we’re all alive, given that there are so many others from our expedition who we haven’t heard from recently.

Jack June 20, 2026 at 6:12 pm
There was Ben, but who else is gone?

Elaine June 20, 2026 at 6:14 pm
Yeah, has anybody heard from Kittyllama or AKhailstorm?

Jack June 20, 2026 at 6:17 pm
They were on the expedition? I thought they were Mei’s friends.

Elaine June 20, 2026 at 6:25 pm
Wasn’t Kittyllama Kayleigh with the pink hair? And I think Akhailstorm was the guy with the flesh tunnels and tats.

Mei June 20, 2026 at 6:30 pm
No, Akhailstorm is the female camp leader with the camouflage baseball hat, Kittyllama is Jeffrey with the piercings and tattoos.

Elaine June 20, 2026 at 6:32 pm
You sure? Damn, I liked him.

Jack June 20, 2026 at 6:35 pm
Meh. They were dicks.
Debating about vaccinating

The news reaches us that a vaccine is developed. Li is worried that this will not be effective – it is too soon, she says, even if they have a sealed laboratory of a thousand experts working since the first confirmed case, it is a miracle if they can develop an effective vaccine in this time. It is not yet tested. We have a communication from WHO asking if we will volunteer to try the vaccine. We are a perfect control group – we are mostly young, the group with highest risk, and we have a successful quarantine so they know we do not have the virus already. But to test it, we will need to be exposed to the virus, and if it fails, then we will need to begin quarantine again and lose more people. There is also another danger. If we have the vaccine, the remaining government will say there is now no need for us to keep out the army, and we must give up the occupation, lose all our hard work and have the same emergency rules as the rest of Beijing. Still, the idea of a vaccine makes us want to hope that it will work, that the Blood Flu will finally be over. If this is true, the army will not need to stay in the campus for long. They will be rebuilding, not keeping control. This is what our Party members say.

In the meeting today, I do not sit with Li and the committee on the platform as usual, but with Jian and some other first year students. At first they do not talk much to me, but I tell them I do not know how I will vote on the vaccine, and they begin to discuss what they believe. They mostly do not believe a vaccine can work yet, but some feel a duty to try it. We watch the two factions, the Party and the Quarantine Movement, each waiting
for the other to make a proposal so they can oppose it. I can see that Zhen fears to call
for a vote, because the party will say he is too weak to decide himself. He thinks he must
make a decision and defend it, though he believes in us voting for ourselves, and I know
he will give in because he is tired, very tired from not sleeping and from carrying the
weight of all our hopes, and being called weak by any whose hopes he cannot carry. We
debate and debate and know our decision will be irrelevant, he will decide. Why do Jian
and I sit here and listen? We could go away and enjoy our time together. We have
worked so hard.

The vaccine is already given to the army – but they take the anti-virals, so nobody
knows if they already have the virus or if the vaccine will work for them. I believe we
should wait, find out if the army have a bad effect from the vaccine before we break a
safe quarantine, and I put up my hand to say so. Li tries to call me to speak, but there are
too many hands, and a party member behind me answers when Li points to me. She
speaks for more than five minutes, repeating many things to keep the floor, uses the
applause of the Party to silence a challenge, speaking loudly so that nobody can
interrupt, and by the time she allows a challenge I cannot remember what I want to say
and everybody is cheering because we are heroes of the quarantine and we will have
the new vaccine.

After the meeting, I ask Jian and his friends to come with me to the Democracy Building
to speak with Zhen and Li and the rest of the committee, but they want to go to the lake.
They ask me to go with them, and I want to. The meeting rooms are hot with people, and
make my eyes close; I wish I can sit by the lake in the sun with them and talk about
music and art and ourselves, and not go to talk more about a bad decision that is already
made and how to make sure we do not look bad to the Quarantine Movement because
Zhen gave in to the Party again. But I must go and support Li as she explains, again, why
this is so dangerous, why this vaccine will not work.

After the meeting, the Committee decides we will ask for volunteers for a group of 200
to have the vaccine. They will stay in a separated area near the entrance to campus for
two weeks, go outside the campus every day, and see if they have the virus. Li asks what
if nobody will volunteer, they say they will find volunteers easily. She asks if any of them
will volunteer. Nobody from the committee raises their hand, not the party who pushed
for this, not Zhen who made the final decision. I stand up and I tell them it is wrong to
ask other students to take risks we will not take ourselves, that if nobody from the committee wants to volunteer, we should refuse to test the vaccine in the campus. The party members then begin to shout, say I try to turn over a decision made in a general assembly, I do not understand how the process works, I am just an assistant, not a party member or elected to the committee, I should not be in this meeting. So I leave. I don’t know if I will go back.

12 thoughts on “Debating about vaccinating”

Ash on June 23, 2026 at 1:31 am said:
Oh god, it’s all too familiar, though the stakes weren’t quite so high when I was involved in student politics. When the politics of resistance becomes the politics of “the movement”, it’s about to all fall apart. You’re wise to get out while you can, Mei.

Mei on June 23, 2026 at 1:33 am said:
But I cannot get out so easily. I was part of building this. If I leave, and it falls apart, it is my fault.

Ash on June 23, 2026 at 1:34 am said:
Of course it isn’t. Any movement that can’t stand up for the lack of one individual isn’t worth saving. Isn’t that why you haven’t put yourself forward for elections?

Mei on June 23, 2026 at 1:37 am said:
I don’t know. I want to believe you are right, because this means I am free to do as I want. But this is the wrong reason to believe it.

Elaine on June 23, 2026 at 7:04 am said:
It’s the perfect reason. What’s the point in any of this if you can’t ever do what you want? My advice: go sit with your new mates by the lake, and screw the Party and the Quarantine Movement.

Jack on June 23, 2026 at 7:13 am said:
I don’t know. I mean, I always said you should’ve got out months ago, and I guess this shows I was right, but since you’re stuck there, you may as well stick with it and do what you stayed to do. Or what’s the point in any of it?

Mei on June 23, 2026 at 7:31 am said:
I probably will go back, even if it is just for Li. But I will take a break from the meetings, and spend time with my new friends.

Fiona on June 23, 2026 at 3:45 pm said:
Huh, I wonder what they do really have with this vaccine. A wish and a prayer, maybe. And yes, my first thoughts are it doesn’t seem right to test it on people who are not at immediate risk of infection.

Ash on June 23, 2026 at 8:20 pm said:
The trouble is, if you test it on people who are already at risk of infection, how do you know whether they were infected before they were inoculated? I’m sure those at risk will be clamouring to try it, but given the variability of the incubation period, putting people at risk who weren’t before is the only way to find out for certain whether or not it actually works.

Fiona on June 23, 2026 at 10:51 pm said:
Human experimentation? Mei, I think the point you made probably made an impact, even though you were shouted down. If individuals want to volunteer, that’s one thing. Hey, I even might. But I’d have trouble advising someone else to. Nevertheless, I sure hope the vaccine does really work. It’s from the WHO? That actually does sound legitimate. Maybe they were able to build on previous work from other flu vaccines? but this isn’t really like other flus, is it?

Mei on June 25, 2026 at 7:03 pm said:
I think the decision to test this vaccine is as much from wanting to save reputation and keep control as it is about hope. To WHO and the government, our quarantine is a useful example, but also a danger. Many people watch us. If
we turn against the party here, the whole country may follow, perhaps the whole world will say there is no way to go back to how it was and we should begin a new way to live.

I think to test the vaccine now is about more than just the danger to us, it is using us to tell everybody the old world is still there, we may still go back. And this means we stop going forward. Really, I do not know what I should do next.

Fiona on June 25, 2026 at 10:51 pm said:

I think you're right.
The Looter Situation

I haven’t played with my looters for a few days now, and they’re getting despondent. I gave them board games and playing cards and books and toys, but I can tell they feel neglected. Jack’s right, I should never have taken them in. I’m responsible for them now; even if they are first degree arseholes who were going to shoot me and take my store, I can’t just look the other way while they starve or suffocate in their fridge. So I take their food down and open the door for them every six or seven hours, but I haven’t set them a challenge in days and I don’t even look at the screens that much anymore. When I do, they’re usually just sitting there, sometimes exercising, sometimes poking at a tin of spam or dog food, and they have that blank look of tired anxiety on their faces, and I know what they’re thinking.

They’re wondering the same thing I’m wondering: how am I going to end this? How do I get them out of here without risking retribution? Cause Trigger Bright worked out before I’d even thought about it that my safest, my only really sensible option was to turn off the cameras and let them rot. That’s why his game from the start has been Trigger Sensible, Trigger Calm, Trigger Reassuring. He needs to persuade me that he’s Trigger Trustworthy. I’m not convinced. He’s tried the Man About the House line on me again, the skunk. I said he should note, from his current situation, that I’m clearly able to defend myself from the likes of Trigger Happy and his creative threats, and he actually said not to “mind him”, because “he’s harmless really, but you can’t expect the kind of deference you might’ve got in the old world.”
He was trying to push my buttons, I know that now. He gets me angry, I drop the Big Sister routine to yell at him, and before I know it we're having a conversation.

“I don’t want deference, you arsehole. I want to know that if I open the door and let you fuckers loose, some woman’s dead, raped body isn’t going to show up in the parking lot the next day. Your mate threatened like as not it’d be mine. How am I supposed to trust you?”

“How are you supposed to trust anyone?”

“Luckily, I don’t have to.”

“Not just yet. It’s a big store, but it won’t last a lifetime. Neither will your security setup – batteries stop keeping charge, parts go. Or you’ll get a bigger gang at your door, and they won’t all fall into your traps. Who’re you gonna trust, them or me?”

“I’ll have to find myself some other options.”

“Such as?”

As it happens, I’ve got a few precautionary measures in place for those eventualities, but no point in showing all my cards. He waits – I can see him, but he can’t see me. His hands are resting on his knees as he sits stock still on the beanbag I gave them from the staff lounge. His scraggly beard doesn’t quite conceal a smirk, and his eyes are always searching, calculating. I’m calculating how much to say, too. I shouldn’t be talking to him about this stuff at all.

“I can move on, when I want to,” I tell him.

“Move on where?”

“Why would I tell you? But I know where there are places it didn’t all fall apart; people pulled together, built communities.”

He scoffs. “Don’t give me that Dreamtime Town shit.”

I was really just trying to lead the topic away from the store, because I honestly have no intention of leaving this place or any idea where else I could go. So this was new.

“I was thinking of the Beijing students. What’s Dreamtime Town?”

He paused, but not long enough to look like he was making it up, shrugged and snorted.

“Bunch of fucking hippies starving in the desert, if it exists at all. Nobody who’s gone looking ever came back.”

“Maybe they found it.”

“Maybe they walked into a gang of bandits with a nice line in web design and some stock footage from a nineties commune, and their bodies were eaten by dingoes.”
I’ve got to admit, I’m growing a fondness for Trigger Cynical. But I’m not about to let him join me.

I looked up Dreamtime Town – there’s a vid of crops growing and kids doing lessons and people sitting in circles having civilised meetings where they all vote on what to build next and whether to go looking for more people and what colour to paint the fence. If you want to go there, you’re supposed to send them a vid of yourself saying who you are, what skills you can bring, and answering a load of questions designed to find out if you’re about to take a hatchet to them in the night – they’re not majorly subtle. Trigger Cynical’s probably right – they’ve been gunned down by now and there’s a gang of Unsavouries meeting each newcomer with a hail of bullets and living off the spoils. Then again, they don’t say you have to bring anything except a willingness to learn, so if they are bandits they’re missing a trick – unless they really like to see people learn not to trust vids they find on the internet.

I think I’m going to have to let the Trigger Brothers go. I can’t keep giving them my food and water, and I’m sick of slopping their buckets out. And I can’t leave them to die. I’ve been practicing my shooting in case they try and come back, but I don’t think they will, even if they can find more guns from somewhere. They’ve talked about it, quietly, when they reckon I won’t be listening, and the consensus is there’s got to be easier places to raid. I’ll take Trigger Happy first, call him into the diary room in the early morning and then open the door and lead him out at gunpoint. I’ll take him a few blocks away and make him padlock himself to a lamppost with a bike chain, then I’ll come back and let the others out. Grumpy’ll scarper – I don’t believe his shit about never wanting to join them, but I believe he’ll keep up the pretence as long as I’ve got the loaded pistol. I’ll give the padlock key to Frank – that’s his actual name, Trigger Changeable is a Frank – and I’ll tell him where Trigger Happy is and let him decide what to do about it. And I’ll lock the doors behind them, and go back to my Inner Sanctum, and watch my security screens and wait for them to never come back. I’ll do it tomorrow.

7 responses to The Looter Situation

Ash · June 27, 2026 at 12:08 am
Be careful and safe, Elaine. I think it’s the right decision.
Jack · June 27, 2026 at 12:16 am
I wouldn’t go that far, but if you really can’t kill them – just sleep with one eye open.

Elaine · June 27, 2026 at 12:17 am
I sleep with a good dozen eyes open, all connected to proximity alarms, but thanks guys – I’ll be careful.

Mei · June 27, 2026 at 7:44 pm
I have one question for you. What if one of them returns, no gun, hands in the air, asking to join you? Will you let him in?

Elaine · June 27, 2026 at 9:43 pm
Depends which one. ;-) I doubt it.

Fiona · June 28, 2026 at 5:12 am
I think this is a brave decision. As much as I was impressed with what you pulled off, Elaine, I must admit I had no idea how you could resolve it. The easy solution would have been really grim, for you as well as them, I think. This way is not without risk, but you’re giving them a chance. If one of them rushes you, you’ll have to be ready to defend yourself, and no-one can judge you for that. That’s all I can think of to say. You’re smart, so I bet you’ll think of some more ways to stack the odds in favour of the way you’d like things to turn out.

I also think this Dreamtime place is worth finding out about, in case you still do end up needing a destination to scarper to.

Elaine · June 29, 2026 at 8:52 pm
Well, I’ve put off the release a few days cause there seem to be a few patrols around lately, so I need to keep a bit of a low profile. And you’re right I could bear to have a few more fail-safes. I’ll do it soon, though.

As for the Dreamtime place – I dunno, I’m sceptical about that. Not just for what Frank said, which is fairly probable, but even if they were genuine – how long could I stick the peace-and-love crap? I don’t belong in a hippy commune. It’d go to shit soon as I open my big trap.
I cannot think of a good meme for this month. I think only about food, and trying to make sure we have enough to eat, because little comes from outside anymore. So I will do my meme about this. Tell me your recipe for disaster: What are you eating and how do you cook it? Perhaps we can help each other with some ideas.

I will give my answer, but first I must tell you something about me. I am an art student, you all know, but you do not know I could be a medical student. I am very good at biology and other sciences in school, but I do not like to dissect the animals, so I choose to study art. This is because one day in school we have to dissect a rat. We are three girls and one rat, and nobody wants to put in the scalpel. When I am tired with arguing, I say “I will do it.” I get ready, and a boy behind me pushes my arm, so the scalpel slips in the gut of the rat and there is rat shit and bad smells coming out, so we jump back and we are screaming, and he is laughing, and that is biology class – boys laughing, girls squealing and waving hands in front of our faces, and covering our mouth to look around and see which boy is laughing at us the most.

I always love animals, and my cat loves me too, because he brings to me a present – a big present – adult rat, almost 30cm! Now, I feed you, he says. We have very little protein now in our food, with only noodles, rice and some little beans in the store, and sometimes a stew with the lab animals and vegetables we farm, but not much to go around. I am very hungry. The rat smells bad, but looks healthy (except dead). I know it can have many bad diseases
and fleas. I wear a mask and gloves to pick it up, and I put plastic on top of the table, and get a sharp knife. If you see me, you will think I am a vet doing a surgery. I think of the dissecting lesson at school, and when the knife touches the skin I am squealing a little. Then I get a feeling, like I am two people, and one is squealing and the other is standing next to her and says: “What is the matter with you? You organise a quarantine. You sit all night with a dead girl in the next room. You bury a hundred people. This is just a dead rat.”

This is when I know I can do this. I am not scared, and I am not squeamish. Truly, I never was. At school, I am squealing because the other girls are squealing. But I am not that girl. Maybe the others are not that girl, too. That girl is not real, and now my life is too real, I cannot pretend to be that girl.

So I am skinning and gutting and washing and cooking my rat with a little cabbage in a little water on the tiny stove in my room, because I cannot go to the big kitchen with private food. I know others do this sometimes, but even though I no longer go to the meetings, I am seen with the committee and must be an example. I put a little in a bowl for the cat, and then I eat everything to the bones. It is not the best, but when you are hungry, everything tastes good. The cat does not agree; he looks at me to say, “I expect better from you.” “You are right,” I say. “I should be a medical student.”

Maybe if we are still here next year, if lectures begin again, I will transfer.

12 thoughts on “Recipes for disaster”

Jack on July 1, 2026 at 9:37 pm said:
And you didn't want me shooting woodchucks.

Mei on July 1, 2026 at 10:37 pm said:
Many things have changed now, for both of us.

Elaine on July 1, 2026 at 10:34 pm said:
Hey, no shame in eating rodents – I’ve set traps around the store, I consider it a treat every time one goes off. I sometimes gather some empty packaging and break up some wooden furniture and start a little fire up on the roof – they’re better spit-roasted than stewed, I find. Make sure they’re well-cooked, though, or the little buggers’ll get their revenge.

Mei on July 1, 2026 at 10:38 pm said:
Perhaps at night I can find somewhere private to light a fire – but I don’t think I will catch another rat so easily.

Ash on July 2, 2026 at 12:49 am said:
We haven’t had a lot of luck with trapping or hunting – we don’t have very good bait. I’d give a lot for a fresh loaf of bread right now.

Jack on July 2, 2026 at 7:26 am said:
I still got sacks of flour, and once you get hold of a bit of yeast, it grows itself if you keep it right. I’ve baked some awesome bread – wish I could get some to you, dude.

Elaine on July 2, 2026 at 7:51 am said:
I got some flour and dried yeast, but not enough fuel to keep a fire hot enough to bake it. I can make a sort of unleavened flatbread on the camp stove, but it’s not that good. How are you getting the fuel to run an oven?

Jack on July 2, 2026 at 7:53 am said:
I just do what we did in the forest and put it in two cake tins inside a fire, and keep feeding and fanning it till it’s done.

Elaine on July 2, 2026 at 7:54 am said:
Wow, that was normally a two-dude job, and time-consuming, too – normally you skived off, when you could ;-). You must have arms like tree trunks by now.

Jack on July 2, 2026 at 7:57 am said:
Yeah, I’m keeping in shape.
Fiona on July 2, 2026 at 10:46 pm said:

Cooking fuel is my bottleneck too. I've been working on a simple solar oven – there's lots of plans online. I know you can bake bread in the commercial ones, not sure about my homemade effort. My problem is it's hardly ever sunny here for long enough to give it a good test.

Great post, Mei! You and the cat are a good team. I'm glad you got some protein.

Ash on July 4, 2026 at 2:08 am said:

I fear I'd have similar issues with anything requiring reliable weather. Our solar panels are good for boosting the charge on the batteries we charge our handsets and workset from while we're stationary, but we have to move on every now and then if only to get some extra charge from the dynamos in the wheels.
Been raiding

So, raiding. It’s the new thing. All the cool kids are doing it. Thought I’d give it a go.

Turns out, in the town, the power hasn’t even gone yet. There was even power to the pumps in the gas station on the way in, and nobody in sight. Guess there’s a limited number of cops left to go round, and they’re sticking to the banks and the major food stores. Nobody was guarding the road blocks, but then I didn’t see any other traffic. Maybe they’re guarding road blocks further out towards the freeway, and I’m just in the middle of an exclusion zone. It looks like I’m pretty much on my own here, and I’m hoping that means everybody else got evacuated to some kind of quarantine place and I got left out, rather than, you know, the alternative, which is kind of creepy. I don’t pass many houses on my way into town, but the few I did, I tried not to look in the windows. The nightmares are bad enough without that.

I worked out how to pump the gas – I’m not the first, cause there’s about $25,000 on the dial. Not a cent on the till, so I didn’t bother leaving cash just for the next guy to pick up. I didn’t bother with the rest of the town, cause I’m pretty much OK for food, water, ammo. Realized when I got back I coulda done with some cooking oil, but isn’t that
always the way? I'll stock up next time I go in, and I'll plant some sunflowers to press my own oil in future.

So I got seed in the ground and food in the stores. To answer Mei’s “recipes for disaster” meme, I’ve been preserving plums, since I got a good crop. Here’s my Mom’s recipe:

1. Put 1kg of fruit, minus the stones (yeah, I only made that mistake once) and about a cup of water in a pan and heat it till it boils.
2. Lower the heat and simmer it for about 30 minutes, or until the fruit’s really soft.
3. Add 1kg sugar and stir it in till it’s dissolved, then bring it all to the boil again.
4. Boil it for about 10 minutes, then scrape off any bits on the top and let it cool for 10-15 minutes.
5. Put it in jars that you’ve warmed and sterilized in boiling water and put the lids on while it’s still warm. They should pull the seal down as they cool and pop when you open them up for the first time.

I used the preserve to baste a roast chicken. Real cooking! Mom would be proud. I reckon there’ll be enough preserve to see me through the year. The chicken was from frozen – have to use all that up before the power goes for good. Tomorrow I’m going on a sort of self-interested mercy mission to round up any ownerless poultry or cattle in the area. Fruit and vegetables are what I know, but they’re not what I want to live on forever.

10 thoughts on “Been raiding.”

Ash July 4, 2026 at 12:46 pm
That’s good to hear. And don’t kill all those chickens, you’ll do better from the eggs in the longterm. Cattle, I can’t help you with! But what are you going to do when you run out of seed? Isn’t your farm a Friendly Frankenstein franchise? I believe all the FFs are F1s.

Jack July 4, 2026 at 12:51 pm
Well, the main crops, yeah, but my folks did a bit of experimenting with traditional varieties in the yard, so I’ve got those seed stores. Not enough to plant
fields, but then I’m only growing for one right now. If I save seed from those, I should be able to grow more next year.

Fiona July 5, 2026 at 6:03 am

How eerie, an empty town. I get that eerie feeling too, as I haven’t been within 100 m of another human for weeks (months?), well except outside houses I guess. But our community forum keeps going, so we know who’s still around and able to do their jobs, and, increasingly, who isn’t. Jack, I’m very impressed with how you’re coping, you’re doing just the right thing to keep going and keep in touch with your friends, do keep it up.

On a related note, Ash, I have chickens now! At least, I have the care of some chickens. A whole barn full!

Jack July 5, 2026 at 10:18 am

Hey, awesome! Wish I could mail you some of my plum preserve...

I don’t see anybody local on the state or county socnets, but then I haven’t exactly advertised my own presence there. When you’re alone on a whole farm, putting your location up on one of those message boards is like pinning a “raid me” sign to your own back.

Ash July 5, 2026 at 10:27 am

That is the dilemma we all face, isn’t it? To find like-minded survivors and forge alliances we have to make ourselves vulnerable to predatory or desperate people. My feeling is that it’s the duty of those who have the relative security of a solid base to invite wanderers in. Those of us on the move are far too vulnerable to gangs, landowners and the authorities to risk approaching an occupied location.

Elaine July 8, 2026 at 5:06 pm

Can’t say I feel too secure with the likes of the triggers roaming the area, either. But then I’m not exactly a legitimate “landowner”.

Jack July 8, 2026 at 5:15 pm
Yeah, I think we got worse security concerns. At least if you’re mobile you can run away. I might have a pretty sweet setup here but that just makes me a bigger target.

Ash July 5, 2026 at 10:29 am
That’s an amazing find! A lot for one person to manage, though – or is it a shared duty? How are you feeding them?

Fiona July 5, 2026 at 10:47 am
Not so much a find, more an inheritance. They belong to neighbours who have fallen ill. I don’t really know too much about taking care of them besides putting out feed, which luckily there seems to be enough of to last awhile. It’s nice that they’re so good at voluntarily coming back in to their roosts at night.

Ash July 8, 2026 at 1:07 pm
I always liked that part – I found them a very reassuring presence. I miss them, and not just for the eggs! Make sure they’re safe from foxes, or whatever your local predators are. Animals that usually rely on our leftovers must be getting as desperate as we are.

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Soup and sanctuary

We continue to travel around, looking for safe stopping places. There are riots in some of the cities where people are breaking out of their quarantines, but the small towns are looking deserted. The larger petrol stations that are attached to supermarkets are guarded by the army, but some smaller ones in isolated villages are abandoned – it’s here we’ve been doing our raiding, and, to answer this month’s meme, living on travel sweets, crisps and twiglets when we can get them, and dandelions, nettles and berries when we can’t. Most authors of foraging manuals and wild food guides expected that they would be used by hobbyists with well-stocked larders. It’s very difficult to make anything tasty entirely from foraged food, but here’s my recipe for nettle soup, with some suggested replacements for increasingly hard-to-find ingredients.

Ash’s nettle soup

1. Heat a little oil in a pan.
2. Add a chopped onion and two cloves of garlic, and stir until softened.
3. If you’re lucky enough to have potatoes, chop them up small so that they cook quickly, saving you fuel. Otherwise, stir in some flour or whatever thickening agent you’ve managed to acquire.
4. Add the liquid slowly and bring to the boil, stirring as you go.
5. Once the potatoes are soft, add about three handfuls of washed and roughly chopped nettles per person, and simmer for a minute or two just to ensure they’re well and truly de-stung.
6. Use a hand-turned blender or masher to get the consistency as soup-like as possible.
7. Season and serve.

Oil or fat. We brought plenty of cooking oil with us, but it’s getting very scarce in the places we raid. Some wild nuts and seeds are good sources, but the likelihood
of finding a sufficient quantity to be able to press a decent supply is almost as slim as getting hold of a working oil press. The best bet for vegetarians is to find an abandoned cultivated rapeseed crop, while those able to hunt could make use of fatty waterfowl such as ducks and geese.

**Onions and Garlic.** If you can find wild onions or wild garlic (ramsons), they add a good flavour, but don’t make nearly such a solid base as cultivated varieties.

**Thickening agent.** With no potatoes or flour left, we add a little milk powder sometimes. The stems of Fireweed are supposed to contain a thickening agent, but it adds a bitter flavour and, to be honest, I’m not sure how it’s supposed to be extracted. This is the kind of thing it’s very difficult to replace without using cultivated crops.

**Liquid.** Most recipes suggest two cups of milk, cream or soya alternatives as well as a cup of water or stock, but unless you have access to a cow or a soya processing plant, you will probably be using water. Strain and boil it before adding it to the soup, especially if you have no water purification tablets.

**Nettles.** These, at least, are plentiful. Lest it needs saying, use thick rubber gloves to pick them! You can eat stalks, flowers etc., but the young top leaves before flowering are the tastiest and most nutritious part. Wash them well and try to get them from somewhere far enough from a road that they won’t be contaminated by traffic exhaust. They’ll lose their sting once immersed in boiling water.

**Seasoning.** I daresay there’ll come a time when we have to get to the coast and use sea water for salt, but for now we harvest salt and pepper from the hardy perennial vandalised fast food chain, which is in plentiful supply.

This soup is one of our few sources of vitamins, though at times it’s more like nettle tea than soup. After eight weeks on the road we’re sick and worn out, stick-figure cartoons of ourselves, all cheekbone and shoulder-blade. Last week, after two days exposed in a layby because Sue and I couldn’t drive for more than ten minutes before feeling dizzy, we needed a proper rest and had the most incredible urge to be inside a building again, even for a little while. And I had an idea.

While I’m sure that most people with money have barricaded themselves into their gated detached fortresses, it occurred to me that there are a reasonable number of luxury residences around the country guaranteed to be lying empty. I won’t give the
exact location that we found, but it’s one of the smaller stately homes, preserved as a museum and restored to its 19th century condition, complete with period furniture and fittings. The good thing about listed buildings is that they don’t have double glazing – sash windows make for easy entry, and we guessed that if silent alarms were set off in some security centre, the staff wouldn’t be there, or would have more pressing issues to attend to. We were going to leave the museum area relatively untouched and just use the staff rooms, but it turned unseasonably cold that night, and the display rooms had fireplaces draughty enough that we reasoned they must be usable. I was afraid of our smoke being seen, but we decided, again, that nobody would really be looking. We had some charcoal left from the last garage we raided, and we collected dry wood from the grounds; then we discussed whether, under such circumstances, one should retire to the parlour or the drawing room for the evening.

Even after running from the police, siphoning petrol from cars and an intensive course in breaking and entering, the idea of crossing that red rope barrier and touching museum pieces provoked a thrill of transgression. Sarah’s laughter as she clattered copper pots and jumped onto antique beds convinced us we’d done the right thing. After all, these objects were built to last, and to combine beauty and functionality. There was something very right about putting them to good use after so long. We found that even the stove was still connected to a chimney, and we cooked our last two tins of baked beans on a Victorian range and ate them by candlelight, accompanied by blackcurrant squash in crystal wine glasses. Sarah was for stripping the rather unsettling life-size dummies that populated the place and dressing up, but Sue drew a line at this – the costumes were delicate items, and besides, it would be impractical. We might have to leave in a hurry.

In the light of the day, we explored the grounds and made an even better find than the house: a kitchen garden with a wide variety of tomatoes, courgettes, new potatoes and a surprisingly abundant number of beans, given its neglect over the past month. Fresh vegetables were a greater luxury than the embroidered bedspreads and silver cutlery, and after three days there we felt revived. We’d just decided to stay for the foreseeable future when we saw the fires, from the window, distant but ominous, and huge. The nearby town was burning, and a quick check of the functioning local socnets confirmed that people had broken out of one of the larger quarantines, and immediately gone
about breaking into the others. It wouldn’t be long before they were scouring the suburbs for food and shelter.

In principle, we should have welcomed the escapees into the house, invited them to work the gardens with us and form a community. That’s what I would have suggested doing a month ago. But we didn’t know whether they’d be infectious, starving, desperate or violent, and we didn’t wait to find out. The last time we decided to trust our neighbours, it didn’t work out well for us. We harvested what would ripen and headed North, leaving the museum to its fate.

8 responses to “Soup and Sanctuary”

Jack July 8, 2026 at 6:10 pm
I have this image of a mob with burning torches breaking into the museum and being shocked to find that some vandals and hooligans have left the beds unmade and dirty dishes in the sink.

Ash July 8, 2026 at 6:11 pm
They will find we tidied up after ourselves immaculately!

Elaine July 8, 2026 at 10:07 pm
Trust isn’t easy to come by these days. From what I’m reading, there’s a load of quarantine breakouts in the UK. Getting out of cities until the shitstorms have died down seems sensible if you’ve got food for a while. Shame to leave such a sweet setup, though. I envy you the fresh veg.

Ash July 8, 2026 at 10:08 pm
Well, get your roof garden going!
Elaine July 8, 2026 at 10:09 pm
Not just now. It's the middle of winter here!

Ash July 8, 2026 at 10:10 pm
Well, that gives you plenty of time to prepare. Maybe you can get your guests to help. Or did you let them go?

Elaine July 8, 2026 at 10:11 pm
I kept finding reasons to put it off, but they're gone now. I'll write all about it soon.

Mei July 9, 2026 at 8:43 pm
Maybe you will return there in a month to find they have a very nice community, and you can join them!
Thank you for a recipe that others can use.
No more Triggers or Tomatoes

So, I did let the Triggers go in the end. I kept thinking of excuses to put it off. I don’t know if I was more afraid of them turning on me or just knowing how totally alone I am here. The release went without trouble. Frank was the only one who didn’t look surprised to see me. He just said, “Thought you’d be taller.”

I’d thought the same of him, to be honest. I was a little shocked at how thin and weak he looked, in the flesh. I’d given them as much as I was eating, but I guess he was used to more, plus I’d been doing an hour on the exercise bike every night and morning, while he’d just been sitting there letting his muscles waste. I took him to the exit, handed him the padlock keys and told him where the others were.

“Are you asking me to let them go?” he said.

“I’m not asking you for anything,” I told him. “It’s up to you, they’re your problem now.”

He walked away without looking back. He looked defeated.

That was a week ago. I guess they either came through for me and didn’t tell anybody else about the store, or they’re dead. So now, I don’t have a hell of a lot to do with myself besides check the proximity alarms, watch the screens, exercise and run up my power supply, read the socnets and run down my power supply. And target practice – I reckon it’s not a waste of ammo to make sure I can shoot straight. The Triggers weren’t exactly company, but they were a reminder that I wasn’t alone in the world.
I have a little concern for my sanity in isolation, a new appreciation for my blogging buddies. I’d best answer the meme of the month so they don’t abandon me. Mei wants a Recipe for Disaster: What am I eating, and how am I cooking it?

Well, it’s not all been dog food. The tinned sausages didn’t last very long, but I make sausage shapes out of spam and corned beef and it’s not even slightly the same, but that’s the closest thing I’ve got to a recipe. If you got dry egg you can add a bit of water and roll it in that, then in cornflour before frying it, but it doesn’t improve it much. It’s also salty, which makes me thirsty: not good since I got to be careful with my water supply, and I’m long since out of beer. I’m catching rainwater through a guttering system I rigged out of plastic cups and hosepipe, and I’m fine for now but trying to store it because I know I’ll get low come summer. I saved me some big bags of dried beans, rice and pasta, but it does get a bit bland, especially now I’m out of tinned toms for risottos – and they seemed inexhaustible a month ago. I miss them with a yearning that borders on grief.

I don’t think it’s possible to realise, unless you’re living off tinned food or trying to go vegan, what a remarkable foodstuff the tomato is. Farewell to sweet, sharp, succulent red, laced with the bitter tang of aluminium. Hello to the salty blandness of stock cubes, and the chemical aftertaste of monosodium glutamate, henceforth my lifelong companion. Ash, my trusty guide to growing your own sanity, keeps blinking me info on making drip-feeders to preserve my most precious resource, and is again encouraging me to get going on a roof garden – he has touchingly unfounded faith in my ability to keep stuff alive. Still, it’s not like I can’t fit the attempt into my social diary at present, so before long I might go plumbing the undiscovered depths of my digital veridity, even though I can’t expect to strike tomatoes till Christmas.

Want to know what I got in abundance, though? Moisturiser. Metric fuck-tonnes of it, I tell ya. If I could only find some recipes calling for 2 jars of Oil of Aloe, I could open up a damn restaurant up here. As it is, I may starve to death within six months, but I’ll die smooth as an adder’s ass-crack. Let the sky stay clear as a soap bubble – I’ll get all my moisture directly through the skin in the form of provitapeptilide Z, clinically proven to stop the seven signs of dehydration (all except for, you know, dying and such). I won’t age, I won’t wrinkle, I won’t crack in the sun. Archaeologists will find me out here in 100 years’ time, and marvel at the miraculous Colmart Mummy.
“She led a pampered life,” they’ll say, “anointed daily in sacred unctions, whose production could have fed and watered a hundred slaves for a hundred years. Truly this woman represents the very pinnacle of the decadence that destroyed her society. And why was she lavished with this wasteful abundance while those around her perished?”

And here the camera will linger on my still-succulent lips, the firm tautness of my forehead, the eye-sockets where never a crow has set foot, though my liver has shrivelled within me like a shrink-wrapped turd.

“Because,” they will say, “she was worth it.” And they’ll be wrong.

22 responses to No more Triggers or Tomatoes

Mei · July 15, 2026 at 3:46 am
You eat better than I do, at least. Why are they wrong? You are worth life, as much as anyone.

Elaine · July 15, 2026 at 6:08 pm
There’s many worthier sitting around dead. And I’m not exactly doing much with my life except hoarding a pile of tin cans and driving away anyone who comes near.

Ash · July 16, 2026 at 2:52 am
So let somebody join you. You must be able to find somebody up to your standards on the Quarantine Free forums. There are plenty of possibilities.

Elaine · July 16, 2026 at 5:32 am
Yeah, but most likely ones are a) the forum was set up by the state to find quarantine refusers, b) the best offers on the forum are from looters looking to find the best stores, c) on the off-chance I do pick a genuine applicant they’ll assume I’m state or a bandit looking to reel them into a nice deserted location, rob them and deliver them to a quarantine camp. Seriously, about one in 20 hook-ups from those sites go well. I’m not going near them.

Jack · July 16, 2026 at 5:38 am
Way I see it, nobody deserves the best hoards and most secure locations, so if anybody’s gonna have them, why not us?

Mei · July 16, 2026 at 8:14 am
If you have enough for more people, why not share and be more secure?

Jack · July 16, 2026 at 8:17 am
Because it’s goddamn dangerous! You could be sharing with anybody! They could gut you in your sleep and then they’d be sitting on what you were sitting on, and how much fairer would that be?

Ash · July 16, 2026 at 8:59 am
That’s always the case, though. And if that’s how we all think about everybody, all the time, we’ll never rebuild any kind of worthwhile society.

Elaine · July 16, 2026 at 9:05 am
That’s the crux of it. I don’t reckon we will. I don’t reckon we had one to start with. But where does that leave me? Risk losing everything or sit here feeling like it’s all for nothing.

Ash · July 16, 2026 at 9:06 am
If it’s all for nothing, what do you have to lose?

Elaine · July 16, 2026 at 9:09 am
What you had to lose when you left that museum. Just cause taking that risk’s the right thing to do, doesn’t make it easy.

Fiona · July 17, 2026 at 12:52 pm
And she doesn’t actually have all that much, that was part of the problem with having the Triggers, wasn’t it?

I feel bad for you guys, and me with all these eggs now.

Mei · July 19, 2026 at 9:21 pm
Don’t feel bad, Fiona – it is good to know that others can keep a good community alive, even when we worry for ourselves. Do you give eggs to your neighbours in a truck like the fish?

Elaine · July 19, 2026 at 10:27 pm
Sorry for the delay in seeing this: I went down to the stores to take an inventory and work out how long I can afford to stay here, and found a whole crate of
remaindered Shiraz I’d missed before. Been too crook to charge my system for a couple of days.
Mei’s right, even if my atrophied heart is stuffed full of petty jealousies and grudges, I guess it’s good somebody has fresh, nutritious food while I force down pallid peas, unrinsed, from a tin, trying to ingest the ghost of a vitamin. You enjoy those fresh eggs. Do you have them boiled runny so the hot yolk runs down the shell when you dip a crispy chip in them? Do you have them poached, sprinkled with a little dill and salt? Protein, oh god, how I miss you.

Fiona · July 20, 2026 at 2:11 am
As for my recipe, I cook them in a little water on the solar oven whenever the weather cooperates, and it takes about an hour. We still get grid electricity, some of the time, but it’s very patchy and I’m trying not to rely on it.

Elaine · July 20, 2026 at 2:36 am
Wow, slow-cooked eggs. Are they good that way? I bet they’re good.

Fiona · July 19, 2026 at 11:28 pm
Wow, how I wish I could courier a dozen eggs to Beijing University campus, the Colmart in Canberra, Australia, and caravan at no fixed address, UK. Wait, I don’t want to leave Jack out – have you been successful at finding any livestock to adopt?
And yes I’ve switched tasks to egg distribution, by bicycle now. The truck was converted to alcohol fuel but in the end they couldn’t make enough of it to keep it going.

Jack · July 20, 2026 at 2:38 am
You guys all need to get over to Ash’s blog now, it’s gonna be hilarious!

Elaine · July 20, 2026 at 2:41 am
Ha, Loltastic!
Something to take my mind off food, at last!

Jack · July 20, 2026 at 3:45 am
Oh, and yeah I got about twenty chickens and a couple of roosters, I’m looking up how to breed them so I can have eggs and meat.

Ash · July 20, 2026 at 3:51 am
That’s an awful lot of hard work, Jack, and very complex. I advise against trying to deal with slaughter single-handed, especially with no experience and nobody to show you how.

And thank you all so much for the support with Sarah!

Elaine · July 20, 2026 at 3:53 am

Aw, sorry Ash, we have to get our entertainment where we can these days. You were fighting a losing battle, there.
hi evr1 im ash an i have irashnal fobyas of bad spel’n and my dorta driving  i teech her cos it maks me fl lik a gud dad in a norml world an preten shes gonna get a 2nd hand fiat fr her 18th an go to uni in bristl, bt carnt let hr get awy frm us fr 5mins or go lootn on hr own tho shes mor quite thn me or achly do smthin usefl cos im a bludy COWARD

also i hv a rly stupd passwrd.

44 responses to “u blogjacked”

Jack July 19, 2026 at 5:30 pm
Nice one, Sarah! Ha, she got you good, Ash!

Elaine July 19, 2026 at 5:44 pm
I guess the fun starts when Ash notices. Where is he? You steal his handset?

Ash July 19, 2026 at 5:46 pm
no, i got the wrkset u cn skimp him if u want

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 5:48 pm
Alright, you’ve made your point. Just come back to the caravan and we’ll talk. Your mother’s going frantic. And I’d very much appreciate it if you could change my really stupid password back now.

Ash July 19, 2026 at 5:49 pm

no lets chat rite hr were al yr “awsum” yng mates cn joyn in c wot they thnk

Jack July 19, 2026 at 5:50 pm

I think you’re awesome, Sarah!

Elaine July 19, 2026 at 5:51 pm

I think you need to take the quotes off the awesome, there. And maybe put them around the “young”, in my case.

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 5:53 pm

You want me to live in the real world, this is my assessment of it. We have to stay together, all three of us, at all times. It’s not safe for any of us to be out alone. Come back and stop being so childish.

Ash July 19, 2026 at 5:54 pm

stop dismissin wot i say lk im a child u think its real, all 3 of us goin thievin or huntin? mums ill n ur size 9s r lik a bludy drumkit we cant all sit in the caravan frever we need suplies and im fuckin 17 i need sum space

Elaine July 19, 2026 at 5:56 pm

Actually, that sounds pretty reasonable. Couldn’t Sarah pitch a tent outside?
The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 5:59 pm

We did think of that, thank you Elaine, and we do use the tent as an extra room during the day, but it's too dangerous to sleep there, especially for Sarah. You never know who or what might find us in the night.

Ash July 19, 2026 at 6:01 pm

wot cos theyd rip into a tent but a caravan wiv a 1cm thck wall puts em rite off

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 6:09 pm

We've been through this.

Ash July 19, 2026 at 6:10 pm

wev not bin thro it, u sayn no is not a ngoshyashn

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 6:02 pm

You know, this would be less confusing if you could use your own login and give mine back.

Ash July 19, 2026 at 6:02 pm

no way ule lock the post 2 stop ur mates agree wiv me.

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 6:03 pm

If you want me to respect your privacy, respect mine and give me back the use of my own blog and avatar.
Ash July 19, 2026 at 6:08 pm

i giv u a betr 1, shud sho ^ soon

Elaine July 19, 2026 at 6:12 pm

Is it ok to make a neutral observation?

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 6:14 pm

Could it perhaps wait?

Ash July 19, 2026 at 6:14 pm

yeh go frit

Jack July 19, 2026 at 6:15 pm

Like she's not gonna do it anyway.

Elaine July 19, 2026 at 6:17 pm

I don’t want to interfere, but there’s kind of an inevitability about this.

Jack July 19, 2026 at 6:18 pm

Told ya.

The REAL Ash! July 19, 2026 at 6:19 pm

Well, it's inevitable that Sarah will come home tonight because she's not going to leave us worrying once she's calmed down and thought it through, because she's
really a very responsible and considerate young woman when all’s said and done.

keep talkn dusnt meen u get ur blog back

It’s also inevitable that as time goes on, food gets scarcer, Sarah gets older… things are going to change, one way or another. So anything that’s not safe, you might want to think about how to make it safer rather than try to stop it happening. Only one of those options has a chance of working in the long-term.

I agree. I have done things I never know I can do, things my parents will never want me to do, but the world is different now. Nobody can protect me, and these risks are mine to take. We must see there is an equal risk in trying to keep others safe from things we cannot change.

There’s no risk in waiting until she turns 18.

But what is the difference in a few months?

diffrens is will b 2 layt We nd nother drivr an moor fud now
This is ridiculous, Sarah. When are you going to come back to the caravan?

1 u let me driv tnight, mums sick n ur tyred n u no im safe if we get puld its not lk itll mak a difrance if i got a lisens or not
2 im slepin in the tent til it gets 2 cold il kep a nife in my slepin bag
3 i alredy got sum tind stuff n flouer out that mt hows, i was carefl no1 saw i get the rest 2moro

And you're holding my blog to ransom for these demands?

occupyin direct action gets the goods innit

I can't imagine who told you that. Alright. You can drive tonight, but you don't take the car out alone; you can use the tent if we find somewhere it can go up safely and be relatively concealed in the dark; and we will get the rest of the food tomorrow, if Sue's well enough to do look-out duty. We'll reopen negotiations on future raiding protocols. Does that seem fair to our neutral arbiter?

I'd hold out for the Fiat, but times being what they are it looks like decent deal.
Sarah July 19, 2026 at 6:40 pm
get the kettle on then c u in 5

Ash July 19, 2026 at 6:41 pm
Where are you?

Sarah July 19, 2026 at 6:42 pm
roun the cornr hedj by bus shltr, im not stupid

Fiona July 19, 2026 at 8:24 pm
Oh my I missed all this.
Going for eggs now. Talking of safety, I feel weird about it but I’m taking my late husband’s rifle with me. Yesterday it looked like someone had been in there and I don’t think any of the family that own the place are capable of being out and about anymore.

Ash July 19, 2026 at 9:37 pm
We keep a lookout, but we’re unlikely to encounter any firearms without them being pointed at us. So sorry to hear about your husband. Was it the flu?

Fiona July 25, 2026 at 12:53 am
Ash, my husband died about a year ago of a heart attack. Ironically, he always used to say “I hope I live long enough to see the apocalypse!” And he just missed it. Besides still grieving him on top of everything else, I could really use his skills and help at this time...
On the other hand, he never wanted children. And it seems I have one now.
Ash July 25, 2026 at 10:14 am

I just saw the story on Jack’s blog. I’m not sure whether it’s a blessing or a cruelty that young children are the most likely to survive the flu. Once again, I find myself thankful that this didn’t happen ten years ago. The thought of Sarah, out on her own in this, growing up in the world that’s emerging... I hope the little girl you've found is doing alright? I suppose she probably doesn't understand much of what’s happening. She's very lucky that you found her.
Defending the farm

It’s been a tough couple of weeks. Since all the police got called to the cities, a lot of small towns in the area broke out of quarantine and folks went looking for a bunch of stuff they didn’t have: food, clean water, safe shelter away from the riots, and a lot of them started looking in the farms not too far from the towns. I guess a few of them had escaped the cities, too, and I got to be really careful of them – not only are they almost definitely carrying the flu, they’re probably either on anti-virals or steroids and all those other drugs the rumors say might help, drugs that incidentally lower capacity for rational thinking and increase aggression. They take this shit thinking, what? If they can prolong their suffering a little a cure will be developed and folks’ll bring it them on a plate before the end? And in the meantime, they continue to go breaking into homes and stores, spreading the flu to everyone they touch. Perhaps they are the walking dead. They want brains, alright.

A few times over the last couple of weeks I’ve driven groups of them off the farm with a rifle. I don’t have the best security – we’ve never really needed a lot of alarms or cameras here before – but I built up the fences a little and concreted some broken glass on top where there’s no barbed wire, and I get a good view of the gate from my loft.
window. It’s so quiet round here now, the gravel path is as good as a burglar alarm. And yeah, I know I’m not the first to have to deal with raiders, and that some are just ordinary families trying to get by, but with drug-crazed infected psychos around I can’t afford to take chances. I figure there’s no point blowing my supplies on folks who’ll be dead in a few days, either. It’s selfish, I know, and it’s not that I’ve got anything against these people, but I owe it to my parents to look out for myself. What was the point in them shutting me out of the house as they died if I’m only going to open myself up to infection from every stranger who comes by?

I’ve put up warning signs, and I give two warning shots before I aim to kill. I can’t afford to waste more ammo than that, and anybody not taking the hint I figure is either determined enough to deserve what they get or desperate enough that it’s a mercy. They’ve mostly run at the first shot, but a couple who came snooping today started shooting back. Thankfully, they only had short-range pistols, and they misjudged where my shots had come from, anyhow. The second warning shot might have given away my vantage point, but it hit close enough to make them run for cover behind the garage. I knew they couldn’t sneak out to the gate or the house without me seeing, so I watched till nightfall. When I first saw the creeping shadow I thought it was a raccoon, but then I saw it was too big, and I took aim. I hit the water butt three feet away, but I can repair it tomorrow, and it had the right effect – two shadows ran full pelt for the gate and didn’t come back.

22 thoughts on “Defending the farm”

Ash July 23, 2026 at 10:35 am

You’ll excuse me if I have more sympathy for the poor buggers caught behind a shed all night than with the lunatic taking aim at them from a window. It’s not going to be long before my family and I are – as you put it – “desperate enough that it’s a mercy”. I can only hope that if we go seeking refuge somewhere occupied we won’t be assumed infected and dismissed as zombies.

Jack July 23, 2026 at 10:44 am

How many times are we gonna go through this, Ash? It’s not personal, it’s circumstance. And things are worse here than in the UK.
Things are the same everywhere. The people you’re shooting at could be in just the same predicament as me.

And the people you’re stealing from could be in the same predicament as me. We’ve already established you got as much of a problem with trust as the rest of us.

There’s a world of difference between reluctance to advertise your whereabouts to perfect strangers on the internet and shooting at ordinary people who are right in front of you, when you have the option to talk to them instead.

They had guns!

So did you!

Look, it wasn’t quite how I described it. Truth is, I was petrified.

How do you think they felt?

Hey, I don’t have to justify my decisions to you. I have a right to defend myself.

Nobody forces you to justify your decision, but I ask you to think about this decision. We all have to defend ourselves, but this is because we all are in the defensive. Somebody has to be the first to not attack. I do not blame you for being
afraid – we all are afraid – but you are in a secure position, more than most. You must think of the good you can do if you let somebody in.

Jack July 23, 2026 at 11:02 am
I had the guts to deal with them how I had to. You didn’t see them.

Elaine July 23, 2026 at 11:03 am
What did you see that made them so scary?

Jack July 23, 2026 at 11:04 am
Oh, so now you’re all ganging up on me?

Elaine July 23, 2026 at 11:04 am
No, I’m just asking. Why do you always think that?

Ash July 23, 2026 at 11:06 am
Alright, let’s leave this now. I’m sure we all have more important things to do than antagonise the few people in the world we know we can trust. That wasn’t my intention. Whatever the reasons for your decision, Jack, I accept that you know your situation better than I do. I just want you to be aware of mine.

Jack July 23, 2026 at 11:07 am
Sure, we can all appreciate each other’s situations. There’s just fuck all we can do about it.

Fiona July 24, 2026 at 8:09 pm
Well, Jack is right that new infections are still very much an issue here in North America. Sad to say, but the people who have fallen ill in our area, like my neighbours with the chickens, are the ones who took in friends and family from further south down island or the mainland. Why haven’t we been getting more refugees lately? I’m not asking questions, but I assume someone is taking it upon themselves to turn them back. So, somehow, there is one survivor of that family. The six year old daughter was crying in the barn when I went down there the other day. Like Jack, she’s seen her whole family
die around her and I think she’s been on her own for a couple days. So what could I do? I took her home.

Jack July 25, 2026 at 8:37 am
Woah – harsh choice. I guess I’d have to do the same, or at least take her to somebody who’d be better, but it’s kinda risky. I hope she’s not infected. Aren’t all little kids, like, immune but carriers or something?

Ash July 25, 2026 at 8:45 am
That’s not really how it works, Jack. Children are just as prone to infection and normally show symptoms as quickly as adults do, but the flu works its way through their systems more slowly (strangely, it’s precisely because their immune systems are weaker), and they have a better chance of developing antibodies and fighting it off before it becomes fatal.
If her family have already died and she seems healthy, she’s probably already survived the flu. I can’t say for sure that she’s no longer infectious – it’s difficult to keep up with the latest research, for obvious reasons – but it’s no riskier taking in a child than any other apparently healthy person.

Jack July 25, 2026 at 8:48 am
Still too risky for me.

Fiona July 27, 2026 at 3:21 pm
I guess we’ll see what happens. So far we are both still physically healthy. Thanks for the info, Ash.
A message from the army

Posted on July 25, 2026

We hear from the army again, saying now we all take the vaccine, they will enter the campus to make their base here for Beijing operations. We respond that there is not enough vaccine for everybody, and we test a small group first, that we need more time, but they do not answer. We prepare to defend ourselves, with traps and weapons made from what we have – garden tools, laboratory chemicals, glass bottles and a little petrol from the cars that are parked here. Also, with cameras and live feeds to many Socnets around the world. Not long ago, the government praised us for our independence. All the world, all that is left, will now see how their soldiers take it from us.

We all had our army training before we begin university, but I was one of those who think this is an extra school exam for a subject that does not interest me, that I must pass but no need to be top of the class. Many of us think this way – we are the best in our school years, we know we will have a place at Peking University. When will we need this skill?

We discuss tactics and do a training exercise here each morning. We think they will not try to shoot us, but when they come into the campus they may bring the disease with them, and this is worse than guns. All our hard work, and all our grief, it was for nothing if we only get the disease from the soldiers now. The Party say we should have allowed
them in at the start, so we can negotiate a way to avoid close contact. Now, we must keep them out, or I think we will lose all unity and everything we have fought for.

Zhen blames himself. He will not say so, but Li sees it, and she tells me. I worry for him, and for all of us. A short time ago, we felt strong enough to hold the campus, we had a victory and could do anything. Now we feel helpless, and everybody looks to Zhen to be strong and know what we must do, like he is a different kind of person, just because we vote him for the leader. Everybody waits for what the committee will say, and the committee waits for what Zhen will say – but he goes to his room near the beginning of the committee meeting, saying not to disturb him. Li tells me, he just needs time. I hope there is enough time for him, and for all of us.

9 thoughts on “A message from the army”

Elaine on July 26, 2026 at 7:49 am said:
Shit – here’s hoping they negotiate rather than just invading. It’ll be pretty bad press for them, but I don’t reckon they much care about that now. What’s the rest of the world gonna do? Every government left is busy watching its own back.

Mei on July 26, 2026 at 7:52 am said:
It is not governments we want to see us. We do this for people in their own quarantines – inside China, too. There are other quarantines in Beijing, they know they will be next if we fall. They may do something, if not here, then where they are.

Elaine on July 26, 2026 at 7:53 am said:
Well, I hope it doesn’t come to it. Fighting hand to hand after everything you’ve done to keep safe – it’d be a disaster.

Ash on July 26, 2026 at 6:30 pm said:
You’re going to those meetings again, then?
Mei on July 26, 2026 at 6:31 pm said:
Sometimes. When I try to do something else, I just sit and think about the meeting, then go the forum to find out what happens. So I decide to go back.

Jack on July 26, 2026 at 9:13 pm said:
Well, I guess you should know what’s coming and prepare for it. Is there somewhere you can hide if the campus gets invaded?

Mei on July 26, 2026 at 9:16 pm said:
If we get invaded, I will not hide. I will do what I can.

Fiona on July 28, 2026 at 3:23 am said:
You are so brave, Mei. I wish they would just leave you alone.

Mei on July 28, 2026 at 8:41 pm said:
To be brave is normal now, it is too necessary to be special. You know this when you take home a child who may be sick. To do something else, to not be brave now is too terrible.
The final warning

Posted on July 28, 2026

Today we have a final notice from the army – if we do not open the doors by 7:00am tomorrow and let them in, they will force a way into the campus. I do not even forward the message to the forum, where the Party will see it, but go straight to Li, and we go together to Zhen. He listens while we read the message. He looks at us, like he did not understand, and I read it again. Zhen says nothing. He stares in front of him. He begins to tell Li to call a meeting for breakfast – we think, this is good, he begins to make a plan. Then he asks how much is in the store for lunch, do we need to harvest more root vegetables? Li almost throws the tea at him, but we make him drink it instead. “This is very kind of you girls,” he says, smiling. “I know you are very busy. How is the power system, Mei? Is there enough electricity for the forum? I should start reading the forum again. I have more time now.”

I ask Li, “How long has he been like this?”

She tells me maybe two weeks. They hide it – take him to the meetings with rehearsed lines to say, and then somebody takes him away and they continue without him. They cannot let the party see he has become so bad – we will be finished.

I tell Li we will be finished anyway tomorrow if we do not do something. But what? Get people ready to fight? Open the gate and get people locked into their rooms? Call the committee for a meeting?

“Call everybody,” I say. I put a message out on the forum and we get some people calling through every building where people live or work – Emergency General Meeting in the
auditorium. For a moment, I feel almost happy, because this is how it was in the beginning, when we felt strong and we could do anything, when anybody can call a general meeting and nobody will say: “By what authority?”

Of course, The Party and even some of the Quarantine Movement in the committee are angry we did not go to them first.

“There isn’t time,” I say. “We need to get ready, now, all of us. Never mind the procedure.”

“Where is Zhen?” somebody asks, but I shrug my shoulders and say, “I am just an assistant, how do I know?”

Li chairs the meeting. She tells everybody that Zhen prepares a plan for the fight, but meantime we must decide who will be guarding each entry, prepare the barricades and traps and distribute the weapons we have, and the face masks and gloves – I had nearly forgotten how uncomfortable they are. We will be ready tomorrow morning. I will use a camera for a live feed and Li leads the medical group. Jian will join her. We only fight if they get past the gate and the barricade. I try to sleep a little before the morning, but I do not think I will. I will tell you what happens when I can.

37 thoughts on “The final warning”

Elaine on July 28, 2026 at 8:26 pm said:
Holy fuck. Good luck, Mei. Watch your back and don’t be a hero.

Ash on July 28, 2026 at 8:55 pm said:
We’ll be watching the feed. Be sure to confirm that you’re alright as soon as you can.

Fiona on July 28, 2026 at 11:56 pm said:
I will tell everyone I can reach to watch.

Mei on July 29, 2026 at 12:27 am said:
Thank you Fiona – I cannot know for sure when they will invade, but their communication says 7:00am, which will be 7:00pm EST or midnight GMT.

Fiona on July 29, 2026 at 2:02 am said:
Are you going to put up some big banners – Quarantine! Please do not break our quarantine! so it’s clear that is what is happening...

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 6:58 am said:
I think they've had signs up since the beginning of the occupation, but there seem to be a few more tonight. The only one I can see that’s in English says: “No more silence.”

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 12:06 am said:
You're filming with a powerful zoom from a good distance away, right? You're not actually going into a battle with the army, with nothing but a camera?

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 6:54 am said:
I don’t think you’re going to get a response to that, Jack. She’s busy. Looks like they’re all in place. You got enough power to watch the live feed?

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 6:58 am said:
I’m watching it.

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:00 am said:
Are they all army out there? There's more of them left than I thought.

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:03 am said:
Why are they just standing there?

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:04 am said:
Perhaps the cameras are having the desired effect.
Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:04 am said:
Or they’re just saving ammo.

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:06 am said:
I can’t stand this! Are those bastards going to attack or go away?

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:07 am said:
What are the students shouting?

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:08 am said:
My Mandarin’s rusty in the extreme. I think they’re calling for some kind of solidarity.

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:09 am said:
Jesus. Can’t they do that from cover? I don’t like the look of this. I don’t want to watch.

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:11 am said:
Holy crap, that’s started it! I just hope Mei’s filming from cover.

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:13 am said:
I can’t see what’s happening! Were those students or soldiers we just panned past?

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:14 am said:
Are those people dead? And which side were they on?

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:15 am said:
Bloody hell! This is looking bad. I think there’s guns and dead on both sides now. But the camera’s still going, that means Mei’s alright.
Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:16 am said:
She’s saying they’ve got in. They’re trying to work out how.

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:17 am said:
Did they get over the wall and the barricade?

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:18 am said:
Nobody seems to know – it’s chaos there. The medical teams have had to retreat to safety.

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:20 am said:
Those dead were soldiers, for sure. The students aren’t doing too bad.

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:21 am said:
Oh. Shit, those weren’t soldiers.

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:24 am said:
What’s going on now? There seems to be less fighting. She’s actually running towards the wall. Are those soldiers climbing back over?

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:24 am said:
Looks like a retreat. I think the army are leaving.

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:26 am said:
That’s very strange. A few minutes ago I was sure they could have taken over the campus. Can you translate anything we’re hearing?

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:28 am said:
They’re talking way too fast for me. I think they’re surprised, too. They reckon the army didn’t expect them to come out fighting.

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:29 am said:
No, I get it now. This isn't a takeover, it's a raid. The battle was a distraction. I'll bet they've made off with some supplies and called it a day.

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:31 am said:
Shit, so that was all for nothing? They could've stayed in their rooms and it would've gone the same?

Ash on July 29, 2026 at 7:33 am said:
I doubt that. It probably means the difference between being left with nothing and being left with enough to salvage. But they've paid a heavy price.

Jack on July 29, 2026 at 7:34 am said:
At least it's over now, and Mei seems to be OK.

Elaine on July 29, 2026 at 7:40 am said:
Well, that was the damage report. I suppose now they start the clean-up. Shit, what a mess.

Mei on July 29, 2026 at 7:50 am said:
Before we clean up, we must decide if we go back to isolated quarantine. Li tries to persuade the committee we must do this now, to save more infection, but the forum server is down and there is much that we must decide quickly. Nobody can find Zhen. I must go now.

Fiona on July 29, 2026 at 1:09 pm said:
Missed some of this due to power fluctuations but caught the end. So glad Mei is safe. Shame on those soldiers.
No time for a meme this month. Now, I am in a quarantine again, only it is not so organised as last time. We avoid close contact, but have to leave our rooms all the time, there are so few of us and so many extra duties – tending the vegetables, gathering the animals, keeping the watch and guarding the little food we still have.

We at least hold the campus. The soldiers fired warning shots and many of us ran, but more stayed and fought them. We thought they would not aim to kill us, but they no longer care about killing. They do not shoot a lot, but we now know this is only because they have few bullets. Many students and staff died beating them down from the walls with broom handles and petrol bombs. This distracted us from the few who came in without uniform, and took much of the food from our stores, and also destroyed the runs for the rabbits and guinea pigs. We caught some of these, but too late. We capture many weapons, and in the middle of the fighting, with people in panic and grief, the few soldiers we caught were shot. We did not want to do this, we wanted to be better than them.

Even during the fighting, the Party leaders keep asking the Quarantine Movement committee members: where is Zhen? Where is our leader? After the fighting, when the army retreat from the walls and we begin to list the loss and damage, we find the answer. He is in the committee meeting room in the Democracy Building, hanging from the light fitting by his neck, leaving a note saying only: “I am sorry, I must resign.”
We have fought up close with the army, so our worst fear now is that many will be infected. We go in teams of three to minimise contact amongst ourselves, and bring the dead to the burial place, by the Jing Yuan memorial. We have no time to dig more graves. We pile up the bodies, including Zhen, and throw on the remaining petrol, but the fire does not take well and there is nothing we can do except leave them, and abandon the meadow and the Yuan buildings.

We gather the little food that remains from a few hidden personal stores of those who died or ran away. There is not really enough to feed us for another quarantine, but we have no choice. We do not even decide if those in the inoculation experiment need to join the quarantine or not. They each decide for themselves. This is wrong and frightening, how we cannot make a decision anymore that everybody will follow. How can a quarantine work if everybody makes a different rule? But we must try.

10 thoughts on “Back in quarantine”

Fiona on August 2, 2026 at 8:40 am said:
Wow. Those soldiers were evil. They could have been doing what you were doing all along, instead of sabotaging it. I can only wish the best for you now. Maybe your cat will catch you one of the escaped rodents.
How long will you quarantine now? I am wondering, based on your prior experience, if you have a good idea of how long the incubation period for the flu usually is. Sometimes it is very fast, like Jack’s parents, but how long can it be?
Best wishes,
Fiona

Mei on August 2, 2026 at 4:02 pm said:
Evil? I don’t know. They were desperate for the food, like all of us, but they expect they will keep getting supplies. When this stops, it is too late for them to start a quarantine themselves.
We offer, long ago, that they can join us if they let us search for anti-virals before they come in, but they know what it would mean to stop taking these pills.
Latest research that is put on an academic socnet says the incubation without
anti-virals is no more than five days, but there are many other factors – it will still be safer to quarantine for 28 days, but I don’t know if people will stay in their rooms so long without food.

Elaine on August 2, 2026 at 4:06 pm said:
This is nuts. You guys were so organised. You have to hold it together – if you can’t, nobody can.

Mei on August 2, 2026 at 4:16 pm said:
Many messages like this come to us. Some of them bring hope, encourage us with a sense of our power, and our responsibility. We are the first self-organising quarantine, and so many put their hopes in us, look to us for what they should do. But I think of what happened to Zhen, and I fear for us. The hopes of others are hard to carry.

Ash on August 2, 2026 at 7:16 pm said:
You can’t take on all that responsibility. In the end, what you do has to work to keep you going, not to meet others’ expectations.

Jack on August 2, 2026 at 10:12 pm said:
Yeah, keep going for you, not for your cheerleaders. If people can’t find their own will to carry on, screw it, you can’t do it for them. Just look after yourself.

Mei on August 2, 2026 at 11:10 pm said:
In some way, you are right – we must not lose our own way to be a symbol for others. But we cannot abandon everyone who looks to us – if others can learn from us, then even if we fail everything we worked for is not wasted. It is difficult to keep in the middle of this path. I have no clear answer.

Fiona on August 2, 2026 at 8:44 pm said:
Yes, poor Zhen. I was thinking about the discussion of utopias, and it’s sometimes said that the best people to be leaders are the ones who don’t want to be. But
maybe a leader needs to have a personality that delights in power and being looked up to, to keep them sane under the weight of all that stress.

Mei on August 2, 2026 at 11:05 pm said:

I do not know if there is a way to be a good leader at this time, or if there is any time to be a good leader. One who delights in power only makes decisions that will keep power. One who does not delight in power will be destroyed by those who do.

Zhen was good at speaking, and at seeing the way things work, and arguing for a good decision, but he was better as a strong voice among many voices, on the forum and in our early meetings.

Today, I read many forums used to organise the student occupations around the world. Many of us thought, because we are the first, we understand everything the best, but there is much we can learn. There are many ways to make a decision without a leader.

Fiona on August 3, 2026 at 11:02 am said:

I noticed how you managed quite well without a leader.

Rest in peace, Zhen. A good man in a bad time.
The present, the past and the future

Raiding is becoming more dangerous – most of the food has been taken for the camps and what’s left is often guarded. We’re trying to extend our foraging skills, and we’ve attempted to catch fish and snare rabbits. We’ve had little success, but we’re persevering.

We thankfully haven’t come across any occupied shops, but at the last place we met another family – a young couple with a three-year-old – and almost killed each other with fright. They’ve been on the run a little longer than us. They were on holiday when it all kicked off, and left their campsite for an abandoned barn off the motorway, but had to leave when they were seen by a patrol. They spent an evening in the caravan with us, swapping advice on edible wild plants and the best shops for looting, and they warned us not to try service stations, even though there are very few patrols on the motorways anymore. Fuel is guarded by either police or armed gangs, and if it’s the latter they sell it at less conspicuous locations. We shared food and tea bags and stories and rumours, and were reassured to discover that we weren’t the only ones, and then they went off to their tent for the night and in the morning they’d packed up and gone.

I’ve got to admit, I was a little offended. I’d thought we might end up travelling together for a while, helping each other out. I don’t see why they wouldn’t want that, or why they wouldn’t even say goodbye. What did they think we’d do? Sarah suspects I scared them off by talking about community – apparently most people equate that to some sort of religious cult. I told Sue, I don’t want to go back, if that’s what it’s come to. She said, go back? She never wanted to be there in the first place. That surprises me. I’m surprised by a lot, these days. I’m surprised by how little I miss having things, and more surprised by how little Sarah and Sue complain about everything we’ve left behind. I always thought we’d settled down and bought the car, the house, then the better car, then the
bigger house with the nicer garden, because it was what Sue wanted, what we both wanted for Sarah. But it turns out that Sue was happier when we were sharing a room in Edmonton, and Sarah wishes we'd taken off in the caravan and left it all behind years ago. “It would've been more of a laugh without the blockades and the blood flu,” she says. You’d think that would make me happy – relieve the sense of loss, the grief for the death of a lifestyle. But it only depresses me. What was it all for, I ask myself? All that work, earning all that money, all to build a prison for ourselves. We can’t even celebrate our escape, because we’re mourning our friends, and the waste of it all.

And now, of course, there’s a vaccine being tested in China. In spite of all that’s happened, it might not even be too late for us, we might pull ourselves back from the brink. What then, for the quarantine refusers? How embarrassing, if we abandoned a dying society and it got better. Or recovered, anyway. Couldn’t we have given it a push? Held a pillow over its face? It was what was expected of us, after all, but we were too busy looking out for ourselves. So it seems it will be just us, for as long as we can manage it, until there’s some kind of rebuilt social structure large and anonymous enough to slip back into unnoticed. And nobody will have learnt anything.

19 responses to “The present, the past and the future”

Elaine August 4, 2026 at 2:29 pm
Don’t let it get you down – your little get-together sounds more amicable than my last social engagement. Hey, maybe you should put out an ad for travelling companions on one of those Quarantine Free sites.

Ash August 4, 2026 at 2:31 pm
No thanks, the caravan’s crowded enough as it is.

Jack August 4, 2026 at 3:03 pm
Find somebody else with a trailer, go convoy!
I'd quite like that, but I have my family to think about.

You don't mean to suggest letting strangers from the internet into your space would be kinda risky, Ash?

Ha! Yeah, he's a bit slow to take his own advice, ain't he?

Don't you two start ganging up on me!

Aw, just messin' with ya, Ash.

Sucks, huh? The W4's the only social life we really got, but we can't trust anybody there enough to tell them who or where we really are. We might as well all be spambots.

Makes you wonder how much of any of it's real.

What's that supposed to mean? Anything you've told us been a lie?
Elaine August 4, 2026 at 3:15 pm

Me? Nah. You?

Ash August 4, 2026 at 3:16 pm

Can I interrupt at this point to assert, from a neutral perspective, that having met you I’m pretty sure you’re both real.

Elaine August 4, 2026 at 3:16 pm

Yeah, but we only have your word for that, and who’s vouching for you?

Ash August 4, 2026 at 3:17 pm

That won’t work on me. Sue and Sarah don’t let me doubt my own existence for a second.

Fiona August 4, 2026 at 4:02 pm

I remember Elaine saying once we’d never see normal again with a telescope. One thing that will have changed for sure, much lower global population. That will bring a lot of other changes. If enough good people like you can survive these hard times, it may be a fresh chance for humanity. That’s what I’m clinging to, anyway.

I guess I’m now allowing myself to breathe a little sigh of relief for my own personal survival. It’s been twelve days since I found Clara. Not as long as Mei’s quarantine, but quite a bit longer than expected for the flu to strike down someone like me who’s always had an excellent immune system. I’ve been trying to teach her how to do everything around here in case she had to survive on her own, but it’s been tough as she was pretty traumatized and not much in the mood to concentrate on anything.
Well, that is a relief. I hope to hear more about your community and how you manage once you’ve given yourselves the “all clear”.

I hope you and Clara both get some time to regroup and recover now. Children are resilient. Sarah would resent being referred to as a child, of course, but she is young, and though she’s as angry and resentful as you’d expect of someone whose promising future has just crumbled before her eyes, she has taken to this life with a courage and competence that frankly scares me.

Sue and I wait anxiously for her to come home, and we see that slight shadow’s silent approach, then make out the full racksack on her back and the sharp knife in her belt, and we look at each other and wonder how we raised this strong, stubborn stranger.

I can guarantee that however you take to parenting, it will never be dull.

The vaccine will not save anybody, will not bring a society back. Even if it works, how do we produce enough for the world? How do we send it there? It will not come to England for a long time. All that can save a society is people taking a risk to build one.

I don’t hold out much hope of that. I suppose we’re just waiting to discover whether any of the quarantines have actually worked.
Still here

So, I haven’t posted in a while because there’s been squat going on here. Just me and the spiders freezing our arses off in the Inner Sanctum. Nobody seems to be out there – nobody looting the store, nobody on the cameras. Where the hell is everybody? I’m starting to feel like they’re amassing just out of sight, waiting for me to set foot outside my defences before jumping out and shouting: “Surprise! You’re dead!”

To take my mind off the monotony, I’m trying to use up some of the leftover items in the store, the stuff nobody wanted to loot. It’s rained enough to fill my water barrels, so I’ve dyed my hair. What do you reckon to the new avatar? I keep catching my reflection in screens and windows and thinking there’s an intruder. It keeps me on my toes, but it’s always a disappointment when I find out it’s just me. Still, it makes me feel different, conspicuous. I feel like I want to stand up on the roof and shout: “I’m here! Come and get me, you bastards!”

I want some raiders, I want something to happen – anything. I’ve set so many alarms and failsafes to keep them out, it seems like a waste if nobody uses them. I think I can remember where they all are. How would it be for irony if I ended all this stumbling into one of my own traps?

I wonder where the Triggers are now. Did Frank join up with the others, or are there a couple of skeletons hanging by bicycle locks off the lamppost two blocks down? I
deliberately took them out of my line of sight from the roof. I didn't want to see, I didn't want to know. It was the first time I’d left the store in forever, and it was a ghost town. I couldn’t stand it. In the Inner Sanctum, I can watch movies and vids, I can even SkIMp when there’s enough power, and it seems like the world’s still there. When I go out, it makes me doubt any of it’s real. I know I’ve got friends out there, over thousands of miles of oceans and mountains and crust and mantle and liquid iron core. But the silence and emptiness is right outside, waiting for me, and it’s terrifying.

I didn’t think I’d make it this long. I didn't think I’d be any good at this – surviving. Failure was my speciality, and now I can’t even do that. Why am I still alive? Why am I still here? And what the hell am I supposed to do about it?

15 responses to Still here.

Jack · August 7, 2026 at 10:49 pm
Don’t start asking questions like that. Find a project, get distracted, or you’re gonna drive yourself nuts. I mean, more than usual. Even for you.

Ash · August 8, 2026 at 9:33 am
I’d tend to agree with Jack on this. Maybe you should begin trying to make some contact with other survivors in the area. You don’t have to tell them who or where you are, but at least you’ll know you’re not entirely alone.

Elaine · August 8, 2026 at 9:36 am
Or I’ll find out for definite I am.

Ash · August 8, 2026 at 9:38 am
Honestly, there are days when I think that Sue and Sarah and I are the only ones left in England, but that’s only because everybody’s keeping out of sight and not approaching strangers. We check the socnets, and there’s masses of survivors in and around the cities. I understand your reticence, but you don’t have to be alone if you don’t want to be.

Elaine · August 8, 2026 at 9:58 am
I don’t know whether I’m more afraid of being alone or of other people. I’ve never been that keen on sharing space.
Mei · August 8, 2026 at 9:59 am
It is sounding to me like you are lonely.

Elaine · August 8, 2026 at 10:00 am
I like my own company. Maybe I just want other people where I can see ’em ’cause I don’t trust the bastards.

Fiona · August 8, 2026 at 11:04 am
I was alone for weeks and now I suddenly have a kid. You never know what will happen. I guess it’s made the difference between a theoretical reason to survive and a very specific one.

Elaine · August 8, 2026 at 8:35 pm
I pity any poor kid that gets stuck with me. I’d be a terrible mum. I don’t have the patience for it. There used to be a fair few kids in the early days, usually raiding in pairs or small gangs. The flu left a lot of orphans. I wonder what happened to them all? They must’ve got caught and taken to the quarantines.

Fiona · August 8, 2026 at 11:05 am
by the way, your hair looks nice!

Elaine · August 15, 2026 at 8:52 am
I got too used to it. Changed it again.

Fiona · August 15, 2026 at 12:11 pm
Umm....you seriously never looked to see if those young men got unlocked?

Elaine · August 16, 2026 at 12:15 am
Can you imagine a scenario where I go to look and come back feeling reassured about anything?

Fiona · August 16, 2026 at 3:36 am
It’s always better to know than to wonder.

Elaine · August 16, 2026 at 8:23 am
And it’s better yet to crack open a bottle of home-brew wine made from cheap carton grape juice with added sugar and jump around to a 1990s cheese pop compilation till you stop wondering or caring about anything.

I’m not going out there.
In quarantine, we are forced to make our decisions through the forum, and at first I think this is helping a little to make us work together again. But many do not read the forum, or ignore the decisions. I am on watch yesterday, and see a student who is supposed to watch another gate throw a packet over the wall and climb in from outside. I stop him and ask why was he outside. I tell him he must start the clock again on his quarantine. For a moment he looks ashamed or afraid, like a child who is caught out of school, then he calls me “committee bitch” and walks away with the packet. I think I will go after him or call for help, but who can I call? Everybody on watch is too far away, nobody else can come out of their room. I cannot force him to give up the packet – it must be food – and if I try I will make contact and maybe catch the flu, because he has been outside. I decide it is easier to post about him to the forum, and expel him after quarantine. Does this make me the “committee bitch”? I do not want to force an authority, I only want us to all agree a rule and keep it, to keep us safe. If he does not agree, why does he not post on the forum to say so? This is our quarantine. If some people refuse to keep it, why do we bother?

I am angry about this, and feel helpless, but I know we have a bigger problem. The army may attack again at any time, and then we will have to fight again and risk dying again, and there is nobody but the committee to decide what to do, and we cannot argue with ourselves online. The Quarantine Movement lost a lot of face, and a lot of hope, when we
lost Zhen. We made many decisions without him – we never had a leader among ourselves, only for the committee – but we use his authority to debate with the Party, because he has so much respect. Now, all our respect is lost, I feel like we are lost.

On the forum, some people suggest new elections, but nobody in the Quarantine Movement is nominated, only the Party. We do not want another Zhen. Li says, let them sacrifice one of their own to this stupid game of democracy, let us question and doubt and blame them until they lose their mind and jump from the BoYa tower. She was close with Zhen, but I don’t think she really means this. The Party, here, are also just students, we were all the Quarantine Movement in the beginning, not two different parties. We must try to remember this.

6 thoughts on “Falling Apart”

Elaine on August 12, 2026 at 8:20 pm said: Sounds messy. Do you think it’s even possible to bring them all together again?

Mei on August 12, 2026 at 8:27 pm said: I don’t know. There is now a third faction: quarantine refusers, inside a self-organising quarantine! They say there is no point to keep the quarantine when it is already broken and we are in so much danger, that it is more important to get food and make a defence. It is difficult to argue with this, except to say that there is another flu outbreak outside, and it will kill as many or more than the army or starvation if we do not do something to isolate ourselves.

Jack on August 12, 2026 at 8:56 pm said: So if the quarantine’s completely compromised and the structure’s falling apart, I can’t see what you’re staying for.

Mei on August 12, 2026 at 9:26 pm said:
I stay for Li, Jian, and others here who are important to me. And I stay because after so much work, I want to see the end of this, even if it is not the end we worked for. And I stay because where else will I go? I think of my family, those who are left. But it is a dangerous journey, and no transport.

Ash on August 13, 2026 at 7:04 am said:
Is it more dangerous than staying?

Mei on August 13, 2026 at 7:29 am said:
It is dangerous here, too. It is dangerous everywhere. Maybe it is just easier to stay where I will not be alone.
Taking responsibility

I've started seeing regular police patrols between the town and the city, sometimes cars and sometimes helicopters, and not so many raiders, so I'm cool to stop keeping a lookout from my loft window at all times and even to start using SkIMp and playing some W4 games again. It takes my mind off things, and I need to do that, or I'll lose it big-style. I catch myself zoning out of reality – not exactly believing that everything’s normal, but that if I were to go up to the big house at that moment, my folks would still be there. It’s not a good way to think, and I have to distract myself. Playing games is one of the healthiest things I can do right now. It’s weird to say that and not have my Dad yell at me about taking responsibility, but I think I’m being pretty responsible right now. I’m taking care of myself and keeping things going.

I’ve been reading back through my blogs and my comments, and I guess Mei was right about a lot of things – that it would come here eventually, that none of us were safe, that we had to be prepared. I think I did pretty well at all that. I still feel sad about what happened with Mei – a sweet, light kind of sadness that sometimes breaks through the deep, heavy sadness of everything else. I guess in a way it was a good thing we put a bit of distance between us, because we’ve both got enough to deal with right now. But I still
regret that I couldn’t persuade her to come here, because although I lost my family at least my situation’s relatively safe and stable. It hurts me to hear she’s got to go through another quarantine, and spend a month alone again with barely enough food to survive and water that might not be safe and her community falling apart, while I sit here with food in the stores for years to come and crops growing well and secure shelter, and even the time to put my feet up and play games. I mean, if things had to happen this way, and there didn’t seem to be any way of avoiding it, I think I’ve done as well as anybody could do. My one regret is that I couldn’t persuade Mei to share it with me.

7 thoughts on “Taking responsibility”

Mei August 15, 2026 at 10:38 am
At this time, you may be right that I would be better to be with you than where I am, but when it was possible it was not the right thing. We can never know what might have happened. Perhaps if I am with you, I go to the produce fair, and you as well, and we all are dead. We can know only where we are, and I must accept where I am to take control in my life, not wish that things were different.

I think you have everything you need except for company, and that is why you think of me. You should share what you have, find somebody who needs shelter and make a quarantine for them so that they can join you when you know they are safe. Don’t be alone, Jack – this is the only help I can give to you now. I hope you will listen.

Jack August 15, 2026 at 10:58 am
Yeah, it’s not that easy, though. I could quarantine them, but they could be taking anti-virals. And it’s like Elaine says, you don’t know who you can trust. It was you or nobody.

Fiona August 15, 2026 at 7:04 pm
What happened to your neighbours and friends in the area? Has your local Socnet all gone silent? Up here, the survivors who’ve been isolated for several weeks are starting to move in together in small groups to make it easier to keep things running. I held off for the last couple weeks because of Clara but soon we’ll move in with a couple other families on a farm. Not a moment too soon, systems and people both starting to fall apart.
Most of the local community’s totally silent. We were spread over quite a distance, anyhow, so we’re talking a big radius of nobody talking. Could be they’re dead, could be they’re not wanting to advertise they’re alive in case they end up on the Raidar.

There’s some activity on more anonymous nets, but people aren’t being more specific on their location than to say state and county. Unless I go knocking on doors, I’m not gonna know who’s nearby. And if everyone’s responding to knocks on their doors like I am, that wouldn’t be a wise move.

Here’s hoping the families you’re joining are easy to live with.

Thanks Jack. I hear you, there’s advantages to living solo, but after weeks of it, I’m ready for change.

Either way, a farm’s the best place to be. Your community really got blindsided. I’m glad you at least have lots of resources and know how to use them. Best wishes.

I’m impressed that you have the time to sit around gaming. I thought you were single-handedly running a farm that used to have a staff of four at all times and more at harvest? I mean, I know I haven’t exactly been welcoming to trespassers, but my bolthole is low-maintenance. And you’ve taken on chickens, and weren’t you looking for cattle, too? I’m amazed you’re coping so well with it all on your own.

Well, it’s just logistics, really. There’s a meadow across the way, the cows take care of themselves. I think I got it covered. I like having nobody to answer to.
15 Aug 2026

Protected: Now I’m resorting to secret posts...

Hello Elaine – we’ve decided to only waste power on SkIMp for emergencies, so I’m putting a private post here for you rather than call just to gossip.

I’m coming to believe you may be right about Jack. I’m no farmer, but any keen allotmenteer knows that lone self-sufficiency would be a full-time job. This casual attitude to everything doesn’t ring true for somebody keeping chickens and cows and growing vegetables with no help. I suspect he isn’t alone there. What do you think?

7 responses to “Protected: Now I’m resorting to secret posts…”

Elaine August 15, 2026 at 4:45 pm

I’m sure of it. A lot of remote rural communities here seem to have escaped relatively unscathed, and other blogs say it’s the same in some of the states. They’re even advertising for survivors from the cities to join a quarantine area and then come help them. Somebody’s getting food out to the quarantines in the cities, at any rate, if their survival figures are true. All I can’t figure out is why his family would play along, but who knows, perhaps they’re just a bit busy to be checking up on his blog? Also, you do realise it doesn’t cost you anything, or use any more power, to SkIMp Australia than it does the next town, right? ;-)

Ash August 15, 2026 at 4:47 pm

I know, but it feels like a phone call, and SkIMp does use the batteries up quicker than blogging – constant connection versus moments to upload a completed message – we have to think about these things now we’re living on solar power
and elbow grease.
Do you really think his family are still alive? It’s a possibility, I suppose. But why would he lie about that?

Elaine August 15, 2026 at 4:47 pm
I’m down to Solar and the exercise bike. At least you’re in summer right now. Hmm, let me think, attention?

Ash August 15, 2026 at 4:48 pm
English summer – it barely counts.
Mei’s attention?

Elaine August 15, 2026 at 4:49 pm
Who else?

Ash August 15, 2026 at 4:49 pm
Interesting theory. I can’t believe that’s motivation enough for such a massive deception. I know what lengths a boy will go to in trying to impress a girl, but this does seem a little beyond the pale.

Elaine August 15, 2026 at 4:50 pm
You’re one of the good guys, Ash. You’re not even thinking about the depths a boy will sink to in trying to make the girl who dumped him regret it.
Quarantine ending again

Posted on August 18, 2026

Our second quarantine is ended more early than we plan. Nobody uses the isolation rules anymore, there is no point to pretend we keep them. We have no time or energy to dig the graves now, and no plastic to carry the dead to them. We wrap them in sheets, but some have already too much decomposed. We bring the remains of our friends to the stinking meadow where we once lay in the sun to read and talk and kiss, and we throw them onto the bodies of our other friends, and we run from that place, coughing and puking, and wash in muddy water from the lake. I think when we finish cleaning the rooms, there will be little detergent left for washing ourselves. There will be more death – not just from the Flu, but other diseases.

Our immunity is weak because we have little food. Li is sick, and the medical team has much work to do. We all fear another raid, but those who refused the quarantine went outside and they say the army camp is worse than us. We outnumber them now. The vaccination did not work – many who had taken it died of the blood flu after the fighting. Now, we think, the soldiers have no more anti-virals, and they are all infected. There will be no backup for them, no new orders. There is no command, no government, no CCP outside the campus. The Party try to keep order in the meetings, but their authority is gone. So is the Quarantine Movement. We must start from the beginning, with nothing. I try to start a new forum app. It is developed by the student occupations in Greece. You can set a time to discuss a topic, and when the time limit is reached, the
conversation is frozen, the five posts with the most “up” votes becomes a poll and everybody can vote on a decision. I post about this three times, and I think there is a fault on the forum, because my post is deleted after five minutes each time. Then the forum has a power cut. Then Party members start a thread to say the forum is not reliable, and we cannot use it for decisions.

Many do not want to stay. It is not a safe place now, there are gangs in the campus who steal from other students, and there are gangs outside who will kill us and take the campus if they do not die of flu first. Li says it is because we lose Zhen. Even though he could do nothing anymore, he was a symbol that kept us together. Jian says I should stand for the new leader, that I was always far enough from the committee to not be blamed for their mistakes, that everybody knows I do the hard work, I make sure what we need is done. He says people respect me. But what else will they say to him? I do not think I am special. Those of us who still meet in the democracy building, we are just one more gang, we stay together for protection and because we are familiar. We begin to speak of leaving the campus. It is not our place anymore. I will wait until Li is well before I decide what I will do – I want to stay with Jian and Li, whatever happens. I will miss my cat. I have not seen him for a week. I think he leaves the campus, too.

8 thoughts on “Quarantine ending again.”

Fiona on August 19, 2026 at 9:30 am said:
Oh dear. It really fell apart after the raid, didn’t it? That was the last straw. People have their limits, I suppose. It’s a pity they are not all as level headed as you. This is very sad. Maybe it is time to leave, it sounds very unsafe with sick people and no-one observing the quarantine. Any idea what is going on in the rest of China?

Ash on August 19, 2026 at 8:25 pm said:
Perhaps she took your advice? I hope she’ll be alright. I’m sure she’ll be careful, whatever she does.
Anonymous on August 19, 2026 at 10:04 am said:
You're in danger. Delete this blog.

Elaine on August 19, 2026 at 7:25 pm said:
Hey, Anon. What danger? Mei, tell us what's going on there. I can't get through on Skype.

Jack on August 19, 2026 at 9:32 pm said:
Mei? I know you might not be able to reply, but please send us a message to say you're OK. Is Li better? Are you leaving the campus?

Jack on August 20, 2026 at 9:17 pm said:
Hey, it's been a while now. Can you tell where you're at yet? Anybody else following this who can shed any light? Anonymous? Come on, what's going on out there!

Elaine on August 22, 2026 at 9:13 am said:
I think it might be time to give up on Mei. Tell me if I'm wrong.

Jack on August 22, 2026 at 9:15 am said:
You're wrong.
Bright Horizons
The ground, the sky and the things between
I know Mei’s out there

Wishful thinking? Don’t believe me? Here’s how I know. Mei’s had stuff going on since the first quarantine that she never put on her blog. There’s a lot of political factions trying to take control of the campus. There was stuff she couldn’t go public about, and I can’t tell you all of it – I don’t know all of it, myself – but I picked up some details when we used to SkIMp every day. That’s how I know what to look for.

It’s like her paintings, all disconnected bits and you have to piece it together. She knew I understood that. I think she only dumped me to protect me; maybe they were onto our SkIMp calls and maybe they could’ve reached me to put pressure on her, who knows, they could have people in the US, that’s not so unbelievable, is it?

She has a plan she’s trying to tell me. I think she needs to make it look like she’s dead, but she’s planning something big, bigger than the occupation and the quarantine, bigger than the CPC even.

Did any of you notice her picture? It’s a message to me. It looks like the one from before the first quarantine ended, but it’s not. The horizon’s further, the sky’s clearer, you can see the mountains – it could mean she’s getting out of Beijing, maybe out of China. I
mean, look at her new avatar! How much clearer can you say: "I'm not here anymore, I disappeared."

I don't know where she is, and I don't know where she's going, but I won't give up on her. I'll hear from her again, I know it. You'll all see.

4 thoughts on “I know Mei’s out there”

Elaine
August 22, 2026 at 5:45 pm
I don't know, Jack, I'd love to believe you but I think she's in real trouble. I got a goosebump on the back of my neck when she said there was talk of her standing for the next leader. There had to be powerful people who didn't want that. Her picture does look like a message, but I got a horrible feeling that message is “goodbye”.

Jack
August 22, 2026 at 5:47 pm
Nah, she's just saying “Don't look for me here, I'm somewhere else”. I mean, if she wanted to say she was dead, she’d have drawn herself as a zombie, right?

Ash
August 22, 2026 at 5:48 pm
Maybe the message wasn't for us. It has only been a few days – if she intends to come back, we'll find out in due course.

Fiona
August 22, 2026 at 9:38 pm
Well, she must have been alive when she changed the blog. It's unlikely anyone else would have done that, isn't it? How clever of her. I expect she's on the run now, trying to find somewhere safer. I hope she's with friends.

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Turning ourselves in

The last three shops we've been able to get into had nothing left that was edible. Most supermarkets are occupied, and their inhabitants go to even greater lengths than Elaine to defend their stores. The last time we attempted to get near to a large Tesco we passed the gutted shells of burnt out cars. I'd just caught sight of the charred corpse in one of the wrecks when Sarah swerved suddenly and accelerated towards the exit as a gout of flame sprang up on the tarmac behind us. We don't go near the larger shops now.

Last night we ate our penultimate tin of kidney beans with boiled nettles, and Sue suggested, again, giving up and going to the quarantine camp. At least they'd feed us, she said. At least they wouldn't shoot at us for wanting to eat. The quarantine time period’s long past – perhaps families are allowed to stay together now. The question on my mind is, if the quarantine period’s over, where is everybody? You can drive for an hour on any road and see nobody. You'd think people would be leaving the cities, if they were free to do so.

We argued until past midnight, Sue pointing at maps and reading blog testimonies from various cities in the region, me pointing out how little those testimonies mean, Sarah unusually silent, lying on the bunkbed with her headphones turned up, chewing on her sleeves. I don’t want to lose the caravan and the car, and our independence. Sue feels we’ve gone beyond that now.

She said we can go to the city, or we can keep raiding until we get shot, or we can watch our daughter waste away on nettles and dandelion leaves.

I said that if we can hold on for autumn, there’ll be blackberries and hazelnuts and chestnuts to eat.

And she said, it'll get colder, and darker, and we'll get sicker. None of our attempts at snaring or trapping or fishing have had much success. There are a few mushrooms,
roots and berries that I know for sure are safe, but it takes a more expert forager than me to actually find enough to live on for any amount of time. We’re almost out of iodine, too, and unlikely to find more. There’s nowhere else to raid within walking distance, and moving on means using the last of our fuel.

Sue stayed up searching the W4 and running down the power, and this morning told us that Chester’s called an amnesty on quarantine refusers. We could join them now, and be kept in isolation for 28 days before joining the general population. They say they’ve got basic industries running and they’re working farms in the surrounding area. They’ve got security, food and jobs. They need workers.

There was nothing else I could say.

9 responses to "Turning ourselves in"

Elaine August 27, 2026 at 12:08 am
Another dream bites the dust, then. Make sure you let us know you’re OK once you get in there – don’t leave us fretting, like Mei.

Ash August 27, 2026 at 12:12 am
I’ll try, but the journey is probably going to be more perilous than the destination. The major routes are less safe now, but we haven’t the fuel to get there by the back-roads. If you don’t hear... well, it probably won't be good news.

Jack August 27, 2026 at 12:55 am
If it’s police patrols, and they’ve called an amnesty, can’t you just let them take you to the quarantine?

Elaine August 27, 2026 at 12:56 am
I got to wonder why they’d bother with patrols for the few stragglers that are left. They must be low on fuel too.
The amnesty is rather localised, and anyhow it’s mostly bandits rather than police patrolling the roads now. Strange word to use, but it seems the most appropriate for gun-wielding gangs roaming the motorways looking for easy prey. Everybody on the road now is either a bandit or a scavenger. We found ourselves a little more fuel from a car that had turned off the road and wound its way into a wood before smashing into a Horse Chestnut. Not our first corpse by any means, but our most gruesome. There were some tins of tuna and some pasta in the back – possibly the haul she was being chased for, but clearly her pursuers never found her.

Well that’s great! Doesn’t that mean you don’t have to go turn yourselves in?

It gives us a few days’ grace, but we can’t rely on finding supplies just lying around forever. It does mean we have a bit more leeway in getting there, and can take a safer, more roundabout route. We’re expecting to arrive in around a week.

You did really well to hang on as long as you did – and succeeded in avoiding major population centres during the height of the epidemic. Maybe things will be alright now. Good luck.
Thank you – I don’t know whether I’m more afraid of surrender or defeat at this time, but our decision is made. I do hope things turn out better for your community.
Running low

Well, that’s the last of the tins. I’ve even got through the beaten up ones with no labels. They were mostly beans – not even something exciting or disgusting. Just another disappointment.

All I got now is the bumper collection of flours and wholegrains. Funny, nobody seems to think about their fibre intake when they’re raiding. I got yeast and sugar and salt, but no spirit fuel or gas left to cook on, and the electric hotplate uses too much juice. Just getting it warm means cycling out more calories than I’d get from the food I cook on it. Instead, I soak grains like couscous and quinoa in cold water until they’re soft, and I make little flour and water patties to eat raw while I watch vids of fresh-baked bread and try to persuade myself I can smell it. My only daily treat is sugar, but that won’t last forever, either.

No chance of heating – the only way to get warm here is by a bracing few minutes on the exercise bike, then straight into the double-layered sleeping bags to retain as much heat as I can. Washing’s a trauma, but it’s not like I’ve got to keep up my standards for anybody in particular. I remember when the DJ booth was stifling, even in winter – especially in winter. The radiator takes up half the wall. I think about the good old days I hated so much, when I’d struggle with the lunchtime dilemma of going past Coll or broiling to death at my desk.
One day I’ll run out of food. What then? With one of my main contacts missing and another on his way to the quarantines, we all seem to be on the brink. I hope Mei’s still reading, even if she can’t post. I miss her, and that encouraging certainty she had that there’s always a right thing to do and I’ll eventually do it.

Will I leave this place when I run out of food, or just die where I sit? That’s the only dilemma I have left to entertain you with. Stay tuned, folks.

6 responses to Running low

Jack · August 30, 2026 at 2:52 am
Hey, I’m going nowhere – like it or not. Hate to state the obvious, but can’t you just go out and get some more supplies?

Elaine · August 30, 2026 at 2:53 am
No. Don’t know what I might come back to, I’d never be able to trust the place again if I left it. Plus I don’t think there’s anything left. If there were, surely somebody would be out there looking for it, wouldn’t they?

Jack · August 30, 2026 at 2:54 am
Got me there. Maybe every store’s got one hermit holed up refusing to leave cause the outside looks empty.

Elaine · August 30, 2026 at 2:55 am
Hmm. I honestly don’t know if that would make me feel better or worse.

Fiona · August 30, 2026 at 11:40 am
Elaine, I’ve had some luck with a homemade solar oven, if you can scrounge up the materials. Lots of schematics online, eg.


Elaine · August 31, 2026 at 8:42 am
That actually looks pretty doable. The glass is the hardest thing to get right, but I’ll raid the hardware aisle again. A tile cutter’ll probably do it if I can get some internal windows down in big enough pieces. Not sure how well it’ll work in the winter, but better than a slap in the teeth with a raw doughnut.
Thinking back before going on

We’d almost reached Chester when I got cold feet, and we argued again. I didn’t want to take the car in – I decided I wanted to hide it ten miles out, in case we needed it again. Sue said she couldn’t walk that far, and it’d kill Sarah. Sarah had gone to gather blackberries, or no doubt she would’ve protested any implication of weakness on her part, but it wasn’t really about how far we can walk – it was about me stalling the plan. I dropped them on the outskirts of Chester, just out of sight of the checkpoint, then took the car out a couple of miles further. The plan is that I’ll walk in from here and join them. We’ve agreed to meet back at the caravan if something goes wrong. We’ve hidden a handset and a solar charger, wrapped in plastic bags – all cautions I’ve insisted on, despite accusations of paranoia. Sue can’t understand why I have such a strong aversion to the plan. Chester’s thought to be one of the better quarantines, according to some blogs from inside, and we’ll at least get food, which is the most urgent of our concerns. I couldn’t explain then, so I’m going to try now, in case I don’t get another chance.

I keep thinking back to my ‘Storm in a Kettle’ arrest in 2015. The student demonstrations and the summer riots that year had merged together into that infamous press soundbite, the Autumn of Rage. Up until that day I felt like there was some point in fighting, some chance of winning. I was brought up to believe that revolution was possible, if dangerously volatile. I’d been involved in the Anti-cuts, No Borders and Free Palestine movements for a few years, I’d seen the Arab spring and the Indignados and Occupy burst out of nowhere, and it really did seem that we might have our turn at re-making the world. The politicians, the police and the press said that we were mindless thugs, intent on wanton destruction, and we said the same of them. Even if some of those caught in that kettle didn’t consider themselves part of a demonstration, let alone a revolution, even if they didn’t quote Marx or Bakunin in graffiti planted on police stations and shop fronts, they took what they couldn’t afford from those who had too
much to care, and they threw bottles of fire at those who would stop them, and these are
not apolitical acts; they were, perhaps, more political than the un-proofread papers, the
home-made placards and the poorly-rhymed slogans of the socialists and anarchists I
marched with to Parliament Square. But once the barriers went up, and the batons came
out, it didn’t matter why we’d been there. We were forced into a clear alliance, and we
became an army. Despite all the conspiracy theories, nobody really knows who threw
that explosive, but whether they were terrorists, revolutionaries or agent provocateurs,
the result was the same. The dead are still dead, the scarred are still scarred, the Terror
and Radicalism Act was passed and the world was changed.

Nobody got out of that kettle without a beating and a permanent record under the new
act. I almost came out a lot worse. They kept me for two days, laughing when I asked for
a phone call or a lawyer, asking me about terrorist groups and my beliefs, by which they
meant religion. I told them I was an atheist, which was and is true, but I felt
compromised saying it. I grew up with Islam, and I’d never denied it before. They
wouldn’t believe me, anyhow, not with my parents, my associations with Free Palestine.
They had already made up their minds; I should have stayed silent, but I felt compelled
to justify myself. They thought they knew everything about my ideals, my identity, my
politics, my motivations, so that anything I said either corroborated their assumptions
or was a lie. I was amongst those who escaped the Conspiracy of Silence charge by a
whisper. Our lawyers pointed out that this was prior to the Act coming into force, so
even if we had conspired to remain silent, it was not yet a crime when we did so. Still, I
know that the names I confirmed at the prompting and threats of the police were the
real reason I never faced that charge. Everybody told me I had no choice, that it
wouldn’t have helped those who were convicted for me to be another name on the list.
Nobody blamed me, everybody said it was an impossible situation, and they probably
would have done the same, or wouldn’t have known what to do in my place. Such
carefully chosen words. Everybody agreed, I was only thinking of my family, and it made
sense for me to avoid a prison sentence. I didn’t really have to make any excuses, my
friends were so willing to make them for me. But nothing could justify it. It was betrayal,
and surrender, and that was the sentence I lived with.

It wasn’t the only sentence, though. For years afterwards I’d find myself wondering how
many of the stop and searches were routine, how many of the patrols that passed a
building just as I entered or left were coincidental. Friends accused me of paranoia, and
at one point I even believed I was delusional. For years afterwards my blood ran cold when a car pulled away from the kerb after I passed, or somebody got up from a café just after I did.

Sue thought that I gave up on activism after that because of the violence I’d been subjected to, or that I was afraid of further arrests putting her and Sarah at risk, and that too was true, so I left it at that. But what I never really explained was the effect the questioning had had on me, the way they twisted everything, took my identity, my own self-knowledge away from me. I could be a fanatical Islamic terrorist, or I could be the naive dupe of a soon-to-be-outlawed anarchist organisation, depending on the associates I named. I could not act independently on secular or rational thought, that didn’t fit my profile. Everything that would justify my actions to myself would incriminate me to them. I had to be who they wanted me to be. I had to be nobody, to deny my agency, my beliefs and my friends, or lose my job, my family, my freedom.

Now, my greatest fear is walking into that quarantine camp where they will isolate me and question me about where I have been, why I didn’t give myself up sooner, what my intentions were in evading quarantine, what I believe and what means I would be prepared to take to defend that belief, and if it doesn’t fit in with what they’ve already decided, they’ll keep asking until it does. I told myself, back then, that I wouldn’t have given in so easily if it wasn’t for my responsibility to Sue and Sarah, that it was their presence forcing me to put pragmatism above principle. I blamed them for my fear and my retreat, even as I refused their support and encouragement to keep going, persuaded Sue we should get married and put Sarah in school, be a respectable family, so that we’d be safe. These last few months, since we lost everything, it’s the first time that I’ve felt we were ourselves again, no pretences or conventions to appease, a rebel family against the world. This feels like surrender. Sue says to be pragmatic. That’s always been the appeal to surrender.

I don’t really care about the car – I needed an excuse to stay behind a little longer. It’s not just that I don’t want them to see me give in. That’s what I couldn’t explain to them. Though I grew up speaking English as well as Farsi, I carry the trace of my parents’ accent. Sarah has no trace of an accent. To her, Farsi is more like a secret code than a language, a special game that we played sometimes when she was small. She has my dark eyes and hair, Sue’s pale, freckled skin. The simple truth is, they were less likely to
face hassle and awkward questions at the gate if I'm not there. I wonder if I should join them at all.

3 responses to “Thinking back before going on.”

Elaine September 2, 2026 at 6:11 pm
3am thoughts on this. I've never had any real convictions to show the courage of, so I might just be flapping my typing fingers here, but this is probably the time for people who believe in changing the world to get on with it. If you're lucky enough to both know what you believe in and have people to give a rat's arse about, don't give up on either – you'll miss them more than you think.

Jack September 2, 2026 at 6:21 pm
For once, I'm agreeing with Elaine. Don't disappear for your family's sake – they won't appreciate it. What do you think they'll do if you don't show, sit down and get on with their new life or go out looking for you?
And if you think that's surrendering, you know what Mei would say? How you gonna change the world out on your own? You got to be where people are to make to a difference.

Elaine September 3, 2026 at 1:10 am
You know things are bad when Jack's our moral compass. Get with the programme, Ash. We've had no word from Mei for two weeks now. If you're not gonna make the world better, what hope is there for any of us?
A message for Sue and Sarah

I've made it back to the caravan. I can't get through to you. Do you still have your handsets? I'll wait here for you, and if you're not here by tomorrow evening, I'll assume you couldn't get away and try to find a way in. Leave me a message if you can.

I love you both.

3 responses to “A message for Sue and Sarah.”

Elaine September 3, 2026 at 1:43 am
What happened? Are you OK?

Elaine September 3, 2026 at 9:27 am
Shit, not you as well. Don't you go to radio silence on us, Ash. Did you go to the city?

Jack September 3, 2026 at 3:31 pm
C’mon, dude, don’t leave me alone with Elaine! It’s our turn to gang up on her.
03 Sep 2026

اینجا نمی آیند. ما در حال ترک امشب.

right dad, s’me.

i got 10 mins so jus the tl;dr: chesters pr is lies, they put u 2 work an keep u in a scummy flat wiv no water, feed u veg mush and moldie bred, put u in det 4 fud.

sets r gon (no passn info 2 raiders) but gards got handsets an all corupt. mums weding rings only gold we got so this is it. if u move on, leev a mesij in wher we foun mushrums las week an well find u. aftr we py r det cours.

usin ur blog so evn if u don spot this ur matesll skIlMp ya. pls coppi/past hole text. we luv u dad.

5 responses to اینجا نمی آیند. ما در حال ترک امشب.”

Elaine September 3, 2026 at 11:18 pm

So I ran that bit of text through a translator – took me a moment to figure out it wasn’t Arabic – then I was running low on charge, but just did a four minute mile on the exercise bike and sent a dozen SkIlMp messages. Obviously I won’t post the translation here, but I guess you already know it won’t take the guards too much longer than me to work it out. Hoping by then you’re all OK. Not sure how to safely let you know if I get through to Ash, but no reply from him so far. Post when you can and tell us what happened.

Jack September 3, 2026 at 11:24 pm
I tried SkIMping, too – nothing. Situation in Chester sounds familiar from the forums here – debt slavery is the new rule of law if you don't got your own bit of land. You guys need to find an abandoned farmhouse somewhere.

Elaine September 3, 2026 at 11:25 pm

And what then? You got an international courier to send them some non-F1 seeds?

Jack September 3, 2026 at 11:28 pm

Totally would if I could – but given the massive drop in population, there’s got to be some unharvested wheat fields somewhere they can gather from, short-term. After that, Ash knows a little about organic farming. They just need to get settled, get some guns and shoot some wildlife in the meantime.

Elaine September 3, 2026 at 11:32 pm

Simple when you know how, huh? I only hope they get through this to tell us why they didn't think of it.
A message for Ash

It’s Sue this time. We retrieved the wrapped handset from the tree where we left it, but no message from you. When we saw the burnt-out husk of the caravan we ran towards it, which was probably stupid, but we needed to know if you were here. There was nothing to salvage of our home, and nothing to be seen of you either, and we’re taking that as a good sign. We think you must have got away, possibly with the workset, and abandoned the caravan to whoever did this. So I’ll post here in the hopes you can find some way of seeing it, and replying to us.

Sarah said a little about how it was in Chester, but I want you to know all of it. I would have sent that message myself, but after challenging the guards on missing people I was given a red tag, and told to stay within the residential and work areas for a week. It was Sarah who pulled me aside before I got into real trouble. It was the first day, after three hours of gruelling work shovelling ashes and occasional unburnt remains into sacks to go out to the farms as fertiliser. By the end of work, I was frantic that you hadn’t arrived, describing you to everybody, asking if they’d seen you. Eventually, somebody pointed me to the guard who’d been on the gate all afternoon, and he told me you’d arrived and gone away again. I couldn’t understand it. I thought he must be lying. I asked about the people we came in with – a Pakistani family with two little girls and a boy Sarah’s age. We’d shared stories in the waiting area, before they took us for interviews, one by one, each separately tagged and scanned and given the details for our accommodation, food depot and work duties, even the seven-year-old. We hadn’t seen them since. Sarah wanted to wait for them, but I just wanted to get to the depot, get our loaf of soggy bread and find our flat before our shift started. When the guard told me you’d gone, I started asking about them, too, and Sarah dragged me away and told me to look around. There was nobody inside the walls who wasn’t white. I stopped asking questions, and we decided we’d get out the next day and find you.
We went to the depot immediately after work to get into maximum debt and go away with as much food as we could. We had to queue for an hour. I couldn't stop myself worrying about the debt, and Sarah got annoyed with me. “It’s all just numbers on a screen, mum. They only bother with it so they don’t have to call the food ‘rations’ or the work ‘slave labour’. It’s not like anybody’s ever going to be able to pay it off, they charge us more in rent and food than they pay us.” And I got annoyed, because I wanted to believe that some sort of remnant of the old world was in place, that there was some continuity, some normality to be found. “It is normality,” she said. “That’s how it’s always been.” When did she start talking like we used to? She’s like your mother, no quarter for liberal platitudes or half-measures. How we must exasperate her.

We went back to our accommodation and made some rucksacks out of wiring and pillow cases, to take the food and the few essentials they left in the flats. Just as I thought we’d calmed down and focused on a plan, Sarah told me she’d found out how to get a message to you, and she needed my wedding ring, and so we argued again. I didn’t want any complications to my carefully timed plan, or to think of her going alone to a corrupt guard in a deserted building where I couldn’t follow, and I eventually pulled rank and told her that it was my wedding ring, and she couldn’t have it. She started shouting, “What’s more important, making real contact with Dad or holding onto a memory of when you used to?” and that hurt. I didn’t really care about the ring, I just wanted to stop her going, and that made her even angrier, angry that I was weak and afraid, that I couldn’t be strong for her and wouldn’t let her be strong for us. She had an idea that you’d be breaking in to find us even as we were breaking out, and that we had to get a message to you, and even as I told her you wouldn’t try something like that I began to worry that you would, and hesitate over whether to leave at all. By the time Sarah persuaded me to give her the ring we were both shouting and shaking and crying. She grabbed it from me and stormed out in a rage, then immediately returned and hugged me fiercely, planted a kiss on the top of my head, and strode out again.

I spent the next hour trying not to watch the window, trying to occupy myself with preparing and packing. The flats had been cleared, but not too thoroughly. Our plan was to escape down the river on a camping mattress we’d found at the bottom of the wardrobe when we arrived. I checked it for punctures, though I had nothing to fix them with. I’d found some maps in a kitchen drawer, too, and planned out our route and how we’d get back to the caravan. And then I watched the window until it was dark, and
when I saw her walking steadily back towards the flats I knew that she was fine, that our daughter’s damn near invincible, and I felt so proud and relieved – and sad. I put my head down on the table and realised I had no energy left to escape that night. Then I realised I couldn’t tell Sarah that, and I’d just have to find the energy, borrow it at crippling interest from the next day’s reserves, like everything else there.

The canal’s not far from the residential blocks, but it was a tense walk. There isn’t exactly a curfew, but being seen out and about at night with bags and an inflatable mattress would certainly have raised questions. We found an unguarded stretch and huddled together in a warehouse doorway, while we took turns inflating the mattress. It was only then that I began to really think about what we were risking, what would happen if we were caught. In theory we weren’t prisoners there, but running from a debt was a serious crime. There were all kinds of speculations about what happened to “debt fugitives”, but most imagined they were summarily shot. There’s no reason to bring somebody back who might be trouble, or to let somebody go who may know how to get back in unseen. I thought about that as we set our makeshift raft floating on the canal and tried to crawl on board without overturning it, and I wondered if Sarah had thought it, too. Of course she had. She never used to kiss me before walking out after a row.

We lay flat and paddled the raft with our hands over to the other side. We knew that the canal passed a few checkpoints where we might be spotted, while the river was wider and ran further from the residential areas and away from main roads. After crossing, we carried the mattress through deserted streets to the river, drenched and ridiculous, me jumping at shadows and Sarah suffering from inappropriate giggling fits, until we reached a quiet spot to throw ourselves into the hands of the Dee. There was a level change which, small as it was, sent us spinning down a fall towards the handbridge and almost overturned us. Then it was my turn to be angry at Sarah; I hissed at her to get a bloody grip, as I struggled to right us and save the food while she squealed like a child on a rapids ride.

“Have you been drinking?” I asked her, as if there were the slightest possibility, as if she’d just come home late from college, and she shook her head, then buried it in the mattress, crying with laughter.

She took gasping breaths as we got the mattress stable in the current. When she could speak again, all she said was, “I can’t help it. It’s just too funny.” And I realised that it
really was. We clung together and gave in to helpless laughter as the river carried us gently away.

Once we were well into overgrown, unharvested farmland, we put everything in the centre of the mattress and swam it through the chilly water to the bank. By this time most of our clothes were wet anyway. We wrung them out but didn't have any spares, so put them back on, damp, let down the raft and began the long squelch North by the pole star that we knew would eventually lead us to the M6, or at least a road with signs to it, and from there, we hoped, to you. Instead, this morning we found the burnt shell of our home, and you gone.

But we have this handset, and we have each other, so all we can do is keep moving. Sarah thinks you might have gone back to the museum – it's the only place we can think of where you'd imagine we might look for you. But first, we have to find some kind of shelter and sleep.

9 responses to “A message for Ash”

Elaine September 4, 2026 at 12:11 pm
Hey Sue, Sarah – glad to hear you two are OK. Keep us posted about Ash.

Sarah September 4, 2026 at 3:10 pm
we fownd im

Jack September 4, 2026 at 3:11 pm
You did? Where? Is he OK?

Elaine September 4, 2026 at 4:16 pm
Hey, Sarah. Don’t want to pester you guys, I realise you got a lot to catch up, but that’s pretty scant info. It’d help me sleep tonight if you could just let us know he’s alive. He did get away from the caravan, right?

Jack September 4, 2026 at 5:41 pm
You think they’re not posting because he’s OK and they’re catching up, or because he’s not OK?

Elaine September 4, 2026 at 5:43 pm
I think we need to give them some time. I don’t know. You and I are quite lucky with our power set-ups – no word from Ash & family could just mean dead batteries.

Jack September 4, 2026 at 5:46 pm
Yeah, that’ll be what it is. And every time we try and SkIMp it probably uses up any charge they got. We should stop SkIMping and wait for a response here. They’ll be OK.

Elaine September 4, 2026 at 5:49 pm
Yeah, updating his blog probably isn’t Ash’s first priority right now. It’s not necessarily bad if we don’t hear anything for a while.

Is this conversation reassuring you at all? ‘Cause it’s having crap all effect on me.

Jack September 4, 2026 at 5:52 pm
I’m just thinking about Mei. I was sure she’d comment on all this. She must be reading it.
Lost the store

I lost the store. I'm alone and I'm injured and I'm sitting shivering in a basement, shitting myself because there's nobody, I mean absolutely no fucker out here. The whole damn world's dead, except for the ones that are after me. I think I'm completely alone.

I need more water, I need fresh dressings, soon I'm going to need more food. If you don't hear from me again...

Fuck it, if you don’t hear from me again I won’t be around to care what you really thought of me. But I think about balmy nights round the ashes of the camp fire with the air too hot for sleeping bags and the moon too bright for torches, slapping at mozzies and burning off leeches with a cigarette, the kind of night when everyone complained so much about the bugs I threatened to take you all into the outback one day and show you the meaning of hazardous wildlife, and we made idle plans about it, and up until now part of me still thought it might happen, and that we'd all be in the same hemisphere again, looking up at the same stars.

I don’t make friends easily – you all know that by now. I thought all I needed was to know someone was listening, but now I need you to talk to me. If you're out there, if you can spare the time and the power, chat with me now. Tell me what you’re doing. Let me know you're surviving. Be better off than me, and tell me some of it means something. Any of you. Tell me I mattered, that I made you laugh, that you liked my blog.
I don't know what to say anymore. I have nothing else to say.

**41 responses to Lost the store**

**Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:26 am**
Bad timing, I know, but I’m finally well enough to write something. You were right in your guess about low batteries – now that we no longer have the caravan, there’s only a hand-charger. I'll comment on here rather than open SkIMp as it uses less power. How are you feeling? How were you injured?

**Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:27 am**
Good to see your avatar, mate. I was worried about you. I got a bullet wound! Can you believe that? Like some fucking action hero. But I was just running away. You?

**Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:29 am**
I took a bit of a beating at the entrance to Chester, then added a concussion when the caravan was taken, not to mention being half-starved to start with, but I’m going to be alright now that I have Sue and Sarah with me again.

**Jack · September 12, 2026 at 4:30 am**
Woah, you two are chatting and you didn’t SkIMp me? I’m the last to hear everything! I guess you haven’t heard from Mei?

**Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:32 am**
Afraid not, Jack. That’d be the greatest, wouldn’t it? If she and Ash both reappeared to say they were doing peachy, just as I was checking out?

**Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:33 am**
You’re not checking out. You obviously have enough fine motor control to type reasonably quickly – tell me where you’re shot and how much blood you’ve lost.

**Jack · September 12, 2026 at 4:34 am**
No way, you’re not leaving us without saying what happened. We’re not gonna allow it. You stay right here, and keep typing. I can SkIMp if you got the power.

**Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:37 am**
Long story, Jack. Ash – top of my shoulder – I don’t think the bullet went in, but lost enough blood to feel faint. That could’ve been from running, though. Managed a field dressing.

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:38 am
Good. Has the bleeding stopped? And do you have anything to eat?

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:41 am
It’s seeping a little but not full on gushing anymore. As for my food situation, you’re not gonna believe what I got. Last box in the store, unopened and still in date. I put it in my emergency rations, thinking I’d have to be in pretty dire straits to contemplate it. Give you three guesses.

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:42 am
Polenta. :-) Eat it. And drink water. And keep warm.

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:43 am
Yes, nurse. Tell me what else happened to you.

Jack · September 12, 2026 at 4:46 am
Yeah, it’s been total silence since Sarah said she found you. We thought you were dead, dude.

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:48 am
Sorry to worry you both… After they took the caravan I ran until I found a house – it had been a farmhouse. It was unoccupied, but had been raided and everything useful taken. There was a trough with some rainwater in it. Do you have enough water, Elaine?

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:48 am
I’m running pretty low. There’s a tap here but I don’t much trust what’s coming out of it.

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:49 am
Can you boil it?

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:50 am
Not without attracting attention, or choking myself.
Any purification tabs?

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 4:51 am

No, but hey, I forgot I got iodine in my pack! It'll be a while before I can drink it, but that replenishes my supply at any rate. So what did you do with your rainwater, Ash?

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 4:53 am

Drank it straight, I'm sorry to say. I had nothing on me and couldn't get a fire going to boil it. It tasted of rust. Threw up the little I had in my stomach. Eventually I got the wherewithal together to rip up some sheets for bandages and found a pan, some wood, paper and matches. Once I had some boiled water I made some nettle tea and used a drop of hair-dying bleach I found in the bathroom to make a weak hydrogen peroxide solution to soak a wad of towel in, and cleaned my wounds. I don't suppose you have something like that to hand? If not, the iodine will do. Careful, it'll sting.

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:02 am

If by “sting” you mean hurt like all the fucking demons of hell on overtime with tasers, then yeah, that worked. What did you do next? You magic any real food from somewhere?

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 5:03 am

I found some potatoes in the garden, but I couldn't get the fire lit again, so I ate them raw. I don't recommend that.

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:04 am

I don't have a garden, anyhow.

Jack · September 12, 2026 at 5:05 am

How'd you find the family again?

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 5:07 am

When I'd been doubled up on the floor puking my guts out I saw a handset under the kitchen dresser, that the raiders must have missed. It had just enough charge for me to find Sarah's message before it went dead. I'd decided to make my way back to where the caravan had been, to retrieve the set we left there and reply, but I must have passed out before I reached the back door. And then I heard
Sarah’s voice, calling Sue, and thought I was dreaming or hallucinating, or possibly dead. And then I woke up and found they’d carried me to the bed, and were sitting there, whispering in the candlelight, waiting for me to wake up.

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:08 am
That’s nice. You guys all OK?

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 5:08 am
We’ll be alright. You?

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:09 am
The ones coming to find me won’t be such a heart-warming sight to wake up to.

Jack · September 12, 2026 at 5:10 am
You still got us. We’re here.

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:11 am
Well, not exactly. Once I turn off the set and go to sleep, you won’t be.

Jack · September 12, 2026 at 5:11 am
Sure we will. Where else you think we’re going?

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 5:12 am
If you’re warm enough and you don’t feel nauseous, get some sleep. We’ll be here in the morning.

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:13 am
It is morning. It’s getting light here.

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 5:14 am
It’s just got dark here. I sent the sun over. ;-) Let’s both sleep, and then tell me how you’re feeling when you wake. OK?

Elaine · September 12, 2026 at 5:15 am
OK. I reckon I can do that now.

Jack · September 12, 2026 at 5:17 am
Great, and what am I supposed to do?

Fiona · September 12, 2026 at 12:56 pm
So sorry to hear this Elaine. Was it the Triggers? Do hang in there. You are a survivor. I told Clara the story of the lady who tricked her mean boss and took over the store and now she wants to hear it all the time.

Ash · September 12, 2026 at 7:33 pm
That sounds like a wonderful story! I presume you toned down the swearing... ;-) Just think, Elaine, you're a legend in Canada! How are you this evening? Let me know how that wound's healing.

Jack · September 13, 2026 at 4:35 am
So now we've lost Elaine, too. Or she's stringing us along, not replying, to get us worried. Not cool, Elaine. Come on, answer.

Elaine · September 13, 2026 at 8:17 am
Hey guys. I'm OK. I left the set on and it ran out of charge. My shoulder's too bad to wind the charger, so I had to wait until there was enough sun to run it off the solar panel. Wow, Fiona, I always thought that if anybody told their kids about me it'd be as a dire warning! That legend's a lot to live up to. How about using a little artistic licence and making sure I get a happy ending?

Fiona · September 13, 2026 at 9:30 am
I'm hoping for a happy ending, help me out here.
Another raid

This time there were more of them. I’d gotten too confident, and they snuck past the traps and alarms while I was asleep. Time I’d woken up and seen them off, they’d already found the main store and made off with a few sacks of beans and flour. I’m pretty angry at myself for getting so lax. I’ll manage without the food, I have some more in a second location, but I just don’t feel so secure now. I’ve started chopping down our little pine forest we used to harvest for Christmas trees, using the straight trunks to make some spiky fencing for a second barrier around the perimeter. That’s keeping me busy, and of course I’m keeping watch, only sleeping a few hours at a time.

It was a bit of a shock to the system, if you know what I mean. I mean, I’m fine, I’ve still got everything I need, but they kind of got in under my defences. I had to shoot to kill, and y’know, dealing with bodies again and everything, brought a few things back. I’m fine, though. And knowing I can do that, when I need to, I guess it makes me feel safer, in a way. It just got under my skin a little, is all. But hey, what doesn’t kill us makes us hard asses, I guess! That’s the way it is from now on. And before anybody comes in with the sympathy for the raiders, these guys were totally prepared to shoot me if I didn’t get...
them first. If I hadn’t stopped them, they’d have taken everything, and that’d be even worse. So I did what I had to, and they got what was coming to them. That’s an end of it.

So, I’m just wondering if anybody got a message from Mei? I figured that what with Ash and Elaine both having some close calls lately, she might have been concerned and just, you know, sneaked in a quick SkIMp to say “hang in there”. Not my place to check up on her, I know, but I’m kind of worried. I just hope she’s OK. Just, y’know, let me know if she’s said anything – you don’t have to say what she’s said, just if she’s said anything, that’d be a comfort to me to know. And I hope you’re both recovered, too.

11 thoughts on “Another raid”

Ash September 16, 2026 at 9:52 am
Much better, thank you, though I’m also concerned for our friends. I’m glad that you seem to be coping so well.

Power is more of an issue for me than it was – and even when I can charge this set, it seems the servers are sporadically offline. The lights are out everywhere here. I’ve moved over to an Icelandic socnet, not for the security and privacy but because the servers powered by geothermal stations are the most reliable now.

Jack September 16, 2026 at 10:19 am
Here’s to the sysadmins keeping it all going in Reykjavik and the Shetlands. True heroes of the end of days. Wish I had something left to drink to them.

Jack September 16, 2026 at 12:27 pm
Oh wait, I do. They got the stash in the drinks cabinet, but not the home-brew cider that’s just about ready. Nothing like it.

Ash September 16, 2026 at 12:28 pm
I do, indeed, have nothing like it. You’ll have to have one for me.

Jack September 16, 2026 at 12:30 pm
Sure, I can do that. And another for Mei, and one for Elaine. In fact, I reckon Elaine will have more than one. She usually does.
Take it easy, Jack – it sounds like you need to have your wits about you from now on.

Sorry I’m late to the party, and hope my over-indulgence hasn’t been too much for you to handle...
Before we get too wrecked, just a little warning from someone who’s recently had some pretty shitty luck with raiders. If your set-up’s as great as it sounds, and if any of them got away, they’ll be back. We don’t wanna lose you, mate. Either move somewhere smaller or get some help to defend the place – I’m serious, there’s no way you can do it by yourself.

No worries, Elaine – I can deal with raiders. I don’t think these guys are coming back.

Yeah, that’s what I thought about the Triggers. I had a ton of defences and fallbacks, and I still got chased out of my store. It seems like you got an easy-running farm, and your green crops must be visible from miles off. I’m surprised you’ve not been raided more.

I’m pretty sure these guys are scared off for good. I appreciate it, Elaine, but just cause something happened to you, doesn’t mean it applies to me. I don’t want to talk about it anymore – the whole thing was a little traumatic. Anyway, how’s your shoulder?

Getting better. I’ll post more soon.
Not dead yet

At last, a safe enough stop to check into the blog and say sorry for the old llamarooni last week – I gather I got you all a little worried. I wasn’t injured as bad as I thought, though every time I raise my arm it makes me wince like a poke in the eye with an out of tune violin playing a James Blunt song. Some of you chatted till dawn, and I was grateful for that, because when dawn came it was warm enough to sleep and know that I’d wake up again. Still no word from Mei, though.

It’s taken this long for me to be able to recharge my batteries properly, but now I’m back in the blogosphere I guess I’d better explain what all the hoo-ha was about. Obviously it was raiders – well, sort of – from the uniforms I’m guessing it was the actual police, or what’s left of them, which is more or less the same thing as raiders, but with training. I half expected Frank to be with them, but would you credit it, it was Trigger I-Never-Wanted-To-Do-This-Shit Grumpy pointing out the traps and cameras and calling the shots.

There were too many of them to corral in my various penalty pens, so I went to plan Get-The-Fuck-Out, which meant grabbing my pre-packed bag and exiting through the skylight. The Inner Sanctum had a few tricks of its own to slow down the uninitiated, and as I was pulling up my feet I heard the Thunderdome trapdoor come into play: two men enter, one man leaves through a concealed gap in the floor joists a step in front of the threshold. Glad all that sawing turned out to be worth it, but the other guy must’ve
jumped in time 'cause when I turned there was a gun pointing out the skylight, and when I leapt for the fire escape I felt something graze my shoulder. Adrenalin kept me from making brain-space for that until I was on solid ground. As I was pegging it for the exit, all I thought was: “Good thing they didn’t hit the workset.” It only started to hurt when I reached round to get the pistol out the rucksack.

I make it sound like I was pretty slick, but it didn’t all go according to plan. My aim in this scenario was to go back in through a second skylight, hidden from the inside, and hide out in the false ceiling over Jezza’s office, leaving the inner sanctum looking abandoned. Then I’d sit tight till the raiders gave up the hunt and moved on. I wasn’t reckoning on them having a gunner on the roof soon as I got out. They were quicker than I’d prepped for, and I didn’t react fast enough, so the fire escape was my only way. Course, not only did the shooter see me go, I had cameras trained on that way in, and as I ran through the car park I could hear shots hitting the concrete around me and voices jeering through the tannoy. I had my own pistol in my left hand by now, but there was no way I’d have been able to even turn round and take aim before somebody got me, or so I thought till I ran straight into the two they’d left crouching by the fence. Now I look back, the fact they didn’t shoot means they must’ve been planning to take me alive. I didn’t think about that, didn’t even hesitate. Two loud bangs. Close range. They both went down and I kept running. By the time I’d got to the end of the block, I could hear engines starting up. I was in too much pain for barging at doors, and it was at around this point I noticed my whole right side was just about soaked in blood. The next building had one of those old-fashioned cellars with windows at ground level, so I kicked one in and rolled through onto a bed of broken glass and wooden crates, where I lay for about ten minutes without moving.

There was no way I could lift anything high enough to hide the broken window, no way I could run further, no way I could get up and hide better. I lay there waiting for death or discovery, and when neither came I began the slow, painful process of getting the bag off my back. I think I might’ve passed out for a bit. When I could, I drank half my water and poured a little over my shoulder. A bullet graze is nasty, I’m here to tell you. A great chunk of missing skin surrounded by burnt flesh, it looked like a doorway to the deepest pit of hell in my very own shoulder. Felt like it, too. By the time I had leisure to pay it attention, the bleeding had almost stopped. I know you’re not supposed to put anti-septic cream on a gaping wound, but after trying to clean it with an alcohol-free wipe I
wussed out. By evening I’d got it dressed with sticky stitches, wound pads and a bandage that it took me the best part of half an hour to tie one-handed. Then I ate some glucose tablets and drank the rest of my water, and by then my torch was going dim, and I realised I didn’t have the strength to wind it much, and a kind of terror took me. I can’t really explain why. I’m generally your more rational sort of paranoid, anti-social freak, but I became convinced, like it was an unchangeable, universal law, that if I fell asleep at that time I wouldn’t wake up again. I didn’t just think it might be possible, I knew it. I was wrong, but that didn’t make it any better.

So that’s what that midnight missive of cringeworthy self-pity and attention-seeking was all about. Sorry about that, folks, and thanks for the reassurance. The shoulder’s a lot better now, and I can use my wind-up charger as well as the puny little solar panel on my bag, so I thought I could risk an extended typing session. I’ve been moving a bit further from the store every day, cause I still get it in my head some nights that that police gang’s coming back to find me. I wake up in a cold sweat to the sound of circling engines then wake up again to the silence. The food I brought with me’s all but run out, so here’s your daily dose of irony – I’m going raiding.

**6 responses to Not dead yet**

**Jack · September 20, 2026 at 7:46 am**
C’mon, Elaine, you can’t leave me the last homesteader in the Bad Influences. Can’t you take over another store? A house, even?

**Elaine · September 20, 2026 at 8:12 am**
I sort of do that, every night, but there’s never enough left for it to be worth stopping too long. I’m mostly just mapping gardens with water barrels to stay within reach of, then moving around seeing if I can find somewhere that’s not totally picked clean yet.

**Ash · September 20, 2026 at 9:14 am**
In these times, anybody who isn’t indulging in a little self-pity must be delusional. I’m glad you’re alright. And welcome to the scavengers’ club. Somebody once gave me some good advice about propping doors open...
What, in case somebody’s watching on security? Chance’d be a fine thing – I must’ve been the last store standing. I’m covering a lot of ground every day just to find the odd tube of sandwich paste in the back of a kitchen cupboard.

It’s much the same here, though I think our quarantines were less densely packed, and we had more refusers, so there are more survivors around. The suburbs of most towns seem empty at first, but they’re rarely completely deserted – we’re always careful breaking into houses, just in case somebody’s home.

It’d be a relief if they were. Hermit I may be, but this is beginning to freak me out just a little. If it weren’t for you guys and the pain in my shoulder, I’d be tempted to think I was the last living human in the world, and I imagined getting chased out the store just to relieve the monotony.
Moving on again

Well, for those who were concerned, I’m alive and almost well. As Sue heard, I was refused entry to the quarantine camp, though “refused entry” is a rather evasive way to describe beating somebody to the ground and stealing their handset and shoes before dumping them, unconscious, in a wood.

I awoke to the familiar aroma of nettle soup. I’d been covered with a coat, and an insistent voice said, “Drink this,” so I did. There was something in it besides nettles – it had a more rounded and slightly peppery flavour, and when I could focus enough to look at the tin mug being held to my lips I saw some kind of yellowish root in it. I looked up at a young man’s concerned and impatient face, then scrunched my eyes shut in pain when he yelled, “’e’s woken up, Mam!”

A gentler voice responded, “Let him rest, Khalil,” and I obliged while a hushed argument took place over the urgency of getting my story. I tried to wake up, but fell unconscious again. It was the best part of an hour before I could sit and thank them for their kindness. By then, the father had returned with two cheerful small girls, and some kind of dead animal – a squirrel, I think. Khalil offered to fetch some water, and the girls bickered over who was going to light the fire until their mother told them to quiet down, and go and wash their hands in the stream. That left me with the parents, who introduced themselves as they built the fire and skinned the dinner.

They were friendly but reserved. Maira asked, with a hint of caution, whether I was travelling alone, and I noticed that Rafel stopped what he was doing to wait for my answer. When I told them that I’d been trying to join my wife and daughter in Chester, the tension dropped a level.

“Then you are Ashraf,” Maira said, and she told me how they’d met Sue and Sarah on
their way into Chester, before having their own application rejected, though not so
violently as mine. They weren’t surprised by it, or by my story. Chester was the third
city they’d tried and failed to seek refuge with. I wondered why they wanted to get into
a city, given that they seemed to be managing so well in a copse of woodland outside.
They’d clearly got the hang of hunting and foraging, far better than I had. They shook
their heads at this. It’s almost October. It will soon be colder, food will be scarcer. Two
of their children are still small. They’re under no illusion that they can make it through
the winter without joining a city with some proper shelter and a reliable food source.
They were determined to find one that would admit them, even if it meant back-
breaking work, suspicious strangers and the ever-present threat of violence. They said
they would escape again in the Spring, if they could. They were going to try Liverpool
next, and urged me to do the same, once I’d found my family. It’s always difficult to
know which blogs to believe, but there seemed to be quite a few giving different and not
overly glowing reports of the set-up there, and they reckoned that was a good thing.
Variety of opinion means a certain amount of freedom to express it. The many
endorsements for Chester all made similar and, as it turns out, false claims.

I learnt a lot from Maira and Rafel, and from Khalil and the girls, who are already pretty
good trappers and gatherers of the right kinds of mushrooms, roots and leaves. I’ve also
learnt from my mistakes in Chester. I should never have left the car so close by, for a
start. I’d left everything of use in the caravan, detached the car and parked on the hard
shoulder of the M6 only a couple of miles outside the town, and when I felt well enough
to return to it, it was long gone. They must regularly patrol the area around the city, so I
left the road and headed back to the caravan via the fields. By the time I reached it I was
exhausted, and ached all over. Rafel had given me a pair of socks, but they were no
better than bare feet for much of the journey. Sue now says I shouldn’t have tried to
leave so soon, but the restorative power of a good meal and a welcoming family was
tinged with anxiety for my own, and I wanted to get back to the caravan and see if there
was any word from them. When I got there, the caravan was empty and lonely, and
there was no message yet on the workset. I tried SkIMping – another stupid mistake, as
they would obviously have left me a message by now if they still had their handsets. I
posted what I had the energy left to say, and fell asleep.

I was woken by a sudden movement of the caravan. For a minute I thought I was being
towed, but the rocking was too violent for that, and then I heard shouts and laughter,
hands banging against the walls. I was just able to get on my feet before the whole world overturned, throwing me off them again and cracking my head against the bunk beds. The door was now above my head, and I could see through the window that a figure was clambering towards it. I tumbled through the skylight and made for the woods.

I didn’t get a good look at my attackers, but they must have been the guards from Chester. I shouldn’t have gone back for the car, or SkIMped Sue and Sarah’s handsets. Knowing that we had a caravan wouldn’t have told them where it was – they must have found my trail across the fields from where the car had been. I don’t know how much they took before setting the place on fire, I just staggered into the dark, hoping they wouldn’t follow. Minutes later I heard distant whoops of laughter and saw a blaze spring up far away, through the trees, and realised there would be nothing to go back to. I wandered for maybe a mile until I found the farmhouse I spoke of on Elaine’s blog – the rest, you know. I thought I was dreaming when I heard Sue and Sarah’s voices in the kitchen. I thought I must be dying. They’d been searching for shelter, and happened to wander in the same direction as I did. Well, it turned out it was a pretty clear forest path. I’d blundered through it and they’d followed it steadily, and they’d seen a house, just as I did.

So here we are, with no car or caravan and a house that does for shelter from the elements but little else. No fresh water, electricity, heating, not even a working fireplace or old-fashioned range. We’ve managed to get quite a few potatoes that were left behind from a harvested field, and Sarah’s managed to get a tractor working, though we instantly ran out telling her to turn it off, the noise could bring raiders from miles around. We talked about staying, setting up our once longed-for homestead, but it didn’t take long to abandon that idea. Apart from the practicalities, it’s far too near Chester, and if it’s been raided before it’ll likely be raided again once activity is spotted. We’ll set off for Liverpool tomorrow. Our transport’s not exactly stealthy, but it’s better than walking all the way.

13 responses to “Moving on again”

Elaine September 25, 2026 at 12:52 am

You’re taking a tractor on the motorway? That’ll be something to see...
Ash September 25, 2026 at 12:53 am

It’s not as if we’re in danger of holding up traffic...but no, probably not all the way. We’ll find something faster and more efficient along the way, if we can.

Jack September 25, 2026 at 1:36 pm

Yeah, I’ve taken a few trips out to get new cars. It’s not like anybody’s using them, so I figure, why not? I got a quite a collection now.

Ash September 25, 2026 at 5:24 pm

How many do you need? What do you use them for?

Jack September 25, 2026 at 5:25 pm

Getting to town, getting across the farm...driving round yelling and firing a shotgun at the sky. What else?

Elaine September 25, 2026 at 10:41 pm

Sounds like you got fuel and ammo to waste! How do you get in, do people just leave them open with the keys on the seat?

Jack September 25, 2026 at 10:42 pm

Pretty much, or the keys are in a house close by. Supplies are not a problem yet. Anything that keeps you sane another day’s worth it.

Ash September 25, 2026 at 10:43 pm

Sanity isn’t the first thing I’d associate with that behaviour... but it’s good that one of us is having fun, I suppose.
Hi Ash. I’m so glad you were helped by some good people. As for Chester, that makes me so angry.

Thanks Fiona – Chester made us all angry, and cautious. There are many places like it now, and many places that could easily turn that way if we don’t fight to stop them. I’ll write about Liverpool in little while. I hope your community is still keeping its independence and social conscience. How is Clara adjusting to everything?

A lot has changed – we are now splintered into multi-household units gathered on farms and acreages. Clara went through a rough spot and regressed into trauma for awhile – seeing other kids with their parents was hard on her. She’s starting to come around again. Me, I feel like I’m living a microcosm of Mei’s commune these days. A lot of overstressed personalities with their own ideas of how things should be done. I go between being inspired and frustrated by the people around me. We are still luckier than most in the resources we have but are not without significant challenges. I just hope we can hold it together because we really need to. Very busy right now. Winter is coming.

Indeed – and yours will be even colder than ours. We’re feeling much the same, reeling from the qualities that fear and uncertainly inspire in those around us, the incredible ferocity and spite, the equally incredible bravery and kindness. The hardest thing to accept is that those qualities can overlap so cruelly, that the moral courage of those you love can hurt you so much more than their anger.
Keep Clara safe. It's a desperate world she's growing into, and you can't protect her forever. Still, protect her while you can.

leve of the thyatricles dad im doin a bit of traynin n scuritie dutys im not goin 2 war
BIG NEWS

OK, guys, brace yourself for the most exciting news of these troubled times – Mei’s here! Yeah, I couldn't believe it either. Turns out there’s still some flights going on – vaccines and government deals and shit – and after Mei left the quarantine her doctor friends got a job with one of these secret labs working on the vaccine, and they got Mei a job there. They don’t got many pilots left, so she trained up, and soon as she got onto a flight out to the US she detoured here. Stole a plane just to find me again.

I know that might seem pretty unbelievable, given that she wasn’t all that hot on the idea of coming out here before, but after thinking it over all this time she realised the one place she wanted to be was here.

It was late last night I heard the proximity sensors go, and when I ran for the window with my rifle I just saw her standing there, waving up at me. She’s not here right now, cause she insisted on quarantining herself over at the other house, but we're counting down the 28 days till we can finally be together again.

27 thoughts on “BIG NEWS”
Jack...this is difficult. I understand how much you want this to be the case, and I understand why you would pretend it is. But it’s not fair. We're all in the process of accepting Mei’s disappearance...her likely death...as well as coming to terms with everything else we've all been through. We’re all grieving in our own way. It may be especially hard on you, but I can’t go along with this fantasy. It won’t make you feel better – only honest grief will, eventually, do that. We can be here for you, but only if you’re really here, so to speak, in the real world where, we must beg in to accept, Mei isn’t any longer. And I’m so sorry.

Elaine September 27, 2026 at 8:06 pm

Sorry Ash, I’m done coddling the little weasel. Nothing he's said from the start has added up but this is just fruitloops on a banana peel. You know, I don’t even sympathise anymore. You think you’re the only one who misses Mei? D’you see the rest of us going public with the wish-fulfilment? It’s too much, Jack. You want to wring Mei’s memory out of shape and scrunch it into a distorted doll of her to fit your private fantasies, fine, but don’t make us watch you doing it. I’m trying to mourn somebody real, and I don’t want to see your pathetic attempt to bring back a glove puppet. Get back to reality. Or don’t you care about keeping your folks’ farm going anymore? Course not, ’cause they’re right there, aren’t they? You didn’t bury them, they’re still up at the house while you play out your little virtual reality apocalypse, making a game out of everything the rest of us have been through, just ’cause you got dumped and felt left out. Screw you.

Jack September 27, 2026 at 9:05 pm

I don’t care what any of you believe, she’s here. I know what’s real.

Jack September 28, 2026 at 6:51 am

I know what’s real.

Jack September 28, 2026 at 1:41 pm
I know what’s real.

*Jack* September 29, 2026 at 4:09 am
I know what’s real.

*Jack* September 29, 2026 at 11:17 am
I know what’s real.

*Elaine* September 29, 2026 at 11:19 am
Is there a glitch in your blog server or are you posting “I know what’s real” again and again? Just so you know, it’s kind of freaking me out.

*Jack* September 29, 2026 at 5:16 pm
I know what’s real.

*Jack* September 30, 2026 at 4:49 am
I know what’s real.

*Elaine* September 30, 2026 at 7:39 am
Right, here it is. I’m sorry. I was harsh before. Well, more than harsh. Actually, I was rotten, rat-arsed drunk. I got a bottle of vodka in my last haul, and it smashed out my brain and made free with my typing fingers. The way you talk about Mei’s always been out of line, but I get that you really want her to be there. I’d like to believe it, too. But like Ash says, you gotta come back to reality.

I didn’t mean it about your folks still being alive – it’s a dark, nasty suspicion I’ve been harbouring, but it was shitty of me to confront you with it. There’s obviously something you don’t want to tell us, and I guess that’s for you to decide. I just never know what’s really going on with you, and I wanted to say something bad enough you might come
clean just to deny it. I went too far, and I’m sorry.
So can you stop with the spooky and start talking again?

**Jack** September 30, 2026 at 10:55 am

I know what’s real.

**Elaine** September 30, 2026 at 11:49 am

Does that mean you’ve stopped believing Mei’s on your farm, or that you’ve stopped listening to anybody else?

**Jack** September 30, 2026 at 6:18 pm

I know what’s real.

**Elaine** September 30, 2026 at 6:42 pm

See, I think I know what you’re going through. Spend long enough on your own, you start to hallucinate, or to interpret outlines and sounds to be what you want to see. Is that what this is like? Or is it pure wishful thinking, of the if-I-believe-it-enough-it’ll-come-true variety? I was holed up in that store jumping at shadows long enough to know both.

**Jack** October 1, 2026 at 8:57 am

I know what’s real.

**Jack** October 1, 2026 at 5:43 pm

I know what’s real.

**Elaine** October 1, 2026 at 7:16 pm

Seriously, mate, talk to me. I know what it’s like. I do this shit all the time, imagine things are different, try to convince myself it’s true. I just don’t put it on my blog, mostly cause that’s a sure way to burst the bubble. I mean, you knew we weren’t gonna say, “Hey, that’s great, Jack, tell her to wing on over and pick up
the rest of us, let’s head back to ground zero and party!” I know this isn’t just self-delusion, it’s a cry for help. So here’s help. Talk to me.

*Jack* October 2, 2026 at 5:18 am
I know what’s real.

*Elaine* October 2, 2026 at 6:12 am
Are you even reading these?

*Jack* October 2, 2026 at 6:25 pm
I know what’s real.

*Elaine* October 2, 2026 at 6:27 pm
If you don’t want my apologies or my help, just tell me to fuck off. Talk to me or block me. I won’t give up.

*Jack* October 3, 2026 at 8:59 am
I know what’s real.

*Elaine* October 3, 2026 at 5:57 pm
Good luck with that.

*Elaine* October 4, 2026 at 6:17 pm
Jack, you there?

*Elaine* October 4, 2026 at 6:26 pm
You should probably be knowing what’s real about now.

*Elaine* October 4, 2026 at 7:20 pm


Don’t be a fuckwit, Jack. Answer me. I’m worried, OK?
What’s real in my world

I’ve had a couple of sunny days to charge up the handset, so I guess I can afford to write something longer than a comment. My mate Jack’s been spectacularly losing his grip, so I’ve been checking in with a daily Lonely Planet guide to the Edge of Reason, given I’m pretty familiar with that territory, but it’s not going so well.

Back in the real world, I’ve been finding a new hole to hide in every night, moving away from the store and hopefully from anybody who might feel vengeful.

The wound’s healing up nicely, but I still got to be careful how much I try and carry, which is awkward given I never know where my next meal’s coming from. Every couple of days or so I bump into somebody else, and we either fight or run away or spend an awkward hour sharing out a haul and making stilted conversation, trying not to look like our right hands are hovering over our guns.

The usual routine goes:

“So, you been down Weston Creek?”

“Yep, nothin’ left. Tried Yarralumla?”

“Yep, nothin’ left there, either.”

Nobody’s going to say there’s anything left anywhere, cause if there is we want it for ourselves. I mostly try to stay out of sight. I’ve cut my hair to a fuzz and wear a big hat
and baggy clothes. I’ve not had any major trouble, but one guy did follow me around like a lost puppy for two days. In the end I had to shoot at him to get him to fuck off.

Only other thing I’ve used the guns for is taking pot-shots at the odd cockatoo, and scaring off anything that starts barking at me out of the shadows. Yep, there’s feral dogs about, and some of them are even canine. It’s not true about them being two meals from wolves, though. That’d be easier to deal with, if they were just snarling, drooling monsters. I’d shoot the skinny bastards for soup if it were that simple. The harsher reality is that most of them would as soon have you for an owner as a dinner, but they’re neurotic and needy and narky, and liable to turn on you soon as something spooks them. Think furry, traumatised toddlers, with sharp teeth and an average running speed of 25 mph. Still more trustworthy than your average human, but I’ve got enough trouble just keeping myself fed right now.

Biggest danger, though: police patrols. Last raider who tried to be friendly told me, “You hear barking, shoot into the air and keep going; you hear an engine, drop your haul and get out. They find you, shoot to kill, and if you’re lucky you’ll die in the gunfight before they can take you to quarantine.”

I asked about the quarantine camps, but then the bastard tried to steal my pack and I had to ram him in the guts with my rifle butt until he let go. This is why I don’t get chatty so often.

I’ve only met one other woman out raiding. We shared a fire for a night, and sort of skirted round the topic of teaming up for protection, but one or other of us always changed the subject. She was in her late 60s, maybe, tough and cheerful, but when she sat down or got up you could tell she was feeling the strain. My shoulder was still pretty bad back then – I guess we were each wondering whether the other would slow us down.

Just before we parted company she said, “Your shoulder’ll get better, but I’ll only get older. Better I walk now than make you leave me behind.”

I nearly said, “I wouldn’t leave you behind.” But I wasn’t sure it was true, so I said nothing.
I haven’t met anybody who’s heard of a case of the flu recently, though word has it the quarantine camps are rife with dysentery and scurvy. Or were, last time anybody got out alive. There’s probably not many left there, now.

Pretty much the only places that survived almost intact were a few isolated farming towns, self-governing now, so long as they’re capable of self-defending. From what I read on the blogs and hear from the raiders’ rumour-mill, a few have come under police control, some under other gangs, but a few are still considered “free communities”. ’Course, nobody can say exactly where these free communities are, else they wouldn’t be for long, so we can’t be positive they really exist. Well, what can we be sure exists, these days? Just ask Jack. He thinks he knows what’s real.

10 responses to What’s real in my world

Ash · October 5, 2026 at 9:23 pm
I don’t think he’s biting. Give him time – he’ll either come around or he won’t. I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do about it.

Elaine · October 5, 2026 at 10:24 pm
No more than we can do about Mei. That’s the shitty thing. Everybody dropping off the radar and you can’t do sweet FA. Scariest thing is, I really can imagine what it’s like, losing your grip that way, and all that keeps me from it is you guys. What if you all disappear?

Ash · October 5, 2026 at 10:26 pm
Then you’ll have to find somebody else to keep you sane. It’s a shame you couldn’t team up with that older woman.

Elaine · October 5, 2026 at 10:27 pm
We’d have driven each other nuts.

Ash · October 5, 2026 at 10:29 pm
What about that place your prisoner was talking about?

Elaine · October 5, 2026 at 10:29 pm
“Dreamtime Town”? When I’ve really got nothing else to live for, I’ll consider that kind of suicide mission.
Fiona · October 6, 2026 at 12:16 am
I wonder if you could find a place like that yourself, Ash. Didn’t England use to have loads of intentional communities?

Ash · October 6, 2026 at 1:28 am
There were a few, I believe. I wonder how many of them survived the flu? Compulsory quarantine was implemented nationally rather than locally, so I doubt the eco-villages, housing co-ops and communes were left out. Anyhow, it’s a little late for me to go looking for them. We’re somewhat involved in Liverpool now…

Fiona · October 6, 2026 at 5:22 am
It must be very tough. Best wishes, Elaine. I hope you find something good.

Elaine · October 6, 2026 at 9:58 am
I’ll settle for tinned food and rainwater, but thanks. I hope it works out well for you and Clara.
08 Oct 2026

Settling in for the foreseeable, preparing for the unforeseen

Well, the journey was eventful, mostly with the necessity of keeping Sarah in vehicles and fuel, but eventually we reached Liverpool. We suspected that both the Mersey Tunnel and the Runcorn Bridge would be troublesome, so we went all the way around Warrington and parked our last car on the hard shoulder of the M62, by a wood a good hour's trek from the end of the motorway. Since we had a second handset again, we left one buried at the foot of a recognisable tree in a plastic bag, and agreed to make this our meeting point should anything go wrong.

Today we retrieved it, in light of our decision to stay here. We’ve been assigned a spacious house with running water (cold only) and occasional electricity (for an hour or two after dark), which feels absurdly luxurious, as does knowing where the next meal is coming from. We’ve all found gainful – if not entirely prudent – employment. I’m working at the last hospital standing, where there are injuries and ailments of many kinds, but no sign of blood flu since the storming of the quarantines. Sue’s part of a team installing off-grid power sources to supplement what comes in from the off-shore wind farms. Sarah is converting diesel engines to run on chip fat and, in her free time, training to join the militia, and nothing I or Sue or anybody else says will sway her against it. I’m not sure what to make of them. They try to avoid appearing to have a uniform, but it’s hard not to notice the pocket-belts and headsets, not to mention the visible weapons they all carry. Two dropped round the day we arrived to give us their SkIMp contact and a password, and told us that we could call on them if we saw any sign of raiders, or if other residents gave us any trouble that we couldn't manage ourselves. They took exception to being described as a police force, but were happy enough to answer questions and give us a bit of background on what’s been happening here.
Liverpool was one of the first cities to break out of quarantine. It’s been through something resembling a civil war that continues to flare up in isolated pockets on the outskirts of city. The militia tries to keep it there, and most people go about in relative safety within the barricades. It seems that, early on, several groups started coalescing into communities – some loosely democratic, some leaderless, some more authoritarian but unable to keep a leader for long – and when these communities discovered one another, there was a period of cautious standoff before a period of yet more cautious merging and co-operation. This uneasy alliance was galvanised by a particularly brutal gang made up largely of police, ad-hoc security and local fascist groups, dangerous enough to bring almost all the other disparate factions into coalition against them. The militia was formed to oppose the threat, and because no group wanted the others to have control of it, it was independent of them all. They’re self-organised, with no ranks or leaders, only working groups and conveners. They’re all volunteers. They fight off raiders, make supply runs outside the barricades, mediate disputes and even scavenge, repair and supply bicycles (more important than you might think, given the scarcity of petrol). I’m uneasy about them.

We’ve been to a weekly “general meeting” to try to get a handle on who or what all the different factions here represent. There’s a committee that oversees administration – it consists of maybe ten or twelve people, each nominated by a community or influential group. Many of the major players were once trade unionists, party activists or civil servants – people used to public speaking. I recognised a number of familiar characters through their oratory styles: the debate-lover who throws a controversial question into the mix every time a discussion nears consensus; the softly-spoken voice of indignation that wears the opposition down with repetition; the chorus of younger voices, dotted around the room, applauding one another’s interruptions to make their numbers seem greater than they are. Then I recognised Khalil amongst the militia, speaking animatedly against a committee proposal to issue a new currency. I was surprised to see him head into the private committee chamber after the meeting. Sarah informed me that he was a delegate rather than a committee member in his own right.

“It’s a rotating role,” she told me. “He has a mandate, and he’ll report back to the militia on what the council’s up to.”

“And if they’re up to no good?” I asked.

“Then the militia’ll stop them.”
“You sound very confident about that.”
She told me to stop making “dad face”, which is apparently an involuntary expression of
cynicism that I use to undermine her choices. “Anyway,” she added, “since when do you
want to see politicians in charge? The militia are just doing what you do, keeping an eye
on the power.”
“And who keeps an eye on the militia?” I asked.
“Everyone,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Especially people like you.”
I get the impression that the committee consider the militia something of a liability, but
too useful to disband, and they’re right on that point. Without them, we may well have
been walking into another Chester. As it is, we’ve walked into an uneasy alliance that
may stabilise or fall in the coming months.

Since our appearance at the meeting we’ve had visits and official messages of welcome
from representatives of a number of factions. A few months ago this might have seemed
reassuring, but Chester brought back some old instincts, and I recognise when my
political affiliations are being probed, my threat assessed and my favour courted. There
are a number of factions here that wouldn’t mind counting a family like us among their
own, which is encouraging until you consider how little they’d like to count us as
somebody else’s. For now, Sue and I are working hard, smiling a lot, keeping our mouths
shut and our ears open. But I’m concerned that Sarah’s allegiances are all too obvious.

3 responses to “Settling in for the foreseeable, preparing for the unforeseen”

Fiona October 9, 2026 at 2:57 am
Well, this is interesting.

Elaine October 9, 2026 at 1:35 pm
Yeah – guess it’s good to know things on the other side of the world are getting
going again, even if it’s a bit shaky. It could be a lot worse.

Ash October 9, 2026 at 1:37 pm
It could still get a lot worse. That’s what worries me.
They say you can never go home, but we all know they're full of shit.

I wasn't heading towards the area, I just happened to get here. It's like when you've got an ex you don't want to bump into, but you kind of do, so you go to the places they hang out, telling yourself all the while they won't be there so you can act surprised when you see them. I turned the corner onto my street, and it was just, like: "Oh hey, Low-Rent Studio Unit, fancy seeing you here! Not moved on yet? Well, I have. Not that I came here to tell you that. Actually, I'm just here to raid the house across the street. I thought I may as well collect some of my things, while I was passing. I didn't even think you'd be home." But it is. It's home, and even as I tell myself I can't bring back the past and it'll only open old wounds and leave me confused and vulnerable, I know I'm going to stay the night.

I can see now that I was just putting off the inevitable. I had to come back before I could move on. I just couldn't imagine a scenario where I'd open the front door and it wouldn't be depressing as fuck. I thought, it'll either have been raided by someone like me, and it'll look like a burglary: every lock broken, every cupboard and drawer turned out in search of edibles or useables or valuables, then abandoned as a wreck not worth the effort of salvage, like a metaphor for my life. Or it'll be somebody like the Triggers, before they went rogue, and they'll have been in and cleared everything to be logged and sorted and stored for the quarantines, leaving it empty and hollow with only the
ghostly echo of the presence of my soul, like a metaphor for my life. Or there could be somebody living there, eating the last of my food and wearing my clothes and sleeping in my bed, reading my books, watching my movies, listening to my music, taking in everything I am and gradually replacing me from the outside in, challenging me to surrender everything I was or fight to reclaim myself, thereby ultimately destroying a reflection or aspect of myself. Like a metaphor for my life.

As it turned out, none of those things had happened. Where I live isn’t exactly rich pickings, so it might have been passed over by the salvage squads and not yet resorted to by the scavengers. It’s almost exactly as I left it, except for the radioactive slime monster in the fridge and the patches of mould and fungus that a winter without heating has brought out of the wallpaper and soft furnishings. It’s kind of weird. I got out my spare camp stove, and it still had half a canister of gas left. I made coffee – actual coffee – and drank it from the blue speckled-glaze mug I stole from work for my birthday. I made a bean chilli and rice from the food in my cupboards, with cumin and smoked paprika and passata with basil, a splash of cabernet and fresh oregano from my window box, the new spring leaves.

When it started to get dark, I lit some scented candles from the cupboard of generic gifts, collected over the years from colleagues and casual drinking buddies and ex-partners’ mothers who’ve felt they should get me something but don’t know what I like. I filled a hot water bottle. I put on my pyjamas and my dressing gown and my slippers, and got into my bed and dreamt strange dreams. I dreamt that I’d spent five months barricaded into Colmart and then wandered the deserted streets of Canberra looting kitchens to survive. Then I dreamt that was only a dream. Then I woke in the bright sun through unlined, badly-sewn velvet curtains and looked around and, for a good while, I really didn’t know what had happened, and I tried to get back to sleep before I’d remember for sure, but I couldn’t.

I got up and put on clean clothes. Then I filled every container I could find with water. I dug out the solar shower I’ve never used (cause I sneer at campers who won’t get in the river) and put it out front in the spring sunshine. Then I opened every window in the house, got out every cleaning product from under the kitchen sink, shook out every sheet and duvet and rug and throw, scrubbed the mould off the walls, emptied and cleaned the fridge and freezer and kitchen cupboards, washed my raiding clothes and
sleeping bag in the bath and hung them out on the neighbour’s washing line. I went through just about everything in the place, burning junk I’d never want again in the yard, packing what I could use in my rucksack, stowing everything else away neatly in clean drawers and cupboards. Then I brought the solar shower into the bathroom and hung it off the useless electric one and got properly clean in warm water for the first time in months, with flower-scented soaps and seashell-shaped sponges (more generic gifts). I made more real food to eat and to pack. Then I sat down at my table to write this.

And now I’m hearing that seductive little traitor voice that says I can stay here just a little longer, just casually, no commitment, no ties – no rent, even – and nothing outside has to be real tonight. I could lock my door and make it all go away. “Just for eight hours,” says the duvet. “Or twenty-four,” says the liquor cabinet. “Or forever,” says the bathroom cabinet. And that’s why I can’t stay. If I keep still, then by the time I’m out of options I won’t be able to face going out to find more, and this time there might not be a gang of raiders to chase me away. Or there might be one too soon. I don’t have my in-store security system here, and my smoke’s probably already caught somebody’s attention. It’s too dangerous not to move on.

I’m re-stocked and clean, and I’ve got fresh clothes and thick socks and boots that fit. This is the time to head out again. No staying still, no going back.

No idea where I’m headed.

8 responses to Going Home

Ash · October 16, 2026 at 10:46 am

Moving on must have been difficult. When we moved in here I started to miss our old home and its contents much more than when we had the caravan, because it feels like starting from scratch. It’s not the big expensive things I think of, it’s the work we put into the place: the shelves we put up, the curtains we made, furniture rescued from skips that we lovingly sanded and varnished, and the garden, of course. I hope somebody’s making good use of my vegetable patch.

You’ll find your direction. Dare I suggest it again, perhaps when you find somebody to journey with?
I don’t know, Ash. Even if I could bring myself to trust some total stranger, I’m finding it pretty hard to believe I could give them reason to trust me.

Why shouldn’t they?

Elaine, in all seriousness, I’m concerned for your safety. I’d like to know you’re not alone.

That’s sweet, in a condescending kind of way, but I’ve got stronger and fitter since you last saw me, I sleep light and I’ve still got my gun.

That’s not what I meant, and I think you know it.

You mean the comment about the bathroom cabinet? I’ve been struggling with those thoughts a long time. Long before everything beyond my own head-space went to shit.

Sorry if it makes you uncomfortable.

It doesn’t make me uncomfortable. It makes me concerned, especially now that there are so few of us to look out for each other. But you know I’m always here. 12,500 miles, but only a SkIMp away.

I know. And I know you’re up in the middle of the night, checking I’m OK. Seriously, you can go to bed, Ash. I’ll SkIMp if I need you. I promise.
Assessing the situation

Nobody seems to notice that we’re balanced on a knife-edge here. Maybe we’re used to death now, or perhaps we can’t help our denial, and after all this we’re still looking the other way until forced to personally confront the dangers. It was brought home to me when a truck screeched into the ambulance bay with half a dozen injured militia fighters from the Kensington barricade. There’d been a skirmish with a group that’s been seen raiding empty houses in the Wavertree area for a couple of weeks. They tried to get over the barricade to the central food stores, and they came armed. The militia saw them off over a couple of hours, and came in with stab wounds, bruising, some minor fractures. An abdominal gunshot wound.

Anybody with medical training is a doctor now, there’s no distinction of rank or qualification. The qualified doctors here were mostly GPs, and some specialist consultants in cardiovascular or neurological conditions. As an A&E nurse I have the most experience of serious injury, and it made sense that I was called to take charge. I see that now. At the time, when an urgent call for me to come to surgery echoed through the corridors, there was only one reason for it that I could imagine. I don’t remember how I reached the trauma centre, only the colour draining from the world and the ringing of blood in my ears. We did all we could, but none of us are surgeons. The bullet had punctured her stomach, and the acid had affected the surrounding tissues. She died of multiple organ failure an hour after she was brought in. She was an old hand, her friends told me, one of their best, a veteran of the quarantine liberations. She was twenty-two. I gave a small group of her closest comrades the explanations and condolences, shared their tears and listened to their grief and praise, but all I could feel was the relief that flooded through me when I saw her face. *It’s not Sarah* was all I could think.
There were supposed to be elections yesterday, but the committee decided to call them off for the funeral and the cleanup operation: a political decision. There are at least four committee members who believe they have claims on being the Mayor or Chair or People’s Representative of Liverpool, and as far as I can make out there have been no less than twelve elections since the committee was formed, all of which have been contested until declared invalid. People have election fatigue. The militia are thinking of calling for the dissolution of the committee, for general meetings to be the only decision-making body, with the chair to be decided each meeting, by lottery if necessary, between delegates from each workplace and neighbourhood.

“It’d be a physical version of the non-hierarchical student forums,” Sarah told me when she returned from the militia meeting yesterday. I built up the fire while she orated at me. “We have to have direct democracy on every decision that affects us. Any successful election would consolidate too much power with a single faction and prompt internal conflicts. The committee are wasting everybody’s time on their egos when we need to be talking defence tactics. We can’t fight party political battles with raiders on our doorstep.

“What do you think, dad?” she asked, with a sideways glance at Sue, sitting at the table under the one bright lamp in the house. Sue set her jaw and concentrated on the solar charger she was repairing. Clearly this conversation had a history I was not privy to.

“I’m not sure,” I said carefully, watching the flames take hold of the fresh logs. “I see your point of view, but I see and speak to a lot more people who have little to do with the militia, and to most of them a proposal to dissolve the committee… It might look like a military coup. People will think you’re trying to get rid of the committee to take power for yourselves.”

Sue smiled grimly. Sarah’s yells of denial were aimed at her, but she kept her eyes on her soldering and I answered instead.

“Nobody’s doubting your motives,” I said reasonably, “but by the very nature of your organisational structure you – and those who feel as you do – don’t represent everybody. The militia is also a faction, a powerful one, not immune from political manoeuvring, from within and without. It could end up as a takeover, regardless of intention.”

She rolled her eyes and sat by the fire with me.

“If we wanted to take over, it’d be easier to do it like everyone else, going on about how important we are and how much more we could do if we had more powers. They say
we’re the ones after power, but we do all the work and we’re the only ones not putting ourselves on a bloody ballot!"

I understand how she feels. The majority of survivors are middle-aged or older and, rightly or wrongly, there’s a strong impulse to trust well-spoken politicians explaining what they can do for us over an armed youth movement saying we should do things for ourselves. Sue and I may like to feel we know better, but we have a more urgent interest to defend than our own politics. The committee may be a dangerously volatile collection of self-promoting bureaucrats, but they’re not the ones training our daughter to risk her life for their cause.

Sue put down her soldering iron.

“Sarah, for all their faults,” she said softly, “the committee aren’t the raiders. They have good intentions.”

“Yeah, and we know where those lead.”

“Well,” I put in, “all roads can lead two ways, depending on how you walk them.”

I sounded just like the placatory liberals I used to hate, and was inwardly proud of Sarah for responding with a disgusted tut. We might have laughed, then, and changed the subject, if Sue hadn’t said what I’d lacked the courage to.

“And the road you want to go down, Sarah, the road to revolution and a better world, you know what that road’s paved with? Beautiful, brave, dead children.”

In the silence, she pushed back her chair and headed up the stairs. Sarah went to the door and shouted after her, “We’re not children!”

She looked as if she might cry, but when I went to her she turned away. She sat back down and poked the fire fiercely.

“Of course you are,” I said. “Even the ones over forty. Anybody who still has the heart left to fight is driven by a powerful innocence.”

She scowled at that. I tried to explain to her: it isn’t an insult, we’re not even saying she’s wrong. But for those of us who’ve seen the battles lost too many times before, the cost is too much to bear.

She sees only the cost of doing nothing. She says she won’t spend her life watching her friends die because they never took the opportunity to win when they had the chance. She’ll make a world where we don’t have to fight anymore, or she’ll die trying.

She said, “I didn’t escape from Chester to sit and watch everywhere go that way. We lost everything, and all we’ve got out of it is being here, now, being where we can make it
different. If we throw that away, we got nothing, and we might as well have died back in London. Do you understand me, Dad?”

I do. But I still feel as Sue does. I’m terrified by her certainty, her resolve, and I want nothing more than to keep her home and safe. But how long will this home be safe? I see my mother shining out of her eyes, and I can’t tell her that she’s wrong, or naïve, or incapable, because she is none of those things. She is idealistic, and innocent, and courageous. And if the rest of the militia were truly like her, there might even be hope for them, for all of us. But I can’t quite bring myself to believe it.

7 responses to “Assessing the Situation”

Elaine October 23, 2026 at 12:35 am
You know, even if she wasn’t involved with this militia, you couldn’t keep her safe. There is no safe anymore. I feel for you, Ash, but I got to say I kind of envy her that sense of purpose and hope. I could be happy for her. I don’t know if you and Sue can go that far.

Ash October 23, 2026 at 12:57 am
We’re not convinced we should be going as far as letting her train with them, but what can we do?

Elaine October 23, 2026 at 12:58 am
Nothing I can think of. She’s got to be spitting distance from eighteen by now, and I doubt trying to stop her would do anything but make her more determined.

Ash October 23, 2026 at 1:07 am
Maira and Rafel tried to forbid Khalil from joining the militia, so he just took his things and went to one of their communal houses. They relented within a few
days and they're all reconciled now, but he didn’t move back home – he likes it there. We won’t do anything to push Sarah away from us any faster.

Elaine October 23, 2026 at 1:07 am
Then it looks like you’ve got no choice. Here’s to her revolution, and enjoying your little bit of stability while it lasts.

Fiona October 23, 2026 at 4:53 am
It does sound like a good idea, this general assembly, if the council has proven ineffective...

Ash October 24, 2026 at 6:39 pm
It’s not so much the idea as the transition to it that concerns me. The militia aren’t the only ones who’ll fight for their vision of the future.
Giving up on giving up

I’ve left Canberra. I’m sort of following the river, just to keep some kind of water supply, but trying not to be too visible from the major paths. Still no idea where I’m headed to, but I have new reasons to fear what I’m running from.

Yesterday, I was searching for a key-safe – they make the breaking and entering a little easier, and they tend to be found amongst the tackier lawn ornaments. I wasn’t having much luck, and was scattering woodland creatures in my wake when I heard the sound that every city scavenger dreads: engines. I scrambled for the cover of a water butt as the sound of a truck engine approached, a recorded message blaring out its windows. I listened, pressed against the wall, watching a meerkat I’d overturned roll to a stop at my feet, its paws raised in alert and a madness in its resin eye.

“...have to run and hide. This amnesty will last three days. If you are still in the contaminated zone after this time, we cannot guarantee your safety. This area must be sanitised. The quarantines are clean and safe. You will find food, shelter, medical care and clean water. Once the city can be sanitised, the quarantine will end. You will be able to return to your home. Go to your nearest quarantine centre and all refusal charges will be dropped. You no longer have to run and hide. This amnesty will last three days...”

I considered my options. Give up and go to quarantine? Not happening. I don’t believe a crackle about any amnesty, and even if I did I’m not just walking into it, not after all this.
Hide out somewhere to wait until this “sanitisation” is over? Where would I be safe? What will it involve? Are they going to fumigate each building? Nuke us from the air? How do you sanitise a whole city? I couldn’t risk assuming a bluff any more than I could risk trusting the announcement. It’d have to be option three: head into the bush until it’s over, then see what’s left to sneak back to.

So I headed towards the river to find that the paths out that way were looking freshly trodden. I wasn’t the only contestant to choose door number three. I saw some people out in front, and after passing them in a wide arc I saw some more. I haven’t seen more than one person at a time since the raid, and I never thought I’d see a crowd again. I didn’t think that many people were even left in Canberra. Something on the back of my neck started prickling, and I pulled my hat down and walked on the edge of the path, casting quick glances and listening to the chatter, but not meeting anybody’s eye. There were families there, little kids, people who’ve been hiding out in their own basements or escaped the quarantines. People were beginning to talk openly, the way you can when you’re two strangers on a journey in a crowd instead of two strangers with guns in a dusty store with one tin can left on the shelf. They were starting to get friendly, swap stories. They were letting their guard down. And I thought, “This isn’t right.” We were like a bunch of sheep trotting away from a crouching collie. Sooner or later we’d walk right into a pen.

I tried to talk to a few people, the ones who were front and centre of small huddles, to point out how visible we all were heading this way together. I suggested breaking up into smaller groups, taking different routes, staying under cover, travelling at night. Some nodded and started talking amongst themselves, then shrugged and carried on. Most said, “Safety in numbers” or “Jumpy, aren’t ya?” or even “If they’re coming for us, they’ll get us one way or another.” Towards nightfall people started making camp, and I thought about what to do. In the end I decided to keep my distance from the herd and scout ahead, in cover of darkness. If I spotted anything, I could get back and warn them, but mostly I hoped I could get safely round any trap before it was sprung. I guess I did that.

About 4am I heard a plane approaching, turned off my torch and dived for cover. It passed over, back the way I’d come, towards the refugees. Then a minute later I saw something like fireworks dropping from the sky, and the distance lit up, and a moment
after that I heard the muted rumbles and felt the shockwaves, like a train passing underground. I started running back, then away again, then back again. Then I did what I always do, what I’ve done since the day I took over the store – hid and waited it out, with my hands over my ears. I did go back this morning, but there wasn’t anybody left to save.

I don’t think this is even about decontamination. I think it’s about control. Anybody not under it is a threat. I don’t know how I’m going to live away from the city. I’ve got my rifle and hobbyist bushcraft, and there might be the odd farmhouse to raid on the way out. I doubt I’ll find much to eat, but I’ve got some supplies and I can survive a little longer.

A little before I started writing this, I wondered whether it was even worth the effort. I lay down where I stood, decided I wasn’t going to fish or forage or do anything. I never planned to make it even this far – it’s here and no further, I thought. That’s it, I’ve had enough. I can’t do it anymore. I just wanted to stop. I wanted to make it all stop.

Well, after an hour or so, I was kind of half asleep, but I opened my eyes and saw a huge brown snake slinking along, not a metre from me. Not sure what species, but all the ones like it are pretty deadly. I’ve seen them before, but never that close. It had tiny, perfect, light brown scales, like a baby pine cone, except where the sun glinted blue-green on the edges, then it was like a tropical fish, sliding through the dry ocean towards me. And I just thought... oh.

Fuck.

*Off.*

I rolled away, and by the time I’d picked up a stick it had slithered out of view, leaving me to contend with the idea that I really didn’t want to die after all. F***ed if I know what I do want. I guess I need to hang around a little longer and find out.

**responses**

*4 responses to Giving up on giving up*
Fiona · October 27, 2026 at 2:32 pm
Oh Elaine. Someone has a lot to answer for. Here, and in England, and China, and no doubt many other places too.
The flu killed so many people, but sometimes I feel like...not enough.
Best wishes for you on your journey.

Elaine · November 4, 2026 at 9:11 am
Thanks – you too. I think I’ve decided where I’m headed. I’ll post later.

Ash · October 28, 2026 at 2:07 am
I’m glad you’re still with us, and I hope you find the purpose you’re looking for. Perhaps the time’s come to seek out that community?

Elaine · October 28, 2026 at 2:11 am
Looks from here like there’s two kinds of people left: the ones who aren’t safe to be with cause they’re killers, and the ones who aren’t safe to be with cause they’re getting killed. I’m not in a hurry to join either.
Hope for the future

After a great deal of debate and disruption, the elections went ahead, and were once again inconclusive. The militia accepted amendments to their proposal, and the committee was not dissolved. It will, instead, be expanded to include delegates from each workplace, and the pre-existing members are now responsible for and answerable to neighbourhood committees rather than political interest groups. I’ve managed to end up elected to represent the hospital, and Sarah tells me that the militia are OK with this, provided the role is rotated periodically, which is fine by me. The sooner the better. Those meetings are interminable.

With all the work on re-organisation and safeguards and recallability procedures, there’s been very little time for the major administrative functions we’re supposed to be here for. I sometimes think the only thing the committee really organises is itself, and that not too efficiently. And yet, whether by general consensus or individuals getting on with what’s necessary without waiting for sanction, life goes on. I take a much more optimistic view of our situation now. Houses enough for all comers have been cleared and sanitised and re-furnished, water’s going through the system, power’s getting into the grid – albeit sporadically – from the off-shore wind farms. There’s a programme to keep food coming in from various allotments within the city and surrounding farms (and we even have our own chickens). Several schools are running. The militia guards the borders and the fuel depot, and even manages to send a few buses round the city twice a day. Most importantly (and the real cause for my change of mood) Sarah promises to stick to the transport and stay out of the higher-risk militia duties – for a while, at least. It was Khalil who persuaded her and their militia comrades that her skills are too important to risk, and she should teach engine maintenance for a couple of years before taking on border patrols. Merely a reprieve for Sue and me, but cause for celebration nonetheless.
And speaking of celebration, Sarah announced this plan to us on her eighteenth birthday. We made a cake and had a small party with Khalil and his family, before he and Sarah left us for more stimulating company and wilder activities that I’m not allowed to ask about. It was good to have a quiet evening with Maira and Rafel, anyhow. They are amongst the few people here who call on us without any agenda, and they feel like old friends already. Sarah has many more friends, of course. It seems almost every night she has a meeting or a duty or a party to go to. There’s plenty of partying among the youth here, and among the not so young, too: bonfires in the street and vegetable vodka and mushrooms and garden-grown cannabis. I’m not sure whether we’re celebrating our survival or trying to forget our anxieties. After so long cooped up with Sue and Sarah in cars and caravans, it feels strange to have separate rooms to go to and separate lives to lead again. It makes me a little sad, to be honest. I’d just got my family back, in so many ways, and I fear losing them again. But we must all go to work – not for money or to meet quotas, but because our work is essential, and appreciated, all the more so for the lack of anything to pay us with.

No credit system has passed the pragmatism test here. Without all those complex variables in the way, inequalities and disadvantages are easier to spot, and systems easier to overturn. Why should doctors have more food than fruit-pickers? And how would we take it from them? That’s the real reason no election has been successful. With an independent militia and no currency, there’s no way to control distribution, and so no way to make promises to any particular sector or organise us against one another. It’s working out of necessity rather than consensus at the moment, but the longer it works, the more the consensus tends towards the way things are. If we can fend off the raiders long enough to achieve stability... who knows, we may even have a future here.

8 responses to “Hope for the future”

Elaine October 29, 2026 at 10:37 pm
Well, how about that, you found your utopia after all!

Ash October 29, 2026 at 11:51 pm
Hardly! Did I mention the raiding gangs, the constant street fighting, the piles of rotting waste in the street, the terrible food, the endless wrangling over who’s entitled to how much of anything? But there does seem to be just about enough to go around, for the time being, and there’s as much chance of things getting better as worse.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 12:00 am
You sure you’re not doing a Jack?

Ash October 30, 2026 at 12:02 am
Hah! If this was wish fulfilment I’d include gas central heating and municipal rubbish collections, not to mention a strictly enforced ban on under-21s in the militia – make that under-30s, or just make it anybody close to me. Which I realise is unreasonable and impossible. What I have is as much as I could realistically hope for.

I wonder how Jack is doing?

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 12:10 am
I don’t like to think about it. I get this black hole in the pit of my stomach. I was really angry with him, fucking fuming, but when he just stopped responding like that... I feel responsible. I yanked that comfort blanket out from under him, pretty hard.

Ash October 30, 2026 at 12:11 am
The fall back to reality may have knocked the wind out of him, but I doubt it killed him. He may well have just preserved his fantasy by ceasing to blog about it. Perhaps it’s what he needs, and perhaps one day he’ll no longer need it and get in touch again. He’s a survivor at heart. We all are.
Elaine October 30, 2026 at 12:13 am

I guess so. I’d like to hear how he’s doing, though. And I wish we could hear something from Mei, or anybody who knew her. I know that’s not going to happen. But I want to know how she died. I want to be able to say goodbye.

Ash October 30, 2026 at 12:14 am

You did. You are. So am I. She may be out there to see it, or she may not be. As in so many things, we have to settle for what’s possible now.
Coming clean

So, I see all my friends – those of them I’ve got left, anyhow – are wondering if I’m a lair or if I’m dead. They’re right on one count, and as for the other...well, it won’t be long now.

So I exaggerated a little about how well I was keeping the farm going, and having massive stores of food and fuel. I didn’t get much from the town, cause I couldn’t get gas in the truck. I took the car on a couple of runs before that ran out, too. Walking there and back with a trolley takes hours, and it’s been too dangerous since the gangs moved out of the city. For weeks I’ve been living mostly on mouldy beans and the odd squirrel – or woodchuck.

Most of the food I put aside when I was prepping got taken in the raids. The first one, I turned out my lights, locked the door and shivered under my bed till they left. I was afraid they’d be carrying the flu, or that they’d just shoot me, or that I’d have to shoot them. The second one – the one about a month ago – I was already kind of not quite here, I mean I half believed the stuff I was posting. I thought I could take them, and I started shooting from the window but they jumped me. They’d come in through the
back while they used my rigged alarms to lure me out front, and they knocked the gun out of my hand before I could even take aim. They forced me to show them where my hidden stores were. They took almost everything. Worse, they made me go up to the main house, with a rifle in my back, to call out and see if anyone was home.

They realised there wasn’t soon as we got within 50 yards of the place. The smell. They still made me go in with them. They made me face the wall, and one of them held a gun to me while the others searched the place. I could hear the flies buzzing around, and the smell made me wretch. I couldn’t stand upright. Eventually the guy with the gun let me kneel down to puke. They put masks on and ignored the flies, like it was nothing, they see this shit all the time. They took all the food in sealed containers from the kitchen and the basement, most of the tools in the garage, the truck and most of my weapons. They left me alone in there, said they’d shoot at me if I came out before they’d gone. I kept telling myself it wasn’t real. I’d buried them, I did funerals and everything. The wooden crosses and laminated photos were there, out in the herb patch. But I didn’t bury them. I just left them in there and didn’t go over that side of the farm again. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t look at them.

And I couldn’t say any of that, here. Mei was reading, and she was just dealing with it all, like it came easy to her. She didn’t need anything from me. And if she saw that I wasn’t coping, that things were falling apart for me... I’d look so weak and stupid. So I lied. I wanted to impress her. I wanted her to change her mind about me. I thought, my life might have been going nowhere in the old world, but now that the shit’s hit, it’s my time, and I can be the one to keep it going, and bring it back from the brink. That’s what I wanted her to see. And I wanted her to regret brushing me off, and know she’d have been OK if she’d only come to join me when I asked her to. So yeah, I guess it was pretty pathetic. And petty, and mean. And it didn’t even work. Whatever I said to big up my life, she never regretted staying in Beijing for a second. She could barely find time to think about me. So the whole sham was pointless then, and it’s even more pointless now.

So I guess now I get what I deserve: to sit in an empty house on a wasted farm with no family, no friends, no food and no way out. All I got now is one loaded pistol, a backup I hid when I was prepping. So perhaps I got a way out after all.

30 thoughts on “Coming clean”
Elaine October 30, 2026 at 6:35 pm
Jack, c’mon, dude. Pick up my SkIMp calls.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 6:36 pm
I don't feel like talking.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 6:40 pm
I know how you feel, but I don’t know how to do this. It gets dark when you’re stuck in your own head, but there are other ways out. Just think about it a little longer.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 6:42 pm
I've been thinking about it for weeks. You know there’s no reason for me to stick around. You're the last person to persuade anybody there’s a reason to carry on. You've known it was all pointless from the beginning.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 6:43 pm
And yet, here I still am. And I think it’s because of you guys. We need each other.

Ash October 30, 2026 at 6:44 pm
Mei wouldn’t want you to do this, Jack. She needs you, too.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 6:45 pm
Mei doesn’t need anything. Mei’s dead.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 6:46 pm
You don’t know that. She could be reading this, and not able to post anything back. You don’t want her to have to live with that, do you?

Jack October 30, 2026 at 6:47 pm
She said it herself. You don’t hear from somebody, somebody’s dead. She’s dead. And you won’t be hearing from me again.

Ash October 30, 2026 at 6:48 pm
Never mind Mei, we need you.

*Elaine* October 30, 2026 at 6:50 pm

Yeah, dude, you were there for me when I thought I was dying in that basement. I couldn’t have got through the night without you.

*Jack* October 30, 2026 at 6:58 pm

That’s bullshit. Ash has his family, and you don’t need anybody. And Mei’s dead, and my family are dead. There’s nobody needs me, and nothing I could do for them if they did.

*Elaine* October 30, 2026 at 6:59 pm

That’s not true. We need you. Just wait till morning, you’ll feel better.

*Ash* October 30, 2026 at 7:05 pm

Jack, are you still there? We will be waiting to hear from you, we need to know how you’re doing. You need to tell us what you have left to eat, what’s left on the farm, and see if we can help.

*Mei* October 30, 2026 at 7:12 pm

I’m here. I’m alive. I hear you.

Now, for everything else, you must stop this. You always think I am the most important thing in your world. But I am not in your world, and you are not in mine, not for a long time. We have a silly, fun eight weeks in another world together, but we always know we will never see each other again. When I begin university, I think maybe I will see you in the summer, explain then that I will always remember the project in Vietnam but my life is different now. There was no way to know what was coming.

So to say you will shoot yourself because I never give you all my attention and was cruel to not have time for you as the world I have been working for all my life falls into pieces in front of me, let me explain my feelings... At one time this would make me afraid for you, I would take the blame, I would write to say I still have feelings for you, that I want us to be together again, that I will find a way to get to you. Now? I have had so much
responsibility for so many, I cannot take the responsibility for your feelings too.
Much has happened, much that I never write in a blog because there is too much to say,
too much to do. My father and grandmother are dead, fighting to bring food into the
town. My best friend Li is dead, fighting to keep the campus free of disease. My
boyfriend is dead from the flu after helping the sick during the second quarantine (yes,
Jian was my boyfriend – I did not say so, because it would hurt you). My dorm-mates are
dead – I never even talk about them because they leave before the occupation. My
favourite teacher is dead. The man who sold noodles in the square outside the campus
is dead. The woman who always saved for me a bag of cucumber flavour crisps and
some apple chips at the campus shop, not because I ask her but because she sees that I
run in a hurry to get them every day before my lecture, and I never knew her name, she
is dead. My cat is dead. The soldiers I shot with a stolen gun to defend myself and my
friends from them and their friends, they are dead. So many people I cared about and
did not care about and loved and hated and did not know are dead.
Who are you, now, to threaten me with your death? You will not show me or teach me
or make me feel anything new by dying. Death is not important anymore. I cannot feel
any more death. All I can hope to feel now is life. All I hope to do is survive, and I can
only do this if I can turn away from the death around me. So if you die, I must turn away
from you.
I like you, Jack. I would like for you to survive. But not because of me. I am nothing to
you. You will never see me again. If you want to show me you can survive, show me you
can do it without me. Do it for yourself. Do it for your parents. Or do not. Be one more
death in billions. But don’t die for me, Jack, and don’t expect me to have grief for you – I
have no more grief left.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 7:18 pm
Mei, what the hell? Where’ve you been? Why didn’t you tell us you were alive?

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:19 pm
OK, is one of you hacking into Mei’s account to fuck with me?

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 7:19 pm
Believe me, if I was gonna do that, that isn’t what I would’ve said.
Ash October 30, 2026 at 7:21 pm
Here’s a reason not to do it, Jack. It turns out that the four of us are all still alive. Don’t spoil it.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:22 pm
I don’t know what I’m going to do. Even if I had a reason to go on, I don’t have anything to eat, or any way clear up the mess I’ve left.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 7:28 pm
You know, I’ve found not knowing how I’m going to survive to be strangely liberating. I’d planned and rationed everything so well at the store, it seemed like losing it was the end of the world, all over again. Then it wasn’t, and I carried on... again. And now I have nothing and nowhere, and I can go anywhere and maybe do anything. I’m not saying anything I do will turn out well, but what’s to lose? Nothing I wasn’t about to throw away anyhow.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:28 pm
Nothing to lose as a reason to live? Seriously? You can’t do any better than that?

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 7:31 pm
If I could, you think I’d have spent the last seven weeks eating vegemite out of jars with my fingers in strangers’ kitchens? You’re not the only one who’s a fucking mess.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:32 pm
Then why don’t you go looking for a community?

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 7:32 pm
Alright. I will if you will.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:33 pm
Seriously?
Sure, why not. But you can’t just say you did. This is a “photos or it didn’t happen” deal.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:36 pm
You first.

Elaine October 30, 2026 at 7:37 pm
We’ll see who gets there first. Race ya.

Jack October 30, 2026 at 7:38 pm
OK, you’re on.
I will post this now, so that you do not have time to all ask me where I have been, what I
have been doing, why I would not answer you.

A little after I last used this blog, the Party faction print a notice and put it all over the
campus. They say the servers in the library have blown, that the Quarantine Movement
volunteers did not take care of them. This is bullshit – I saw party members leave the
library that night. They do this to destroy the forum, to take away our means to organise
without them. I start to create another forum, on another server, and to make a poster
with the URL. When I get back to my room, my workset and papers are gone, my
paintings destroyed, my paints are thrown over the room, the walls. I take some clothes
and supplies in my bag and leave the dorm building, and on my way out I find many
posters that I have just put up are torn in pieces on the ground. Then I hear a shout, and
a big group is running towards me. I recognise the Party woman from the meeting, who
would not let me speak, and some others, but some I am sure are not from the campus.
They have student clothes, but they wear army boots. I run, and there is a gunshot
behind me, and I run again, and when I leave the campus they stop chasing me, just
shout insults behind me.

When I am far away I check my handset. I do not know who left the warning on my blog,
but I did not dare to use it again. I SkIMped only with those I could trust on the campus.
I tried to help run the forum from outside, we even tried to take another building secretly, but there are not enough of us to hold it.

Then I see Jack's post about me, and I remember how much I once cared for him, and realise how little I now care, and I shock myself. I am hard inside and out, now. I have given to others all I have to give. I decide I will leave the latest occupation, and go home, to my mother. I know it will take me a long time. Some vehicles still go between communities, but it is dangerous to give or accept a ride. Every time we think the flu is ended, there is another outbreak somewhere, because one person with anti-virals is still travelling. I steal a bicycle and I raid some food. I hide in empty buildings and try not to be seen. Sometimes I climb onto the back of a truck that goes south and hope I will not be discovered. Three days ago I reached home. I am in a quarantine hostel in the old prison, isolated from others. It is very comfortable, and with more food than I have since the first quarantine. My mother visits, and we talk through a glass window with a telephone. It is so strange, like a screen and a speaker, it could be the same as SkIMp, but the picture is so clear! We cry a lot and speak of everybody that is gone, and then we just sit to be quiet together on either side of the glass. We read, or I paint a picture of her knitting a scarf for me. Then it is not like SkIMp, it is like being together again.

There is much to do. There is no army now. Most died from the flu after there were no more anti-virals, the survivors joined or took over communities. The death is worst in the cities, but the flu also reached many rural areas, especially those near to cities where the army took supplies. All this news is from the forums and blogs – there is no word from government or official Newsnets for many weeks. Some places are controlled by a local party official, others are self-organising, as we were at first. Some farming communities begin to get food to the cities again – neighbourhoods organise trucks to bring in and distribute the food.

I hear news from the campus, because students who wanted me to be a leader still contact me. When the Party take full control they begin lectures again, with a faculty of surviving lecturers and graduate students, all loyal to them, of course. I cannot return there, but others organise against them. I have other things to do. I read medical websites and textbooks, and when my quarantine is over I will begin training at the hospital. Too many doctors have died. It is the best thing I can do.
I want to tell you, also, do not expect to hear more from me soon, and do not worry for me when I do not post to my blog. I think it is wrong for me to keep a blog at this time. It is a distraction, yes, but more than that – it is a way to deceive, and it is dangerous. It is not only Jack that makes me see this. I read again what I wrote of the first quarantine, and it is not a lie, we felt this way and we did these things, but if you read only my blog you might think we had the perfect organisation, real harmony, and it was not like this. The hidden political decisions, the splitting of the party and the quarantine movement – it was in the seed of the quarantine from the beginning, and we might have seen it if we did not paint the better picture for ourselves. We wanted so much to believe in our unity, I wanted to believe in it, and when we showed our quarantine to the world we made it as we wanted it to be, and hoped that this would make it true. We believed in what we created and did not look closely at what we did not want to see. This can happen without a blog or a forum, it happens to every revolution since the beginning of history, but we never learn because, like Jack, we make the comforting story for ourselves and we do not face the reality. I cannot say what that reality is – I am still looking inside and presenting a picture about myself, who is and is not the young woman you once knew, who I feel I must pretend to be on this blog although I no longer know her. On our blogs we lie about ourselves and about the world, to ourselves and to the world. I want to know myself as I am, and to see the world as it is; it is too dangerous for me to create it here. I want to say I love all of you and hope you can rebuild your worlds new, but in truth I do not think you are the same people I knew, and I have no space in my heart to think of your worlds. To say I love you is like trying to make a picture with the dry paint on a palette, a thin film of sentiment left after the real emotion is evaporated, it is not enough. It is the remains of something real, but it is not real. You see, how we make ourselves lie to ourselves and each other, because it is what the blog needs.

This is why I must say goodbye.

14 thoughts on “Saying goodbye”

Jack on October 31, 2026 at 11:51 pm said:

So just like that, you’re gone again? Are you even going to answer the comments?
Elaine on November 1, 2026 at 6:58 am said:
I guess not.

Ash on November 1, 2026 at 7:03 am said:
It seems she’s found the community she needed. I hope it turns out well for her this time.

Jack on November 1, 2026 at 7:06 am said:
But what about this community? What about the Bad Influences? We didn’t split and turn totalitarian and chase her off. Why does she need to run away from us?

Elaine on November 1, 2026 at 7:08 am said:
It does seem kind of harsh.

Jack on November 1, 2026 at 7:15 am said:
I don’t get it! We sit around worrying and mourning you for months, then you come back to slap me in the face for wanting to die without you and tell us all you can’t even feel any real love for any of us anymore? And now you won’t even speak to us? You know, we’ve all been through a lot of shit, but that’s way off. We deserve better.

Ash on November 1, 2026 at 7:24 am said:
Jack, you’re hardly in a position to criticise a voluntary disappearance from the blogosphere, or leaving friends worried. I’m just relieved we heard from Mei again at all, and thank her for explaining herself before doing whatever she needs to start building a new life. Would a pretence that we had a place in that life be any better than the pretences you were trying to maintain?

Jack on November 1, 2026 at 7:31 am said:
Yeah, it would! Cause you make the effort to show you care, and that makes it true. That’s why I came back to you guys when I stopped caring. I needed that connection again. I’m not exactly one to talk about being genuine, but it’s not just
a sham for the rest of us, even if we do it deliberately. We don't just blog because we care, we care because we blog.

Ash on November 1, 2026 at 7:42 am said:
No, it's not a pretence for me, but I understand how Mei feels. I have so much else to care about. Whether I'm at the hospital or in the house or doing a salvage duty, I think all the time of Sarah, training to go out onto the barricade and face off against armed gangs as they approach the city, and it's a constant worry, a heart-rending shock of love and pain and fear. And much as I care about you two, and Mei, I only think of you when I read your blogs. You're not the constant in my life. It doesn't mean I don't care, but I care in small, manageable pieces, when I have the time to put aside for it. I'm sure you feel the same about me.

Jack on November 1, 2026 at 7:56 am said:
About you guys, sure. I cared more about Mei. Except I'm beginning to think it wasn't even really Mei I cared about. She's not who I thought she was. I loved an idea of Mei.

Elaine on November 1, 2026 at 8:02 am said:
Y'know what, I never made a hooaha of it, but I thought about all of you, all the time, like obsessively, like more than people from the store or my parents or myself. When each one of you stopped posting, I was fucking sick. You were everything to me. And that's not right, I can see that, it was a fixation, and it doesn't mean you owe me anything, but it was really you I was caring about, it wasn't just a nice little pastime. You were all I had, and it meant something. It was real.

Jack on November 1, 2026 at 8:08 am said:
You found another bottle of vodka or something? I annoy the fuck out of you.

Elaine on November 1, 2026 at 8:13 am said:
And that's why it's real. I don't have any illusions about you, or anyone else. That's why I can't fucking stand people, and they can't stand me.
Ash on November 1, 2026 at 8:18 am said:

But that doesn’t mean you don’t need people. Or that they don’t need you. You’ve both spent a long time alone. I hope you both follow through on that promise about finding communities. I can’t guarantee it’ll be easy, but it’ll put a few things into perspective.

← Previous
Heading out into the unknown

So, Mei’s exit from the blogosphere got me thinking. I’ve been isolated since long before the pandemic hit. I did it to myself. Well, my folks helped, and the general shittiness of the world contributed, but really, I mostly did it to myself. I used to have some ambition, but I dropped that when it got too hard, and resented every minute of my life instead. I avoided the kind of conflicts that might’ve meant shit or changed anything, and I revelled in irrelevant sniping and trolling. I went in for the kill when I should’ve called truce and slated others’ weakness without trying to lend them any strength. And this was all part of a grand master plan to push away everybody who ever started to care about me, in case I got reliant. Then the world fell apart, more than once, and I was more reliant than I wanted to admit, and all my friends in the world were on this blog, and they were there for me. I’ve got a lot of skills, and I’m not weak, but I do need people. My own company’s not good for me. And, I realised, there are people who need me, too. They’re trying to start up communities and grow food and build shelters and run schools and fight off gangs in little pockets of green in the desert. And they put out a call for people like me to come and join them, and I laughed about it and decided that, if they were even real, I was better than them. Well, if I’m better than them, all the more reason to go along and help them out. I sent them my vid last night.

I’ve got enough supplies for a few days’ trek, a handset, a solar-powered backpack, a scorcher of a summer’s day and a set of co-ordinates that should lead me on the first leg of my journey to this Dreamtime Town place. Apparently there are tests along the way.
got to walk the direction they tell me past the point I’ll run out of water, and trust that there’s a water hole at the other end. If they reckon I’ve got ill intent, they’ll send me the wrong way. They’ll send scouts to meet me who have to get home safe and give a good report before I get the next clue; they intend to get to know me a little before they let me in, test my resolve, my trust and the skills I say I’m bringing. I guess I deserve that. If I find Frank at the other end, I’m going to swing for the bastard.

You know what, though? Like Mei, I’m not going to blog about the journey, or about the place when I get there. I got a coupla reasons for saying that. First is similar to Mei’s: I feel like a fake. Up until I lost the store, I was blogging to impress, not to communicate, just like the funny announcements I used to make in the old life instead of talking to my colleagues. It wasn’t that I didn’t really care, I cared so much I could’ve bled, but I never could connect with anything real while I was aware of being listened to, being public. I always thought I didn’t care what anybody thought of me, but truth is I care about nothing else. I wanted people to think of me as the kind of person who doesn’t care what people think of me. That’s what blogging, performing, will do to you. You create a persona – you can’t help it – and you get trapped inside it. It’s not a lie, exactly, but it’s not the whole truth. It’s a barrier. You’ve always got to be analysing and describing and advising, never just relating. Wherever I end up, and whatever happens there, I want it to be me who arrives, no pretences. I want to relate to people as myself, whether I like them or not. It’ll be hard work, because I’m not that likeable. Narrating it all for public consumption probably won’t do me any favours, either.

The other reason is kind of for you guys, because, despite all that Mei says, I do fucking love you people, and that’s how I know it’s hell when somebody you care about disappears from their blog without a word and you don’t know what happened to them. So if I say, “Hey guys, I’m going off into the outback where I could starve or get bitten by snakes or trampled by wild kangaroos or anything, looking for a place I probably won’t find, where I half suspect people will steal my stuff and kill me anyway – I’ll keep you posted!” then if you hear nothing, you’ll waste your time and power endlessly refreshing my blog and calling my name into the bleak and lonely digital void, and I wouldn’t want that.

If I just tell you all now that I’m going to stop blogging, as of the end of this paragraph – well, then you can imagine me tilling fields of golden wheat, or sipping a glass of
homebrew Mojito in a hammock under the desert sun, or making sarcastic wisecracks at a meeting full of earnest utopians – or go with trampled by wild kangaroos if you prefer, I wouldn’t hold it against you – and you’ll have no reason to suppose me otherwise. In short, if I say I’ll blog, and then I don’t, it can only be bad. If I say I won’t, and then I don’t, it could be good. You can imagine me as you want to. Keep up the work, good or bad or indifferent. And remember, I might still be reading, so watch yourselves.

5 responses to Heading out into the unknown

Jack · November 4, 2026 at 10:44 pm
No fair, I kept my part of the bargain and posted to that forum! I even got a family coming to see the place! Now you disappear? Shit, dude. I’m gonna miss ya.

Ash · November 5, 2026 at 2:12 am
Me too. I do hope that wherever you end up, you find what you were looking for.

Fiona · November 6, 2026 at 4:36 am
You mean I have to make up the kids’ bedtime stories myself from now on? Well, there’s still Ash. They really liked “Sue and Sarah’s Daring Escape”. Good luck, Elaine.

Ash · November 7, 2026 at 11:33 am
It’s good to know that our legends will live on.
And what shall we tell our youngsters of the intrepid Vancouver Islanders? Does their community thrive? Are their fish and eggs abundant?

Fiona · November 11, 2026 at 6:27 pm
Well, life out here has gone back to a modified version of a century ago, maybe two. Barring major disaster or invasions, I imagine most of us will pull through, for awhile at least. Like others, I didn’t tell everything. Our isolation helped save us, but to maintain it, we may have done some things I’m not happy with in retrospect. At the time, we felt we had to. Now though, in our neo-pioneer existence, able-bodied labour and skills are everything, and if anyone is left out there, like Jack who I wish was closer, we hope they’ll make their way up here and help us chop enough wood to get through the winter.
05 Nov 2026

Remember, remember...

It seems everybody's leaving the blogosphere now, for the real world or the next world or a new world. I'll miss them, but I can't say my life is bereft. We are exceptionally lucky, really, to have ended up alive, together, in a place where we are needed and have a chance to make a difference. A year ago, we were busy fighting our own battles and ignoring each other's, for the sake of a distant future in which we would have time and leisure to think about appreciating one another again. Now that we've lost all the things we hoped that future would contain, there's nothing in the way, and we've found each other. It takes losing everything to discover how little of it mattered, how much of what we really value only lasts because we rebuild it every day.

There are fireworks in Sefton Park tonight. I thought that anything containing gunpowder would have been used in the fighting by now, but it seems some time and resources could be spared for explosions of beauty, to celebrate even failed attempts at change, to remind ourselves that whenever we want to, when we decide it's time, people are capable of coming together and blowing everything sky-high.

There's a delicate balance here that could break into open conflict at any time, but it hasn't yet. Everything we're building here is too important for anybody to relinquish control, and that means everybody must relinquish control to the same extent, and exercise it to the same extent, too. The priority for any particular faction becomes not to forward the faction, but to maintain the balance, and when we've balanced for long enough perhaps we will forget we were ever factions and remember only that, together, we stayed upright and kept moving.

The hospital is working. Everybody fears blood flu, but the virulent strain seems to have died out, and it's only the usual winter maladies and pre-existing conditions that are affecting us now. Some things, we no longer have the resources to treat, though
incredibly there are still some medical labs operational around the country, and the pharmacists here are hard at work replicating the most commonly needed drugs as best they can. There’s no trade, as such, because there aren’t any surpluses, as such. We’re not producing a whole lot here, yet, and there’s not much point in sending food down to the labs in Bristol, where many farms are still operating. As it stands, they have the means to produce enough vital medicines to supply the communities that are asking for them, and the plan for expansion is to salvage equipment, train people up and get other labs started rather than just have one small, overworked team increase production.

All these tactics work with our much-reduced population, with communication and co-operation between almost everybody affected possible most of the time. As I said before, without currency there’s nothing in the way: we see all the systems clearly. Will it remain this way, as it all builds up again? Can we keep the systems simple when the population rises, and the processes become entrenched?

I have to go – Sarah’s calling me to come and see the fireworks. I’m not going to make dramatic announcements about abandoning the blog completely – but I’m prioritising my family, the chill November air, the smell of bonfires and a flask of hot cider. And remembering. You might not hear from me for a while. I wish you all the best.

9 responses to “Remember, remember…”

Jack November 5, 2026 at 11:52 pm

Best to you, too, dude. Is it just us now? I keep thinking Elaine won’t be able to stay away for long. We should start talking about her, see if she buts in.

Jack November 6, 2026 at 12:17 am

Aw, c’mon, not you, too.
I'm still here. But really, I think if Mei and Elaine have decided to stop blogging, we should respect their decision.

Yeah, but it sucks. If you get too busy with your new set-up, I’ll be completely on my own.

How’s the search for help coming along?

Actually, not bad. I found some folks I reckon I could live with.

That’s excellent news – you’ll have to tell us all about them.

Will anybody still be reading?

I promise I will.
Family business

So, I took Elaine’s advice and put out that ad, and I got my first reply in minutes. The Winters, family of seven – no wacky religion or anything, they just like having kids, I guess. They had a farm in upstate New York they got forced off by one of those big raiding armies – gangs of thousands, operating in platoons of fifty or so, taking over whole counties. They reckon they’d been flagged up for a target before the flu even hit the city. Probably a bunch of those raiders died since the anti-virals ran out, but by that time the Winters’d been on the road for months and there seemed more point in going forward than back, they said. They’ve been hiding out and trying to find somewhere they can settle, and keeping an eye on the forums. Now they’re here.

When they first arrived I was just glad they weren’t a raiding party, but I’m beginning to wonder if I did the right thing. They’re pretty strict, way worse than my folks were, and there’s so many of them, bossing me around all the time. Littlest kid’s ten, oldest – Brad, my new roommate – is a little older than me, and it seems like at least three of them’s either laughing at me or yelling at me or asking me something I don’t know at all times. They can’t understand how much I didn’t get done here, and they keep going on about it
until I go off and do whatever they’re asking just to get away from them. They don’t have a clue what it was like for me, and they won’t give me a break about any of it.

Except for the bit about burying my family. When I said there were some rank bodies in the house I hadn’t been able to deal with, and I started trying to explain what happened, they just nodded, like this was normal, and Joe and Ellen turned to the kids and said, “OK, Jen, Lyssa, Brad: masks, bags and shovels, you know the drill. Jess, Dan, go play.” So the littlest two dragged me off to throw baseballs for them. An hour later I smelt burning, but when I went towards the back of the house Joe blocked my way and said, “Just some old furniture you don’t want to see again on there. You come round the front, now.”

Two of the armchairs, the rug and most of the cushions were missing from the living room, and there was a stain on the floor and a smell of bleach. We sat on the couch and drank some juice – there’s been a crop of apples since I was raided – and I drew a picture of Jess and Dan playing baseball with a woodchuck, and they showed Joe, and then the others came in, Ellen wiping her hands on the Friendly Frankenstein dishcloth, and they ran to show her, too, and everybody made a fuss about how good it was and how it looked just like them until Ellen told them to go do their chores, and they all just melted out the room like ghosts.

“There’s a patch of dirt where you put the crosses,” she said. “We had to put those to one side. You should be the one to put them up again. You want some time alone?”

It was the first time anybody had asked me to say what I wanted in forever, and I didn’t know. I wanted to thank them for dealing with a shitty job I should’ve done months ago, but I couldn’t speak. I kind of shrugged and then nodded, and they said they’d keep the kids out my way a couple of hours. So I went out to the back and said goodbye to my family, and sat there till it was too cold. Then I came back in and said hi to the Winters, and thanks, and was there anything I could do to help with dinner, and Lyssa said, “Yeah, you can plant it three months ago,” and Brad said to leave me alone, and shoved me a pile of potatoes to peel that they got out of a field I didn’t even know still had potatoes in it.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. Mr. Unreliable-narrator’s spinning us a yarn again, found himself a new family, everything’s rosy – yeah, sure. No, that’s not what I’m doing. I’m past all that. It was a dark time, but I’m pulling through it, mostly because my new “family” are not exactly a fairytale dream. It’s hard giving up control of the farm. I feel
like it’s mine, I inherited it, I’ve suffered for it, it’s always been my home and – shit – legally, who else’s can it be? And this family are everywhere, and I didn’t even have to say “Make yourselves at home!” before they were putting dibs on the bedrooms and turning out the wardrobes. I don’t exactly want to turn the whole place over to the Winter family and become just a tenant in my own home. But I got to admit it, they know what they’re doing, and I sure as hell didn’t. I tried to do what my family would’ve wanted, but it wasn’t even possible for one person, let alone one person as lazy as me. And from the position of hiding out and starving in a summer-house, I couldn’t exactly tell them I’d hire them to manage the place but still keep title and deed to myself. What would I pay them, anyway? If this happened a year ago, they would’ve been stealing my farm. Now, they’re saving me, and they didn’t have to, and the farm wasn’t mine anyhow because I couldn’t do anything with it, and it wouldn’t have been long before somebody else took it off me and threw me out, too. Now we’re all getting it going, and any idea that I’m the boss just cause I was fucking it up on my own before they got here would make me look pretty stupid. So it’s their farm as much as mine. More, really, but I can only try and work on that.

It was true about the water-powered dynamo, by the way – it was already half built, but I finished it and got it going myself, and it provides all the power we need for light and comms. Not for heat, of course – Joe and Ellen are sorting out the fireplaces so we can burn those stupid fences I tried to put up, and they’ll at least be useful for keeping us warm.

I still spend a lot of time thinking about Mei, and thinking about my family, and other people I should’ve thought more about when I was with them instead of after they’d gone. I try to think more about the ones who are here, too. Fiona, it’s good to know people like you are out there – drop me a SkIMp if you’re ever heading down South. Ash, keep in touch – I appreciate all the advice and support you’ve tried to give me, and if you keep talking I’ll start listening. Elaine, if you’re reading this – you really pissed me off with that shit about my folks, but you were trying to make up for it, and it shook me out of a funk that could’ve killed me, so I guess we’re OK. Don’t get eaten by dingoes. Not without a fight, anyhow. And Mei – thanks for coming back, even if it was only for a day. You’re not the girl I knew anymore, but it was good to know you. I never could’ve got this far without you guys; even when you weren’t doing anything, just knowing you were there – you had an influence.
Hey, speaking of my good ol’ Bad Influences, you know where the word Influenza comes from? They used to believe you got sick because of the influence of evil demons or bad stars or shit like that. Brad told me that. He’s full of interesting ideas. We’re starting up a Survivors’ Forum. We figure, there’s loads of practical communities for finding people and getting help and seeing what’s going on across the valley, but there’s not enough places for survivors to just share stories and be there, to give each other emotional support and shit. Check it out. I know you guys are busy, but your bad influence is always welcome. Hope to see you there one day.

One thought on "Family business"

Fiona November 18, 2026 at 2:49 am
I can relate to a lot of this...but safety’s in numbers these days isn't it?
Good luck and best wishes,
Fiona

<< Previous
Bright Horizons (Mei)

I am a beginning student at PKU in Beijing. I study Fine Art, and I watch things: People, buildings, clouds, cars, animals, road signs, books, trees, rain. I think there is something I want to say about these things, but I don’t find the words so I paint them instead. Sometimes the paintings are speaking for me, sometimes not. Now I am a student, I have to speak for the paintings, so I must find the words for what they say. Maybe writing a blog will help me to find out the words. Or maybe I will write a silly profile about me and it will mean nothing! There is much to discover.

Blog Archive

January 5, 2026: Chicken Flu outbreak in Vietnam
January 15, 2026: Too busy to worry
January 20, 2026: Trouble getting home
January 22, 2026: Asking Questions
January 30, 2026: Barriers
February 01, 2026: Which apocalypse I will survive...
February 10, 2026: What is behind the silence?
February 18, 2026: New Year and new tensions
February 24, 2026: Preparing and protesting
March 03, 2026: Our quarantine begins
March 07, 2026: Breaking the silence
March 09, 2026: We are too late.
March 13, 2026: The W4 and freedom
March 19, 2026: Delivering food and keeping harmony
March 27, 2026: How we keep the power going
April 05, 2026: Our quarantine ends
April 11, 2026: Making Manifestos
April 26, 2026: Low on many things
May 04, 2026: Celebrating Youth Day
June 04, 2026: Building for the future
June 22, 2026: Debating about vaccinating
July 01, 2026: Recipes for disaster
July 25, 2026: A message from the army
July 28, 2026: The final warning
August 01, 2026: Back in quarantine
August 12, 2026: Falling apart
August 18, 2026: Quarantine ending again
October 31, 2026: Saying goodbye
Life in the Fast 'Laine (Elaine)

To those who are reading because they know me: Hey Macaronies, pull up a carton and block the aisles awhile – you are welcome here. To those who don’t know me: you know me. You hear my voice every week as you wheel your brats down the aisles, overloading your trollies with overpriced E-numbers, underpriced cotton panties and the tattered shards of my dreams, you shuffling, undead scum of the Earth. Just kidding. Greetings valued customers. My name’s Elaine, and I’ll be pointing you in the direction of the magnificent deals and very special offers available on this blog. If there’s any way I can enhance your reading experience today, please leave a snotty comment and I'll do my best to feign interest.

Blog archive

January 6, 2026: Not so resolute
January 10, 2026: Protected: Sneaky sneaky private post for Mei
January 16, 2026: Security Issues
January 26, 2026: Pushing Polenta
February 07, 2026: It's like they know me
February 20, 2026: Still hating work...
March 01, 2026: I gotta get out of this place
March 16, 2026: Making Preparations
April 01, 2026: And I Feel Fine
April 08, 2026: Sorting my lifetime supplies
April 22, 2026: I'm a Quarantine Refuser
May 08, 2026: Looters
May 20, 2026: What just happened?
May 25, 2026: Protected: What's up with Jack?
June 02, 2026: Uninvited Guests
June 07, 2026: Big Sister: Day 6
June 07, 2026: My utopia
June 26, 2026: The Looter Situation
July 14, 2026: No more Triggers or Tomatoes
August 07, 2026: Still here
August 29, 2026: Running low
September 11, 2026: Lost the store
September 19, 2026: Not dead yet
October 04, 2026: What's real in my world
October 15, 2026: Going Home
October 26, 2026: Giving up on giving up
November 04, 2026: Heading out into the unknown
Seasonal Vegetables of the Living Dead

(Jack)

Hey. I'm a comic artist and gamer living and working on my folks' farm a little way out from Never-heard-of-it, New Jersey. Most of my buds from school have moved on to Jersey City or New York a coupla years back, working or studying or just chilling, but I never really wanted to be anywhere but here. Got everything I need here, I go back up to the family house on the other side of the farm for dinner most nights and we all get on pretty well, long as I get my chores done. Sometimes I get them all nagging at me to do something with my life, but they can't decide what: to go to agricultural college, go to art college, get a job... I figure I can learn farming and drawing here as well as anywhere else. Been doing both all my life, and I don't get why anybody would want that to change.

Blog Archive

Jan 7 2026: Sketchy Resolutions
Jan 23, 2026: Trouble Brewing
Feb 04, 2026: My suspicions are confirmed...
Feb 14 2026: Virtual Valentine
March 5, 2026: Like a Boy Scout
March 10, 2026: Quarantining myself
April 02 2026: Keeping it going
April 15 2026: Manifesto for nothing much
May 10 2026: Sorry Mom!
May 16 2026: Making it up to Mei
May 23 2026: Well this sucks
May 24 2026: This can't be happening
May 25 2026: Getting it all in the ground.
June 10 2026: Where I belong
June 20 2026: Wondering who's out there
July 04 2026: Been raiding
July 23 2026: Defending the farm
August 15 2026: Taking responsibility
August 22 2026: I know Mei's out there
September 16 2026: Another raid
September 27 2026: BIG NEWS
October 30 2026: Coming clean
November 08 2026: Family business
Nursing Grievances (Ash)

I am a nurse at the North Middlesex Healthcare Enterprise, formerly NHS Trust, and at one time known as a Hospital. The job remains the same, and my aim is to carry it out in spite of the priorities of whoever currently attempts to profit from it.

I'm also the husband of a town planner and the father of a 17 year-old well on her way to becoming a mechanic, which is useful as I'm the owner of a car almost the same age. I refuse to sell it on the basis that it still works, and I keep it in working order on the basis that I'll never sell it.

This year I took three months out of work for an adventure holiday disguised as a research project, where I entered into a sort of pact to begin blogging, due to falling in with bad influences. I haven't attempted this sort of self-reflective digital soap-boxing since my student years, and I'm afraid I'm going to rather enjoy it.

Blog Archive

08 Jan 2026: Unresolved
01 Feb 2026: Catastrophic Contingencies
26 Feb 2026: I am not a number
07 Mar 2026: Community Cohesion – some assembly required...
23 Mar 2026: Meeting and mobilising
18 Apr 2026: So much for community spirit
01 May 2026: Open for visitors
07 May 2026: Having a strange day
14 May 2026: The Journey Begins
29 May 2026: On the Road
14 Jun 2026: Going Nowhere
08 Jul 2026: Soup and sanctuary
19 Jul 2026: u blogjacked
04 Aug 2026: The present, the past and the future
15 Aug 2026: Protected: Now I'm resorting to secret posts...
26 Aug 2026: Turning ourselves in
02 Sep 2026: Thinking back before going on
03 Sep 2026: A message for Sue and Sarah
03 Sep 2026: ایبیجا نمی‌آیند. اما در حال ترک‌اشب....
04 Sep 2026: A message for Ash
24 Sep 2026: Moving on again
08 Oct 2026: Settling in for the foreseeable, preparing for the unforeseen
22 Oct 2026: Assessing the situation
29 Oct 2026: Hope for the future
05 Nov 2026: Remember, remember...