

DYLAN EVANS

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

PICADOR

Have you ever thought that that ghastly catastrophe of fifty years ago was, well, was lucky for us? I know it sounds blasphemous; but mightn't it be that we've led more interesting lives than the perhaps rather pointless existence we would otherwise have been brought up to accept as life? We can see now that the values of the twentieth century were invalid; otherwise they wouldn't have wrecked the world. Don't you think the Accident has made us more appreciative of the vital things, like life itself, and like each other?

Brian Aldiss

Greybeard (1964)

There is, I am sensible, an age at which every one of you would choose to stop; and you will look out for the age at which, had you your wish, your species had stopped. Uneasy at your present condition for reasons which threaten your unhappy posterity with still greater uneasiness, you will perhaps wish it were in your power to go back; and this sentiment ought to be considered as the panegyric of your first parents, the condemnation of your contemporaries, and a source of terror to all those who may have the misfortune of succeeding you.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*Discourse on the Origin and Basis of
Inequality Among Men* (1755)

Contents

- 1. THE SCREAM 1**
 - 2. MEXICO 15**
 - 3. ROBOTS 33**
 - 4. HOSPITAL 54**
 - 5. ADAM 65**
 - 6. SCOTLAND 83**
 - 7. AGRIC 97**
 - 8. WINTER 114**
 - 9. POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION 133**
 - 10. SPRING 153**
 - 11. ON THE EDGE 179**
 - 12. SURVIVAL 199**
 - 13. COLLAPSE 225**
 - 14. ESCAPE 245**
 - 15. CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS 258**
- GLOSSARY 274**

1. THE SCREAM

An ear-splitting scream jolted me awake. I looked at the clock. It was 3 am.

The same voice cried out again in terror.

‘No, please don’t, NOOOO!’

I peered out of the window. Opposite was the locked ward. Was that where the scream came from? What on earth were they doing to the poor guy? I imagined a couple of brutal psychiatric nurses holding down a struggling patient while a doctor stabbed him with a gruesome syringe. I shook with fear.

It was my first night in the hospital. I had been detained under the Mental Health Act that afternoon for my own safety. I had never been a patient in a psychiatric hospital before, and I didn’t know what to expect.

The place had appeared pleasant enough the previous afternoon. It was very modern, and I had my own room, with an en-suite bathroom and shower. But what about that scream? Suddenly those antiseptic corridors seemed very cold and sinister.

My fears had been sparked by a conversation with

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

another patient shortly after I had been admitted. As I paced around the enclosed patio, smoking furiously, a burly man in his twenties joined me in my circular walk. His biceps were tattooed and the knuckles on his right hand were bleeding. I didn't ask why. He stared at me for a while.

'Who's your doctor?' he asked suddenly.

'Dr Satoshi,' I replied.

'Oh no!' He grimaced, and shook his head. 'You poor bugger.'

At breakfast, I got my first sight of all the other patients on my ward. Well, all but one; apparently there was also a young woman called Rowena, but she almost always ate alone in her room.

I looked around the dining area. Three men in their forties and fifties, two women of similar ages, a young man in his late teens, and the burly patient I had met the day before. We sat around three small tables silently munching on breakfast cereal and thin slices of toast, until one of my companions greeted me in a refreshingly normal tone of voice.

'Good morning, I'm Terry. What's your name?'

'Hi. I'm Dylan,' I said. Unthinkingly, I reached out to shake his hand, but immediately wondered if this was rather too formal. What is the etiquette when introducing yourself to a fellow patient in a psychiatric hospital? It was not a question I had ever pondered before.

THE SCREAM

I struggled to think of an appropriate way of continuing. If we had been in prison, I could perhaps have asked what he was in for. Surely, I thought, the equivalent would be to ask someone what their diagnosis was, but that didn't seem quite right. Luckily, Terry relieved me of my dilemma by telling me he was here because his horrible wife had lied about him.

'That bloody woman!' he hissed. 'She's done this to me before, you know. Got me locked up when it suited her. I'm sure I'll get out soon, when the doctors realize she's the crazy one, not me!'

He sounded sane to me. For all I knew, he was telling the truth, and he was in fact the victim of some evil plot by his wife to get him out of the way. But as he told his tale, tiny cracks in the logic began to appear, and by the end I could see that his version of events might be somewhat skewed. Or might not. I really couldn't tell whether he was crazy. If I had met him in some other context, the question would not even have occurred to me.

Did his wife really call the police, for example, just to get Terry out of the way so she could enjoy the hotel on her own, as he maintained? Or was there something about his behaviour that prompted her call, which Terry was not telling me? Was she, perhaps, simply a concerned and loving wife trying to do the best for her deranged husband? Both scenarios seemed plausible. And neither seemed particularly bizarre.

My story was different. As I listened to Terry tell how

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

he had ended up here, in hospital, I cast around in my mind for a way to do the same. But every explanation I could think of made me sound like a complete nutcase. At least I was well enough to know how crazy I would sound if I told him the truth. So I kept my mouth shut, and just listened.

It's hard to seem normal in a mental hospital. Even the most innocent actions can seem suspicious when they are carried out by someone already labelled as crazy, as David Rosenhan noted in his famous 1973 paper, 'On being sane in insane places'. Rosenhan sent five healthy volunteers to several psychiatric hospitals in the United States and asked them to pretend to be mad. All were admitted and diagnosed with psychiatric disorders. After admission, the fake patients acted normally and told staff that they felt fine, and had not experienced any more hallucinations. Yet they were detained for an average of almost three weeks before being released. The nursing staff saw all their behaviour through the lens of mental illness. For example, when one volunteer was spotted making notes, nurses described him as engaging in 'writing behaviour', which they regarded with deep suspicion.

Dr Satoshi greeted me with a warm smile as I was ushered into his office. He gestured for me to sit down in the chair opposite him.

'How are you feeling today?'

'I'm OK,' I whispered. I kept touching my chin com-

THE SCREAM

pulsively, gripping individual hairs between the fingernails of my thumb and middle finger and tweaking them out one by one. It's something I have done ever since, whenever I feel nervous, and my friends tell me it looks freakish and jittery, but at the time it felt strangely reassuring, a tiny area of my life where I retained a degree of control.

'Do you think I'm bipolar?' I asked.

'I don't think so, but I can't say for sure yet,' he replied.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

'I really don't want to go on one of those strong drugs they give to people with bipolar disorder,' I pleaded. 'Several friends of mine are bipolar and I've seen a couple of them when they were dosed up. It looks awful.'

'Dr Williams thought you might be suffering from bipolar disorder when we admitted you yesterday. Do you know why she thought that?'

'Yes.'

I looked down at the floor. I had been thinking the same thing. Many of the signs seemed to fit. I was obviously depressed, but during the preceding months my behaviour might well have been described as manic.

'Why don't you think I'm bipolar?'

'It was too systematic. You spent months planning your experiment. A lot of organization went into it. A typical manic phase wouldn't last that long, or allow such careful thought.'

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

‘So you believe me, then? The stuff about my experiment? You know it’s not just all a delusion?’

‘Yes, Dylan. We did some Googling, and we found some newspaper articles about your experiment. I can’t blame Dr Williams for thinking your tale was delusional. I mean all that stuff about your followers, and preparing for the end of the world! But it seems it’s all true.’

It wasn’t quite true, but the gist was correct. We didn’t *really* think the world was about to end. Or at least, we didn’t *start off* thinking that way. The whole experiment was, in fact, meant to be a simulation. We would try to figure out what life might be like *if* civilization collapsed, by acting as if it already had. It was to be a kind of collaborative storytelling, a real-life role-play.

It was a very vague plan, but the basic idea had felt compelling at the time. Now, two years later, it seemed absurd. Why had it become an overriding obsession, leading me to sell my house and give up my academic career to pursue it? How had everything come crashing down around me, ending in my flight from the dilapidated campsite, where I had lived for the past year, to seek medical help? How did I end up in a psychiatric hospital, listening to the screams of a patient in the locked ward at three o’clock in the morning?

Dr Satoshi wanted to know how it all began, so I showed him the scenario I had written to set the scene for the experiment.

THE SCREAM

‘So let me get this right,’ Dr Satoshi said. ‘This wasn’t meant to be a prediction. It was just a kind of fiction, right?’

I nodded. ‘All the volunteers were supposed to read it before they arrived,’ I said. ‘Then we would continue the story, not by imagining what would happen next, but by acting it out in the real world.’

Dr Satoshi began reading out loud: “‘At the dawn of the twenty-first century, most people in Britain assumed that life would continue much as it had done for the previous few decades. People would continue to get richer, live longer, and buy fancier electronic gadgets. They would continue to drive cars, work in offices, earn money, and buy their food in supermarkets. Although this way of life was only a few decades old, it seemed as timeless and permanent as the sun and the moon.’”

He paused and looked at me. ‘You write well. But I can detect a note of scepticism.’ He smiled, and continued.

“‘A few voices warned that this sense of permanence was an illusion, that infinite economic growth on a finite planet was impossible, that global warming and the looming energy crisis would soon put an end to the consumer-friendly economy. But few people took any notice. Academics discussed the possibility of economic collapse in comfortably upholstered leather armchairs, and politicians commissioned lengthy reports recommending policies that they had no intention of implementing. And the vast mass of ordinary people went on driving

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

cars, working in offices, earning money, and buying their food in supermarkets.”

Dr Satoshi paused again. ‘So you saw yourself as one of the few people who could see what was coming?’ he asked. ‘A lone voice crying in the wilderness?’

I grimaced at how grandiose that sounded. ‘Yes,’ I said, my cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

Dr Satoshi continued reading. “Then the power cuts began. They started as an occasional annoyance, but it wasn’t long before the electricity companies were having to schedule them so that people could at least plan for the current being switched off. Sales of emergency generators boomed, at least among those who could still afford such things. Those who couldn’t just used candles, and sat around talking.

“Cold showers were harder to adapt to, and many people preferred to stay dirty for longer. They had to wash their clothes by hand too, as washing machines were not very effective without hot water, and used too much electricity anyway. People became much smellier, and head lice began to spread rapidly. Duvets became infested with bedbugs, and the health system began to creak under the weight of so many cases of pneumonia. As rubbish collection became increasingly infrequent, rotting food and other waste began to pile up at street corners, and soon there were outbreaks of typhoid and cholera in London and New York.”

Dr Satoshi looked up from the printout. ‘Your fictional scenario is quite convincing.’

THE SCREAM

I muttered a barely audible thank you. It no longer seemed very plausible to me.

“And still most people failed to see that they were living through the beginnings of a catastrophe. Every day on the radio an array of experts could be heard claiming that a return to prosperity was just around the corner, and suggesting policy initiatives that would turn the economy around.

“Then came Hurricane Gina. When it hit New York, on 30 September 2012, it did much more than make a lot of people and companies homeless. The insurance market was overwhelmed by the claims, and the resulting financial panic spread from one stock market to another like forest fire.”

‘Why did you choose that date?’ Dr Satoshi asked. ‘Does it have any special significance?’

I tried to think. ‘It’s the day after my birthday,’ I said. ‘And 2012 is when the Maya thought the world would end.’

Dr Satoshi looked at me for a moment, and then continued reading. “Global supply chains snapped. Panic buying ensued, and within a day there was nothing left on the supermarket shelves. Looters took to the streets, and the army was deployed in all the major cities. But the soldiers were ill prepared for keeping martial law in their own country, and the trickle of desertions soon became a flood.

“Everyone began to flee the cities – mostly on foot, as petrol quickly ran out. Most of the refugees did not

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

get very far. Unaccustomed to sleeping outdoors or even camping, the cold weather put paid to thousands. Those who survived the frosty nights grew weak with hunger and disease.

“All that seems a long time ago now. Today, in the year 2025, things have calmed down a lot. There are still some people living in the cities, but on the whole they aren’t nice places to be. The only way to make a reasonable living there is by prostitution, drug-dealing, or protection rackets. Those who aren’t involved in these lucrative trades struggle to make ends meet. They pull the copper out of the walls and rip out sinks and pipe-work to swap for food on street corners. They would love to move out to the country, but they know it’s too late for that now – those who already live there don’t look kindly on incomers. In fact, they have a nasty habit of killing them.”

Dr Satoshi raised his eyebrows. ‘I thought your project was called the Utopia Experiment? That doesn’t sound very utopian!’

‘Go on,’ I muttered. ‘Read the last bit.’

He drew a deep breath, and went on.

“Back in the first decade of the twenty-first century, before the crash, some of the few people who saw the writing on the wall got together and started preparing for the challenging times ahead. They set up self-sufficient communities in rural areas far enough away from the major cities to avoid the first wave of refugees. They taught themselves many old crafts that had been wide-

THE SCREAM

spread before the Industrial Revolution, but which had largely died out in the twentieth century, such as weaving and smelting. They also learned to defend themselves against attacks by hostile strangers. And they began to store up cultural artefacts – books, music, works of art – to preserve for posterity, like secular equivalents of the European monasteries that preserved the great books of classical antiquity throughout the Dark Ages, and so enabled future generations to enjoy these ancient treasures.

“One of those communities was called the Utopia Experiment. Nowadays, those of us who live here simply call it Utopia. It’s not quite as ironic a name as it might first appear. For what we’ve discovered is that, in many ways, things are better now than they were before the crash – at least, they are for those of us who are lucky enough to live out here in the countryside. The air is much cleaner for one thing, and the wildlife has made a comeback. People have a lot more time to spend with their children, and neighbours are always helping each other out. And all that walking around and manual labour means that people are a lot fitter than they used to be. You certainly don’t see any fat people any more. We like to think that the crash gave some people a second chance, an opportunity to escape from the awful state we’d got ourselves into in the late twentieth century.”

Dr Satoshi put down the printout and drew another deep breath.

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

‘Well, that’s some story!’ he said. ‘You are quite a writer.’

‘I’ll never be able to write again!’ I blurted out. I could still hardly concentrate long enough to read more than a few sentences at a time, let alone write a coherent paragraph. Whenever I tried to note down my thoughts, I would lose track of what I was thinking after a single sentence, and my handwriting was a spidery scrawl.

‘Nonsense; I couldn’t have written this!’ exclaimed Dr Satoshi, waving another printout at me. It was one of my academic papers, which he had downloaded from my website and read that morning. I was impressed by the time he was taking to understand me.

But I didn’t believe him. I was convinced my academic career was at an end.

‘If this had happened to you later in life,’ Dr Satoshi continued, ‘then things would look a lot bleaker. But you are forty years old. You have another twenty-five years to build up your savings before you retire. You can do it.’

It would mean starting again, from scratch. I had sold my house to pay for the Utopia Experiment, and I had nothing left apart from a few boxes of books that were currently sitting in a rusty shipping container in a muddy field.

‘Look,’ said Dr Satoshi. ‘I see a lot of people from pretty poor backgrounds. I know that they will probably stay poor for the rest of their lives. When they are old, they will spend what little money they have playing

THE SCREAM

bingo or drinking in their local pub. They don't have a problem with that. That vision doesn't hold any fear for them. But you would hate that. That's not the world you come from.'

I appreciated his honesty. It wasn't the kind of thing I imagined a psychiatrist would or should say. It certainly wasn't very politically correct. But it happened to fit very well with my way of thinking. The image of my older self eking out his last days in some cockney boozery, rubbing shoulders with badly spoken drunks and geriatric bingo players, put the fear of god in me. I would do anything to avoid that fate. I simply had to get well again.

'It is just as well you came here when you did. You have had a lucky escape.'

At the time, I didn't really understand what Dr Satoshi meant by those words. But it is clear to me now that I was unwell, not just mentally, but physically too. I was skinny and malnourished, dirty and unkempt.

'For the moment, I'm just going to put you back on citalopram.'

That was an antidepressant I'd been given when I was depressed before. It worked then. But then I hadn't been nearly so bad. I had managed to keep doing my job throughout the illness. And a few months later I was better, and came off the pills.

'We'll put you on forty milligrams a day and see how you get on.'

Twice my previous dosage. I hoped it would be enough.

THE UTOPIA EXPERIMENT

‘But tell me more about how the whole idea first came to you. The scenario is interesting, but why did you write it in the first place? When did you first think about setting up such a strange experiment?’