

PRISONERS

Terry Morgan

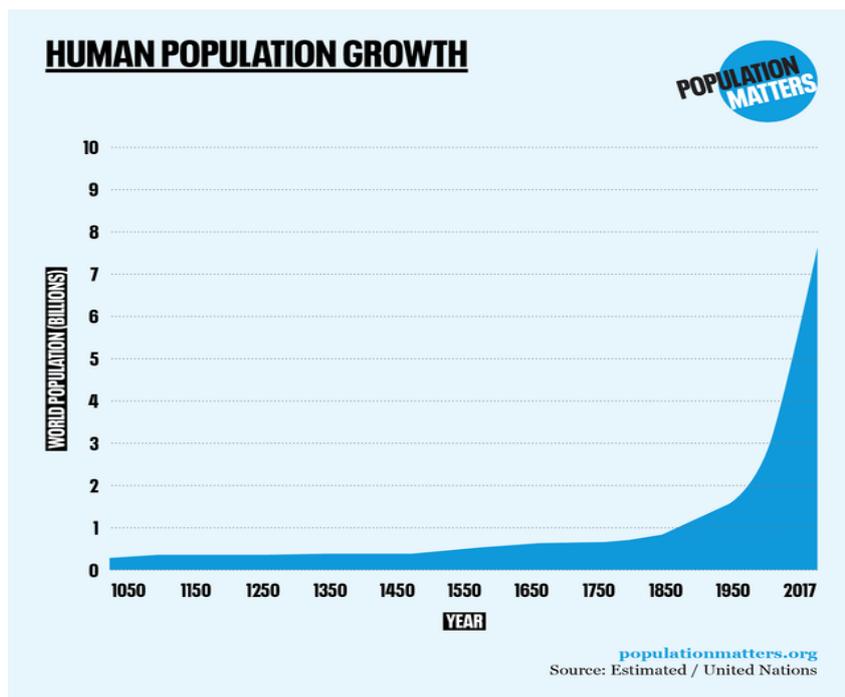
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Author's Introduction:

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Population Matters, December 2018)

Personal comment:

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

PRISONERS

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

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

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

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

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

"Does he have a name?"

"His name is Carl."

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

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

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

“I didn’t know that, Professor.”

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed, the evidence was all around.

Restating his old warnings that trying to reverse the nebulous matters of climate change and CO₂ levels without addressing the fundamental cause of it all, human overpopulation, had become pointless. It was the never-ending problem of economic migration and refugees, of worldwide unemployment, urban violence and social breakdown that had become the new talking point. And who had warned that overpopulation would also be the cause of that?

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

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



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

"Statistics."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

The Professor took a breath and listened.

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re the scientist.”

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

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

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

“Dear Jesus.”

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

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

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

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

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



Forest destruction - Thailand

The Professor shook his head in dismay.

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

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

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

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

“Alien, Professor?”

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

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

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

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

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

The Professor sighed. “Lead on, Sam.”

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They’re OK.”

“Good.”

There was another pause. Carl fidgeted.

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

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

“So, what questions?”

Carl sniffed, nervously.

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

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

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

“Yes?” the Professor said to encourage him.

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

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

“Not all of those,” Carl replied vaguely.

“But perhaps some?”

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

“Do you want advice? Help?”

“I just want to understand.”

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

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

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

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

"But how could they suffer like that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carl frowned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But what better word is there?"

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

"But humans are different."

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

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

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

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

“That is not fair, uncle.”

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

Carl seemed unsure.

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose so.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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