

DIARY OF AN INTERESTING YEAR

by Helen Simpson

12th February 2040

My thirtieth birthday. G gave me this little spiral-backed notebook and a biro. It's a good present, hardly any rust on the spiral and no water damage to the paper. I'm going to start a diary. I'll keep my handwriting tiny to make the paper go further.

15th February 2040

G is really getting me down. He's in his element. They should carve it on his tombstone—"I Was Right."

23rd February 2040

Glad we don't live in London. The Hatchwells have got cousins staying with them, they trekked up from Tottenham (three days). Went round this afternoon and they were saying the thing that finally drove them out was the sewage system—when the drains packed up it overflowed everywhere. They said the smell was unbelievable, the pavements were swimming in it, and of course the hospitals are down so there's nothing to be done about the cholera. Didn't get too close to them in case they were carrying it. They lost their two sons like that last year.

"You see," G said to me on the way home, "capitalism cared more about its children as accessories and demonstrations of earning power than for their future."

"Oh shut up," I said.

2nd March 2040

Can't sleep. I'm writing this instead of staring at the ceiling. There's a mosquito in the room, I can hear it whining close to my ear. Very humid, air like filthy soup, plus we're supposed to wear our facemasks in bed too but I was running with sweat so I ripped mine off just now. Got up and looked at myself in the mirror on the landing—ribs like a fence, hair in greasy rats' tails. Yesterday the rats in the kitchen were busy gnawing away at the breadbin, they didn't even look up when I came in.

6th March 2040

Another quarrel with G. OK, yes, he was right, but why crow about it? That's what you get when you marry your tutor from Uni—wall-to-wall pontificating from an older man. "I saw it coming, any fool could see it coming especially after the Big Melt," he brags. "Thresholds crossed, cascade effect, hopelessly optimistic to assume we had till 2060, blahdy blahdy blah, the plutonomy as lemming, democracy's massive own goal." No wonder we haven't got any friends.

He cheered when rationing came in. He's the one that volunteered first as car-share warden for our road; one piddling little Peugeot for the entire road. He gets a real kick out of the camaraderie round the standpipe.

—I'll swop my big tin of chickpeas for your little tin of sardines.

—No, no, my sardines are protein.

—Chickpeas are protein too, plus they fill you up more. Anyway, I thought you still had some tuna.

—No, I swopped that with Violet Huggins for a tin of tomato soup.

Really sick of bartering, but hard to know how to earn money since the internet went down. “Also, money’s no use unless you’ve got shedloads of it,” as I said to him in bed last night. “The top layer hanging on inside their plastic bubbles of filtered air while the rest of us shuffle round with goitres and tumours and bits of old sheet tied over our mouths. Plus, we’re soaking wet the whole time. We’ve given up on umbrellas, we just go round permanently drenched.” I only stopped ranting when I heard a snore and clocked he was asleep.

8th April 2040

Boring morning washing out rags. No wood for hot water, so had to use ashes and lye again. Hands very sore even though I put plastic bags over them. Did the facemasks first, then the rags from my period. Took forever. At least I haven’t got to do nappies like Lexi or Esme, that would send me right over the edge.

27th April 2040

Just back from Maia’s. Seven months. She’s very frightened. I don’t blame her. She tried to make me promise I’d take care of the baby if anything happens to her. I hovered (mostly at the thought of coming between her and that throwback Martin—she’d got a new black eye, I didn’t ask). I suppose there’s no harm in promising if it makes her feel better. After all it wouldn’t exactly be taking on a responsibility—I give a new baby three months max in these conditions. Diarrhoea, basically.

14th May 2040

Can’t sleep. Bites itching, trying not to scratch. Heavy thumps and squeaks just above, in the ceiling. Think of something nice. Soap and hot water. Fresh air. Condoms! Sick of being permanently on knife edge re pregnancy.

Start again. Wandering round a supermarket—warm, gorgeously lit—corridors of open fridges full of tiger prawns and fillet steak. Gliding off down the fast lane in a sports car, stopping to fill up with thirty litres of petrol. Online, booking tickets for *The Mousetrap*, click, ordering a crate of wine, click, a holiday home, click, a pair of patent leather boots, click, a gap year, click. I go to iTunes and download *The Marriage of Figaro*, then I chat face to face in real time with G’s parents in Sydney. No, don’t think about what happened to them. Horrible. Go to sleep.

21st May 2040

Another row with G. He blew my second candle out, he said one was enough. It wasn’t though, I couldn’t see to read any more. He drives me mad, it’s like living with a policeman. It always was, even before the Collapse. “The Earth has enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed,” was his favourite. Nobody likes being labelled greedy. I called him Killjoy and he didn’t like that. “Every one of us takes about 25 thousand breaths a day,” he told me. “Each breath removes oxygen from the atmosphere and replaces it with carbon dioxide.” Well, pardon me for breathing! What was I supposed to do—turn into a tree?

6th June 2040

Went round to the Lumleys for the news last night. Whole road there squashed into front room, straining to listen to radio—batteries very low (no new ones in the last govt delivery). Big news though—compulsory billeting next week. The Shorthouses were up in arms, Kai shouting and red in the face, Lexi in tears. “You work all your life” etc., etc. What planet is he on. None of us too keen, but nothing to be done about it. When we got back, G checked our stash of tins under the bedroom floorboards. A big rat shot out and I screamed my head off. G held me till I stopped crying then we had sex. Woke in the night and prayed not to be pregnant, though God knows who I was praying to.

12th June 2040

Visited Maia this afternoon. She was in bed, her legs have swollen up like balloons. On at me again to promise about the baby and this time I said yes. She said Violet Huggins was going to help her when it started—Violet was a nurse once, apparently, not really the hands-on sort but better than

nothing. Nobody else in the road will have a clue what to do now we can't google it. "All I remember from old films is that you're supposed to boil a kettle," I said. We started to laugh, we got a bit hysterical. Knuckledragger Martin put his head round the door and growled at us to shut it.

1st July 2040

First billet arrived today by army truck. We've got a Spanish group of eight including one old lady, her daughter and twin toddler grandsons (all pretty feral), plus four unsmiling men of fighting age. A bit much since we only have two bedrooms. G and I tried to show them round but they ignored us, the grandmother bagged our bedroom straight off. We're under the kitchen table tonight. I might try to sleep on top of it because of the rats. We couldn't think of anything to say—the only Spanish we could remember was *muchas gracias*, and as G said, we're certainly not saying *that*.

2nd July 2040

Fell off the table in my sleep. Bashed my elbow. Covered in bruises.

3rd July 2040

G depressed. The four Spaniards are bigger than him, and he's worried that the biggest one, Miguel, has his eye on me (with reason, I have to say).

4th July 2040

G depressed. The grandmother found our tins under the floorboards and all but danced a flamenco. Miguel punched G when he tried to reclaim a tin of sardines and since then his nose won't stop bleeding.

6th July 2040

Last night under the table G came up with a plan. He thinks we should head north. Now this lot are in the flat and a new group from Tehran promised next week, we might as well cut and run. Scotland's heaving, everyone else has already had the same idea, so he thinks we should get on one of the ferries to Stavanger then aim for Russia.

"I don't know," I said. "Where would we stay?"

"I've got the pop-up tent packed in a rucksack behind the shed," he said. "Plus our sleeping bags and my wind-up radio."

"Camping in the mud," I said.

"Look on the bright side," he said. "We have a huge mortgage and we're just going to walk away from it."

"Oh shut up," I said.

17th July 2040

Maia died yesterday. It was horrible. The baby got stuck two weeks ago, it died inside her. Violet Huggins was useless, she didn't have a clue. Martin started waving his Swiss penknife around on the second day and yelling about a Caesarean, he had to be dragged off her. He's round at ours now drinking the last of our precious brandy with the Spaniards. That's it. We've got to go. Now, says G. Yes.

1st August 2040

Somewhere in Shropshire, or possibly Cheshire. We're staying off the beaten track. Heavy rain. This notebook's pages have gone all wavy. At least biro doesn't run. I'm lying inside the tent now, G is out foraging. We got away in the middle of the night. G slung our two rucksacks across the bike. We took turns to wheel it, then on the fourth morning we woke up and looked outside the tent flap and it was gone even though we'd covered it with leaves the night before.

"Could be worse," said G. "We could have had our throats cut while we slept."

"Oh shut up," I said.

3rd August 2040

Rivers and streams all toxic—fertilisers, typhoid, etc. So, we're following G's DIY system. Dip billycan into stream or river. Add three drops of bleach. Boil up on camping stove with t-shirt stretched over billycan. Only moisture squeezed from the t-shirt is safe to drink; nothing else. "You're joking," I said, when G first showed me how to do this. But no.

9th August 2040

Radio news in muddy sleeping bags—skeleton govt obviously struggling, they keep playing *The Enigma Variations*. Last night they announced the end of fuel for civilian use and the compulsory disabling of all remaining civilian cars. As from now we must all stay at home, they said, and not travel without permission. There's talk of martial law. We're going crosscountry as much as possible—less chance of being arrested or mugged—trying to cover ten miles a day but the weather slows us down. Torrential rain, often horizontal in gusting winds.

16th August 2040

Rare dry afternoon. Black lace clouds over yellow sky. Brown grass, frowsty grey mould, fungal frills. Dead trees come crashing down without warning—one nearly got us today, it made us jump. G was hoping we'd find stuff growing in the fields, but all the farmland round here is surrounded by razor wire and armed guards. He says he knows how to grow vegetables from his allotment days, but so what. They take too long. We're hungry *now*, we can't wait till March for some old carrots to get ripe.

22nd August 2040

G broke a front crown cracking a beechnut, there's a black hole and he whistles when he talks. "Damsons, blackberries, young green nettles for soup," he said at the start of all this, smacking his lips. He's not so keen now. No damsons or blackberries, of course—only chickweed and ivy.

He's just caught a lame squirrel so I suppose I'll have to do something with it. No creatures left except squirrels, rats and pigeons, unless you count the insects. The news says they're full of protein, you're meant to grind them into a paste, but so far we haven't been able to face that.

24th August 2040

We met a pig this morning. It was a bit thin for a pig, and it didn't look well. G said, "Quick! We've got to kill it."

"Why?" I said. "How?"

"With a knife," he said. "Bacon. Sausages."

I pointed out that even if we managed to stab it to death with our old kitchen knife, which looked unlikely, we wouldn't be able just to open it up and find bacon and sausages inside.

"Milk, then!" said G wildly. "It's a mammal, isn't it?"

Meanwhile the pig walked off.

25th August 2040

Ravenous. We've both got streaming colds. Jumping with fleas, itching like crazy. Weeping sores on hands and faces—the news says, unfortunate side effects from cloud-seeding. What with all this and his toothache (back molar, swollen jaw) and the malaria, G is in a bad way.

27th August 2040

Found a dead hedgehog. Tried to peel off its spines and barbecue it over the last briquette. Disgusting. Both sick as dogs. Why did I used to moan about the barter system? Foraging is MUCH MUCH worse.

29th August 2040

Dreamed of Maia and the penknife and woke up crying. G held me in his shaky arms and talked about Russia, how it's the new land of milk and honey since the Big Melt. "Some really good farming opportunities opening up in Siberia," he said through chattering teeth. "We're like in *The Three Sisters*," I said. "If only we could get to Moscow". Do you remember that production at the

National? We walked by the river afterwards, we stood and listened to Big Ben chime midnight.” Hugged each other and carried on like this until sleep came.

31st August 2040

G woke up crying. I held him and hushed him and asked what was the matter. “I wish I had a gun,” he said.

15th September 2040

Can’t believe this notebook was still at the bottom of the rucksack. And the biro. Murderer wasn’t interested in them. He’s turned everything else inside out (including me). G didn’t have a gun. This one has a gun.

19th September 2040

M speaks another language. Norwegian? Dutch? Croatian? We can’t talk, so he hits me instead. He smells like an abandoned fridge, his breath stinks of rot. What he does to me is horrible. I don’t want to think about it, I won’t think about it. There’s a tent and cooking stuff on the ground, but half the time we’re up a tree with the gun. There’s a big plank platform and a tarpaulin roped to the branches above. At night he pulls the rope ladder up after us. It’s quite high, you can see for miles. He uses it for storing stuff he brings back from his mugging expeditions. I’m surrounded by tins of baked beans.

3rd October 2040

M can’t seem to get through the day without at least two blow-jobs. I’m always sick afterwards (sometimes during).

8th October 2040

M beat me up yesterday. I’d tried to escape. I shan’t do that again, he’s too fast.

14th October 2040

If we run out of beans I think he might kill me for food. There were warnings about it on the news a while back. This one wouldn’t think twice. I’m just meat on legs to him. He bit me all over last night, hard. I’m covered in bite marks. I was literally licking my wounds afterwards when I remembered how nice the taste of blood is, how I miss it. Strength. Calf’s liver for iron. How I haven’t had a period for ages. When that thought popped out I missed a beat. Then my blood ran cold.

15th October 2040

Wasn’t it juniper berries they used to use? As in gin? Even if it was I wouldn’t know what they looked like, I only remember mint and basil. I can’t be pregnant. I won’t be pregnant.

17th October 2040

Very sick after drinking rank juice off random stewed herbs. Nothing else, though, worse luck.

20th October 2040

Can’t sleep. Dreamed of G, I was moving against him, it started to go up a little way so I thought he wasn’t really dead. Dreadful waking to find M there instead.

23rd October 2040

Can’t sleep. Very bruised and scratched after today. They used to throw themselves downstairs to get rid of it. The trouble is, the gravel pit just wasn’t deep enough, plus the bramble bushes kept breaking my fall. There was some sort of body down there too, seething with white vermin. Maybe it was a goat or a pig or something, but I don’t think it was. I keep thinking it might have been G.

31 October 2040

This baby will be the death of me. Would. Let's make that a subjunctive. "Would," not "will."

7th November 2040

It's all over. I'm still here. Too tired to

8th November 2040

Slept for hours. Stronger. I've got all the food and drink, and the gun. There's still some shouting from down there but it's weaker now. I think he's almost finished.

9th November 2040

Slept for hours. Fever gone. Baked beans for breakfast. More groans started up just now. Never mind. I can wait.

10th November 2040

It's over. I got stuck into his bottle of vodka, it was the demon drink that saved me. He was out mugging—left me up the tree as usual—I drank just enough to raise my courage. Nothing else worked so I thought I'd get him to beat me up. When he came back and saw me waving the bottle he was beside himself. I pretended to be drunker than I was and I lay down on the wooden platform with my arms round my head while he got the boot in. It worked. Not right away, but that night.

Meanwhile M decided he fancied a drink himself, and very soon he'd polished off the rest of it—over three-quarters of a bottle. He was singing and sobbing and carrying on, out of his tree with alcohol, and then, when he was standing pissing off the side of the platform, I crept along and gave him a gigantic shove and he really was out of his tree. Crash.

13th November 2040

I've wrapped your remains in my good blue shirt; sorry I couldn't let you stay on board, but there's no future now for any baby above ground. I'm the end of the line!

This is the last page of my thirtieth birthday present. When I've finished it I'll wrap the notebook up in six plastic bags, sealing each one with duct tape against the rain, then I'll bury it in a hole on top of the blue shirt. I don't know why as I'm not mad enough to think anybody will ever read it. After that I'm going to buckle on this rucksack of provisions and head north with my gun. Wish me luck. Last line: good luck, good luck, good luck, good luck, good luck.