

# IF THIS ROAD



*A quiet walk through what seems to be happening,  
and what we might leave behind us*

IF THIS ROAD

*For whoever is still doing the thing in front of them  
when the argument is over.*

IF THIS ROAD

*The people who did the fixing  
were the people who kept doing the thing in front of  
them  
when everyone else had got distracted.*

*— my grandmother, who I did not listen to until I was forty-five*



*I just wanted to be sure of you.*  
*— A.A. Milne, The House at Pooh Corner*

*A note before the book begins*

*This is a walk. Thirty-seven short pieces. No chapters. No parts. No sections.*

*If you read one piece a night, you will finish in about a month. If you read it all in an afternoon, it will take you an afternoon. Either is fine.*

*The narrator is a storyteller. The people she describes — the shopkeeper, the grandmother, the sister, the niece, the man at the bus stop, the woman running the school in the barn, the man fixing toasters — are invented. They are there to carry the walk in human shape. What the walk describes is not invented. Only its faces.*

*At the end, you will have walked through something heavy. You will also, I hope, have found something small and specific worth doing on the other side.*

*If that is the kind of walk you want, keep reading.*

THE SHOP THAT CLOSED



There was a shop at the end of my street called Hadley's. It had been there longer than I had. Mr Hadley ran it. His father had run it before him. It sold small useful things. Batteries. Screwdrivers. The kind of bread that is not pretending to be anything else.

Last winter, it closed. A handwritten sign went up in the window. Then the sign came down, and the windows were covered with paper, and for months nothing happened. Eventually something else opened. A place called Glow that sells drinks the colour of swimming pools.

I thought about Hadley's more than I expected to. The shop was not important. Mr Hadley was friendly but we were not friends. I could buy batteries somewhere else. None of it mattered, really.

Except that, thinking about it in bed one night, I started counting the things on my street that had gone, and I could not think of many things that had come. The library is open three days a week instead of six. The post office is gone. The bank is now a Thai restaurant. The Thai restaurant before the current one was also a restaurant, and closed. The pub is still a pub, but the people in it are not the people I grew up seeing in it.

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None of this is a tragedy. Streets have always changed. I am old enough to remember my parents saying the same thing about their streets.

But something happens when you add up small changes none of which matter. The total matters, even if none of the parts did. You look up one day and the place you live has become a different place. Not better, not worse. Different. And you realise you did not choose any of the changes. They happened while you were looking the other way, and now they are your life.



This book is about that feeling.

Not the small version — Hadley's closing. The big version. The one where you look up and realise your country is not quite the country you grew up in. Where the people you know are not finding work the way their parents found it. Where the family down the road has half the children your family had. Where the teenagers on their phones are watching things you do not understand.

It is not one thing. It is many small things. None of them, on their own, is a crisis. All of them, together, is something.

I want to tell you what you will find, if you come along. You will find a quiet description of what seems to be happening, piece by piece. Some of it will be familiar. Some will be new. The value is not in any one piece. It is in seeing them next to each other.

You will find, near the end, a question that I think is larger than most people currently believe.

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And you will find, at the very end, a few small specific things that have helped in other hard times. Not instructions. Not commandments. Things that, when I looked honestly, I could see had held. They may help you. They may not. You will know better than I do.

I am not an expert. I am a person who has been paying attention.

If you are ready, we walk.

THE SUBJECT WE DO NOT TALK ABOUT  
AT DINNER



There are subjects I do not talk about at dinner. You probably have them too.

Nobody has forbidden them. It is only that when they come up, the dinner changes. Somebody goes quiet. Somebody leaves the table. My sister-in-law, at Christmas last year, stood up and cleared plates that were not ready to be cleared.

So we have learned, without deciding to, to keep the dinner calm. Football is fine. The weather is fine. Who is doing what for Easter is fine. The specific safe things.

This is new, or at least newer than I am. My parents argued at dinner. My grandparents argued at dinner. The arguments could be sharp, and the subjects were anything. At the end they got on with the meal. The argument was part of the meal.

Somewhere between then and now, the arguments stopped being part of the meal. The arguments started ending the meal. So we stopped having them.



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When my parents argued, they agreed on what had happened. They disagreed about what to do about it. You can argue about what to do.

Now, the arguments start before what to do. They start at what happened. Two people at the same table, looking at different pictures of the same thing on their phones, reading different accounts, each certain their account is the real one.

The pictures are not there by accident. Something is choosing which pictures each of us sees. Something watches what we look at and feeds us more of it, quietly, for reasons I do not fully understand. We will come to this. For now, only this: when two people at the same table cannot agree on what happened, it may be partly because they have not, in a real sense, been shown the same thing.

You cannot argue about what to do when you cannot agree anything happened. So the argument does not start. It sits, quietly, under the meal.

You feel it, though. You feel it in what is not said.

WHERE PEOPLE FIND THEIR PEOPLE  
NOW



When I was growing up, if you held an unusual view, you were mostly alone with it. You might find one or two others in your town. If you were very lucky, there was a magazine. Mostly you kept it to yourself, or you softened it to fit with the people around you.

This was hard on the people with unusual views. Some hid who they were for whole lives. Others drank. Others left. It was not kind.

It had one effect I did not notice until it was gone. When you had to live with people who did not share your view, you had to soften it. You had to find the parts you could say out loud. You had to stay in the room with people who disagreed. Those people kept you, in a way, a little bit sensible. They sanded off your edges. You sanded off theirs.



Now, if you have an unusual view, you can find ten thousand people who share it exactly. Not in your town. Online. You can talk to them every day. You can live, effectively, in a room made of people who agree with you.

The finding is not an accident. Something is matching you. When you pause on a post, something notes which post made you pause, and shows you more. The room has been built for you, one small choice at a time, by something that has learned what will hold you there. You did not build the room. You only walked into it.

This has been a relief to many people who were lonely. Some of the cruellest parts of the old arrangement are gone, and that is good.

But here is the honest thing I have not been saying until now. The rooms are, I think, making many of us worse people than we would otherwise be. I notice it in myself. I am harder than I was ten years ago. I think the worst of strangers faster. I am more certain of my own side and more contemptuous of the other. I have tried, at times, to leave the rooms. I have not managed to leave them fully. They pull at me even as I write this sentence.

I do not say this to confess. I say it because the book will ring false if I pretend it is not true for me. I suspect it is true for most of us.



In the room made of people who agree with you exactly, your edges do not get sanded. Theirs do not either.

And over time, you come to trust the ten thousand online more than the neighbours you actually live among. The online room becomes the real room. The street becomes the place where other people live — people who do not share your room, who do not understand what is obvious to you,

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who are, in some small sense, not quite your people anymore.

This has happened across the world. In many rooms, at once. Each room is full of people who understand exactly what is obvious. Each room is certain the other rooms are mad, or bad, or both.

The streets hold all the rooms at once. The streets get quieter. The streets get a little afraid.

WHAT YOU CANNOT SAY



Not long ago, you could say more or less what you thought. You might get argued with. You might be told you were wrong. But you could say the thing, and keep your job, and be at the table on Sunday.

This is not quite true anymore. Not everywhere. Not for everyone. But enough that most people I know have learned to watch their words, at least in certain rooms. The office. The school where their children go. The posts they sign with their real name.

The penalties are not legal. Nobody is being arrested. The penalties are social. You can lose your job. Your colleagues can decide you are a problem. Your name can become a warning.

So people self-edit. They do not say, at work, what they say at home. They do not say, at home, what they say to their closest friend. The circle of people in front of whom they are fully honest gets smaller every year.



When many people self-edit at once, something happens to the shared conversation. Whole subjects disappear. Not

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because anyone defeated them. Because they were made impossible to raise.

Everyone knows the silences are there. Nobody can name them without breaking them. The shared air gets thinner. The arguments that would have sharpened us stop happening out loud. They move underground. They run hotter there than they would have run in daylight.

A civilisation that cannot talk about things is not more unified. It is only more quiet. The quiet, over time, becomes its own pressure.

THE KITCHEN THAT USED TO BE FULL



My grandmother had five children. My mother had three. My sister has one. I have none, and am, if I am honest, not sure I want any.

This is not a complaint, even against myself. I am a thoughtful person, I think. I have reasons. My reasons are not wrong. They are also not, on their own, the whole story.

But if you put us in a line — grandmother, mother, sister, me — and count the children in each kitchen, you get five, three, one, none. If you do the same with most of the families on most of the streets I know, the line looks about the same. The direction is the same.

There was a time when people said this was a Western thing. That some people in some parts of the world were having fewer children, and others were having many. That the balance was shifting, that one way of life was being outgrown by another.

I used to think this too. Then I read things, and talked to people who had looked at the numbers carefully, and I had to change my mind.



Iran — a country run by a religious government that has tried hard to make its people have more children — is now having fewer than it needs. Turkey, about the same. Much of North Africa, about the same. Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, India — all falling. China has fallen further and faster than almost any country in history. Korea and Japan and Singapore have fallen further still. Parts of Italy and Spain will halve within a few generations if the trend holds.

Whatever is causing it, it is not a Christian thing or a Muslim thing or a Western thing or an Eastern thing. It is a human thing. It is happening, at different speeds, almost everywhere.

The researchers who study this do not agree on why. Different theories weight different things. The availability of contraception. The price of houses. The shape of modern work. The hours spent on screens. The thinning of extended family. The shift in what adulthood is felt to be for. The quiet doubt that this is a world to bring a child into. No single one of these, on its own, explains the scale. Some combination of them, together with things we have probably not yet named properly, is turning humans away from having children, in almost every civilisation that takes on the new arrangement.

We can see the conditions. We cannot yet see, cleanly, the cause.

What we can see is the shape. Five. Three. Two. None. Across the world.

Something is being decided here that nobody chose. The decisions are happening in individual kitchens, one family at a time. But the shape they make together is the shape of a species quietly becoming smaller.

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The old in every country will outnumber the young. The tax and the care and the promises will not balance. The countries that have been topping up their workforces with young people from elsewhere will find that elsewhere is running out of young people too.

No civilisation we know of has come through a moment like this. We do not know what is on the other side, because no-one has been there yet.

Five. Three. Two. None. Watch the kitchens.

WHAT A HOME USED TO BE



Different people, in different places, believe very different things about what a home should be. I am going to try to say this carefully, because whichever side I lean towards, I will lose half my readers.

For most of human history, in most places, a home was the place where the adults worked and the children grew up, and most of that work and growing up happened together. The farm. The shop. The craft. The adults were there. The children were there. The extended family was nearby. The work of the home — the cooking, the cleaning, the caring — was a real job, mostly done by the women, and mostly considered important.

In the last century, this changed. Work left the home. The men went out to factories and offices. The women, in many places, stayed home and raised the children. Then, in the last sixty years, the women went out to work too.

This last change is one of the biggest in human history. It gave women freedoms and capacities they had never had. It gave the economy a workforce it had never had. It also changed the home.



Different traditions look at this change differently. Some see it as a liberation. Some see it as a loss. Some see it as both. Thoughtful people, including many thoughtful women, hold each of these views.

I am not going to tell you which is right. That is for you. What I will say is this: when the women went out to work, the work they had been doing at home did not disappear. The cooking, the cleaning, the raising of children, the holding of the extended family. Somebody still had to do all of it.

In some families, the men took on more. In some, the women did two jobs. In many, the work was outsourced to other women, paid to do it. In many others, the work simply did not get done. The family got thinner. The children were raised, for much of their waking hours, by people who were not their family. The old were housed somewhere else. The cousins scattered.

The home became a smaller thing. A place people slept, mostly. The things that used to happen in homes — the raising, the caring, the keeping of the family's memory — happened in other places, if they happened at all. Often, quietly, they did not.

THE CHILDREN WHO ARE GROWING UP  
IN THIS



I have a niece called Rosa. She is seven.

I watch Rosa sometimes, when I visit. She has a phone. Not fully her own, but close to it. She has a tablet for school. Another for videos. A game thing that lights up and talks to her when she is bored. By the time she is ten she will have spent more hours looking at screens than her grandmother had by the time she was forty.

She already knows the shape of a life on a screen. She knows how to show her good side for a picture. She knows which girls at her school have more followers and which have fewer. She does not yet know there is another way to be a child. She may find out. She may not.



Her parents are doing what they can. They are careful parents. More careful than my parents were, by a long way. They know more about child development than my parents knew. They worry more. They do more things with her. They schedule her life in a way my life was not scheduled.

And yet. Rosa, at seven, is already tired in a way I was not tired at seven. There is a flatness around her eyes when the

tablet has been on too long. She has anxieties my generation did not have at her age. She has been told about climate, and about strangers, and about things that could go wrong in the world, in a way no seven-year-old should have had to think about.

I do not blame her parents. They are doing the best they can inside the arrangement we have given them. The arrangement is the problem, not the parenting. The arrangement was not built for seven-year-olds.



Rosa is the generation that will inherit everything we have walked through. The quiet kitchens. The drifting young men. The debts. The tribes. The machines. The race above us.

She will be old enough to vote near the end of the next decade. Old enough to have children of her own, if she chooses, somewhere near the end of the one after. Whatever we have done by then, she will have to live in.

I wonder, sometimes, what she will think of us. Of the phones we gave her. Of the world we handed her.

I wonder, sometimes, whether she will have children.

I hope she does. I am not sure.

If she does not, something that has been true of our species for as long as there have been people will have stopped being true. And we will, among our other inheritances, be the ones who stopped it.

THE WORK THAT IS NO LONGER THERE



My father worked at Ashcroft's, a factory that made small metal parts for washing machines. He did the same job for thirty years. He knew the men on his line. He knew the foreman. He came home tired, and smelling of oil, and he knew the washing machines in half the kitchens on our street contained something he had touched.

Ashcroft's is not there anymore. The building is still there. It is storage units now. You can rent one for forty pounds a month and keep the things you do not have room for. Some of the men my father worked with lived long enough to see the storage units go up. Most did not.

The work my father did moved to a factory in a country I have never been to. For a while, the children of Ashcroft's workers found other things — office work, call centres, a big distribution warehouse that opened on the edge of town. Those jobs paid more, and the work was easier, and everyone agreed this was progress.

Now something is happening to those jobs too. The call centre closed last year. The warehouse is being retooled, they say, because a machine can move the boxes faster. The office work is being done, more and more, by machines that write letters better than most people can.



The machines doing this work are new. They are not the machines my father would have recognised. They do not stamp metal or lift things. They read, and write, and decide, and respond. They are being built, quietly, while everyone is arguing about other things. We will come back to them near the end of the walk. For now, only this: the work they are taking is the work most people had assumed would always need a human being.



I watch the young people in my town and I see something I do not know how to describe. Many of them have finished their school. Some have been to a university. Few of them have work my father would have called work.

Some do things online. Some make videos. Some deliver food on electric bicycles. Some do not work at all, and the state pays them enough to keep the lights on. None of this is what my father would have called a job.

A few of them are doing extraordinary things. Making music. Writing. Building small businesses that did not exist before. A small number of them, quietly, are creating a kind of renaissance.

But for most, work does not supply what work used to supply. It does not supply the place to go every morning. It does not supply the men on the line. It does not supply the feeling of being needed by the town.

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We are learning, slowly and painfully, that work was never only about money. Work was about having a place. Money was part of it. Money was not the whole of it.

What happens when the money can come without the work? What happens when the state can feed you, but the town has no use for you?

We are finding out.

THE MAN AT THE BUS STOP



There is a man I see some mornings at the bus stop near my house. He is maybe twenty-eight. He looks like he does not sleep well.

We have never spoken. But I have watched him, over months, and I have noticed things.

He does not seem to be going to work. He does not seem to be going anywhere in particular. He is looking at his phone. The phone is doing something to his face. He smiles, sometimes. More often he does not. He watches whatever is on the phone the way my father used to watch television in the last years. A half-attention. Not really seeing. Not really here.

Whatever he is watching has been chosen for him. Something on the other side of the phone has learned, minute by minute, what holds his attention. It is not personal. The same thing is happening to my niece's tablet, and my own phone, and probably yours. We are all being watched by something that has learned to watch us.

I have wondered if he has a girlfriend. I have wondered if he has any friend he talks to in the evenings. I have wondered what he is going to do today, if anything. I have wondered if his parents are alive and whether he sees them.

I do not know. But I know there are many young men like him. The people who count these things say so. The young men, in particular, are not doing well. They are not finding work that feels useful. They are not finding partners. They are not having friends, or children, or purposes.



The state gives some of them enough money to keep them fed and housed. This is better than letting them starve. But nobody has told them what they are meant to do with the time.

A few find something. Make a craft. Raise a child well. Start something small. Study something. Build a thing. A small number of them, quietly, are doing beautifully with what they have.

Most do not. Most watch screens. Drink. Take something. Drift.

It is not their fault. Nobody has told them what the time is for. The institutions that used to give young men somewhere to go — the factory, the union, the church, the army — are gone or shrunken. The family that used to absorb them is smaller. The neighbourhood is full of people they do not know, watching their own phones.

When my grandfather was twenty-eight, he knew where to stand. He knew what was expected of him. He knew the people who expected it.

The man at the bus stop does not.

Young men who have no place and no purpose are, historically, the most dangerous category of person a society can produce. Not because they are bad. Because they are

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human, and they need a place and a purpose, and if the society does not give them one, they will find one themselves, and the one they find will not always be one the society wanted.

I do not know what happens to him. I hope he finds something. I worry that most will not.

THE FRIENDSHIPS WE HAVE LET THIN



I had a friend called Helen. I mean a specific kind of friend. The kind you see every week because you want to. The kind who knows your moods before you name them, who has seen you in most of the rooms of your life. The kind who would come if you called at two in the morning, and would expect you to come if she called.

I had three or four of those, for a long time. Now I have Helen, maybe. Maybe less than Helen, if I am honest. I see her perhaps three times a year now. We shared a flat once, years ago. I was there when her mother died. She was there when mine was first ill. Now we send a text on our birthdays. Now a Christmas card arrives with a photograph of her children that I have to study for a moment before I recognise the older one.

I did not notice this thinning while it was happening. It happened the way Hadley's closed. A postponed coffee. A meeting that did not happen that month. A decade later, I looked around, and the friendship I had thought was still there was not quite still there. It had gone quiet. I had let it go quiet.



I do not think I am unusual. Most of the men I know, of my age, have fewer real friendships than they did at thirty. A few of the women I know have held theirs better. Not all of them. Some of the women tell me the same story.

The young, I am told, have even less of this than we do. Their friendships live mostly on their phones. The loneliness numbers are the highest anyone has ever measured, and it is the young, especially young men, who are loneliest. Something is not working about how we are doing friendship now.



Friendship was one of the quiet holdings-together of the old world. Not the big relationships — marriage, family — but the ordinary ones. The people you saw at the pub. The people you played football with. The people you worked alongside for ten years and kept up with after.

These friendships did not feel like much, in their moments. You did not think about them. You just had them. They were the background of your life.

When they thin, you do not notice, because they were never supposed to be noticed. You only notice later, when something hard happens, and you look around for the people who used to be there, and find you have not called them in two years, and you are not sure you can start now.

This is a quiet loss. It is part of the larger loss the book has been describing. We have let the ordinary things thin because we were busy with the extraordinary ones. We are finding out, slowly, that the ordinary things were the ones we most needed.

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The woman who runs the corner shop still remembers what I buy. Milk, a paper, sometimes a tin of the specific soup my sister likes that nobody else seems to, when she and Rosa come over. She has it ready on the counter some mornings before I have finished saying hello. I had not noticed how rare that had become until she did it again last Tuesday. I walked home thinking about it for longer than the walk took.

THE ELDERS WE NO LONGER VISIT



My grandmother lived in our house until she died. She slept in the back room. She ate with us. She told us stories we heard a hundred times and heard again, because that was what grandmothers were for.

When she got sick, my mother nursed her. When she could not get out of bed, my mother fed her. When she died, she died in the back room, and we all knew what was happening, and we were sad, but we were not surprised, because we had seen it coming.

My niece Rosa will not grow up with this. By the time she was old enough to know what a grandmother was, grandmothers were kept somewhere else. A place called a home. The name is strange, because it is not a home.

I understand why this happens. Nobody has time. The women who used to do the caring are at work. The houses are smaller. The medical care is specialised. The old, it turns out, need more than a family can easily provide.



But something is lost. Something bigger than we have admitted.

When the old are kept separately, the young do not see them. When the young do not see them, they do not learn from them. When they do not learn from them, the long memory of a family — the reasons certain things were done, the knowledge of how a marriage is held for fifty years — is lost.

And when the old die in places where strangers are paid to care for them, the young do not see death. They do not learn what is required of them when it comes. When it comes for their own parents, they will not know what to do. They will do the only thing that seems available. They will call a home.

The old in most societies for most of history were the carriers of the community's memory. They were consulted. They were respected. They were difficult, often, and that was part of it.

We have cut ourselves off from our elders, and we have not yet felt the full cost. The cost is not only what they would have taught us. The cost is who we become, when we have nobody to teach us.

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Though I saw something, yesterday, walking home. An old man on a bench, and a boy of perhaps eight sitting beside him. Not a grandson, I do not think. Some other arrangement. The old man was showing the boy how to fold a piece of paper into something — a bird, or a boat, I could not see. The boy was concentrating the way children concentrate when they have chosen to. Neither of them was holding a phone. I walked past and they did not look up. I have thought about them since.

THE RELIGION-SHAPED HOLE



I am not religious. I was raised in a religion. I left it, quietly, in my twenties. I do not think I am coming back.

But I have noticed something about the time I grew up in and the time I live in now. When I was small, most people around me shared, more or less, a religion. They disagreed about the details. They fought about which version was truer. But they shared a language. What was right. What was wrong. What was owed to neighbours. What was owed to the dead. What marriage was for.

They did not always live up to the language. Nobody does. But they had it. When something difficult happened — a death, a scandal, a birth — they knew, without having to decide again each time, what to do.

Most of that is gone now. For most of the people I know, the shared religious language is no longer there. We have to decide each time, from scratch, what to do.



The hunger religion used to feed has not disappeared. The hunger for meaning. For community. For something larger than yourself. For a sense that your life has a shape and the shape matters.

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The hunger is still there. It is just being fed by other things.

It is being fed by politics, which now works for many people the way religion used to. The enemies are clear. The righteous are clear. The cause is larger than yourself.

It is being fed by wellness, by diets, by workouts, by the optimisation of one's own body, which has become, for many, a full substitute for a spiritual life.

It is being fed by online tribes, where the community is found and the belonging is instant.

It is being fed by causes which take the form of religion without the containers religion had developed over centuries. The moral intensity is as high as any religion ever had. The sense of moral community is thinner. The tolerance for doubt is lower.

None of these feed the hunger well, over time. They burn hot and then burn out. They create enemies faster than they create friends. They do not know what to do with the old, or the dying, or the quietly unhappy. They were not built for these things. Religions were.

I am not saying we should all go back to religion. I do not think we can. But the hole religion left is not an empty space. It is a space that is being filled. And the things filling it are feeding us badly.

Notice the hole. Notice what is filling it.

THE TRUST THAT HAS GONE QUIET



When I was a child, my parents did not lock the door during the day. The neighbours came in if they needed sugar or a hand with something. Mr Dodd the milkman knew where the money was kept for the bill. Mrs Gorse at number thirty-one minded us if my mother had to go to the doctor.

I lock the front door now, even during the day. There is no milkman. If I hire someone to fix something, there is paperwork, and a photograph of their identity card, and a review afterwards, because if he is bad I want to warn the next person, and if I am bad he wants to warn the next person. We are all watching each other, because nobody trusts the old unspoken arrangements any more.



Trust was one of the quiet miracles of the world I grew up in. It was invisible, because it worked. Nobody counted it. Nobody priced it. It just sat there, under everything, making everything else easier.

People trusted the news, because there were three channels and they all seemed serious. People trusted the banks, because the banks were solid and boring. People trusted the doctors, the teachers, the judges, the police, the

government, the church — not entirely, but mostly, enough to get on with life.

Most of those trusts have gone quiet. Not at once. One by one, and then faster, and then nearly all at once near the end. The news became a thousand pieces of news and nobody knew which to believe. The banks collapsed and were bailed out and carried on paying themselves bonuses. The experts disagreed in public and each side was paid by somebody. The government lied about things everyone could check. The church, in some places, protected the worst of itself. The judges, the teachers, the police — each one got its scandal, and the scandals did not stop coming.



A low-trust society is a more expensive society, in every way. More locks, more contracts, more insurance, more cameras, more lawyers, more verification. All of this costs money, and the money has to come from somewhere, and it mostly comes from the people who are paying to be verified.

A low-trust society is also a lonelier society. You cannot easily befriend people you do not trust. You cannot easily help strangers you do not trust. You cannot easily leave your children with them for an afternoon. Trust was the lubricant of ordinary kindness. Without it, ordinary kindness gets rarer and more expensive too.

The quiet loss of trust, across the last forty years, is under everything else we have been walking through. The tribes, the silences at dinner, the lonely young men, the thinning friendships, the state reaching for harder tools. All

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of it is made worse by the fact that, as a society, we no longer quite believe in each other.

Trust, once gone, is hard to rebuild. It took centuries to make, in the places it was made. It took decades to lose. It may take more than a lifetime to find again.

THE NUMBERS THAT DO NOT ADD UP



My neighbour Alan retired last year. He worked for the local council for forty-one years. The pension he was promised at twenty-two is not the pension he is getting at sixty-seven. It still pays. It pays a little less each year, in what it actually buys. He does not complain. He says he is lucky. He is lucky, compared to what is coming for anyone younger.

Countries borrow money. A country, like a family, sometimes pays for things today that will be earned back tomorrow. This is how most of the roads and schools and hospitals got built.

The borrowing works when the tomorrow the country was borrowing against actually arrives. When there are enough young workers to pay the loan back. When the economy grows. When the tax base holds up.

The tomorrow many countries were borrowing against is no longer arriving the way it was meant to. Fewer young workers, because of the quiet kitchens. Slower economies, because the factories have gone. Tax bases shrinking, because the biggest companies have found ways to pay their taxes somewhere else.

The debts have kept growing. The interest on the debts has kept growing. The promises to today's pensioners, and

tomorrow's, have kept growing. The gap between what was promised and what can be paid is very large, and it gets larger every year.



At some point, something gives. The old promises are quietly reduced. The money itself is made to be worth less, through inflation. The state keeps its form but loses its capacity. The generation that receives the reduction is not the generation that made the promise.

This does not arrive as a crisis. That is the strange part. It arrives as a slow lowering. The pension that buys a little less each year. The hospital that has been waiting for a new wing for ten years. The school that is not quite as good as the one your parents went to. The road that is a little worse than the road you remember.

The crisis, if it comes, comes at the end, when all the small lowerings have added up to a country that cannot quite do the things it is supposed to do. And by then, fixing it is very hard, because the young people who would have fixed it were never born.

Meanwhile, the army has been shrinking for years. The peace has been so long that a strong army seemed like a waste. This will turn out, I think, to have been a mistake. A strong army is invisible when it is working. You only notice it was doing something when it stops.

THE BIGGEST PLAYERS HAVE LEFT THE  
ROOM



The bank that used to be on our high street was a building. It had a manager. The manager lived two streets away. If you had a problem, you went in and talked to him, and sometimes he said yes and sometimes he said no, but he said it to your face, and he paid his taxes in the same town you did.

The biggest companies in the world used to be like that. Tied to places. A factory was in a town. A bank had a country. The country could tax it. The country had power over it.

This is not how the biggest companies of our time work. I had this explained to me more than once before I understood it. They exist in clouds, in code, in money that can cross a border in the time it takes to blink. Where the customers are, where the profits are recorded, where the owners live, and whose laws apply, can all be different places. The country whose citizens a company serves may have no real hold on the company at all.

This means the country cannot tax the company properly. It cannot make rules the company has to follow. The country watches, a little helplessly, as the biggest winners of the economy pay very little into the systems that made their winning possible.



When the biggest winners visibly refuse to pay in, something happens to everyone else. People who used to pay their share, without thinking about it, begin to think about it. Why should I, if they won't? The willingness to pay in was never only about the law. It was about a sense that everyone was playing by the same rules.

When that sense goes, the willingness goes with it. The tax base weakens at every level, not only at the top. The state loses capacity. The capacity has to be replaced by more borrowing, or more pressure on the middle, or by letting the schools and the roads slowly fall behind.

And somewhere, meanwhile, the biggest companies sit in offices in countries that ask less of them, and count their profits, and remain the most important organisations in the lives of hundreds of millions of people they will never pay a penny for.

THE SHARED THINGS THAT ARE NO  
LONGER SHARED



There are things that do not belong to any one country. Rivers. Air. Fish in the sea. The climate. The weather.

My uncle fished the same stretch of coast for forty years. He stopped last summer. He said the fish he had known were not there anymore, and the fish that were there were younger and smaller each season, and he did not want to be the last man pulling them out. He did not blame anyone in particular. He said everyone doing the same thing, everywhere, at once, had done it. No-one person could stop, because stopping alone would only mean somebody else caught what you didn't.

For most of history, these were so abundant that no country had to think about sharing them. There was always more river, always more fish, always more air.

There is not always more now. In a number of places, what used to be abundant has started to run out. Or at any rate, it has started to be taken faster than it can replace itself.



Some of what follows I have had to read to understand. I offer it plainly.

There is a river called the Nile. It runs through several countries. The country at the end is Egypt, which depends on the water more than it depends on almost anything else. The countries upstream have begun to dam the river, for their own development. Each dam is reasonable from the point of view of the country building it. The dams together threaten Egypt in a way Egypt cannot stop, because Egypt is downstream.

The same thing is happening on many rivers. The Tigris, where Turkey controls the headwaters and Iraq and Syria depend on the flow. The Mekong, where China's dams affect Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand. The Indus, where India and Pakistan have fought over the water for a lifetime.

The same story about fish in the sea, caught faster than they can grow back, by many countries at once, none of which wants to be the one that stops first.

The same about the minerals in the phones and the batteries — cobalt, lithium, rare earths — from a small number of places, whose governments are not always stable, whose environmental costs are borne far from the people who will use what the minerals become.

The same about the climate itself, which no country wants to pay the full cost of protecting, because any one country that does will find its industries moving to another country that does not.

The old international order was built to prevent countries from invading each other. It was not built to handle countries taking each other's rivers, or each other's fish, or

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each other's air. We do not have rules for these things. We are making them up as we go. And we are not doing it well.

THE BIRDS THAT USED TO BE HERE



There used to be more birds in my garden.

I did not notice at the time. Birds are like old friends. They are the background of your life, and you do not count them, and then one day you realise you have not seen one of them for a long time.

The swallows, which came every summer when I was a child, have not come for four years. The hedgehog that used to visit the compost has not visited in ten. The cuckoo, which I remember hearing every spring, I have not heard in twenty.

This is not my imagination. The scientists who count these things say the numbers are measurable. In many places, the insects that used to hit your windscreen on a summer drive have gone. The songbirds have thinned. The specific beetles and moths and butterflies of my childhood are, in many of the places I knew, no longer there.



I do not know exactly why. Neither do the scientists, fully. Pesticides are part of it. Habitat loss is part of it. The way farming has changed is part of it. Climate is part of it. Each part is itself complicated.

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What we know is the shape. Quieter skies. Quieter hedges. Quieter summers. Fewer of the small living things that used to fill the background of an ordinary life.



I mention this because it is one of the losses we have talked about least. The other pressures get arguments. The climate gets arguments. The politics gets arguments.

The disappearance of ordinary living things from ordinary places does not get arguments. It gets a quiet sadness from people who remember, and no notice at all from people who did not see what there was to lose.

My niece, when she walks in the countryside, does not miss what is not there. She cannot. She did not meet it. She takes for granted that the fields are quieter than they used to be.

Somewhere in the future, one hopes, somebody will miss what we did not miss. Somebody will say: there used to be songbirds. There used to be insects. There used to be hedgehogs. And they will mean: there used to be a whole living texture of the world that my grandparents let go.

I do not know what to do about this. But I wanted to name it. Not everything important is political. Some of the worst losses are the ones nobody is fighting about, because nobody is quite sure what fight to have.

THE EMISSIONS WE SENT SOMEWHERE  
ELSE



Here is a small piece of dishonesty that, once someone pointed it out to me, I could not un-see.

The rich countries have been claiming, for about thirty years, that they are reducing their emissions. That the air they put into the sky is less bad than it was. That they are, slowly, doing what needs to be done.

This is, in a narrow way, true. The air coming out of the chimneys in Britain, and Germany, and France, and the United States, is less bad than it was.

But the chimneys are not where they used to be.

The factories that made the things the rich countries buy were, one by one, moved to other countries. China, for a long time. Now also Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Mexico. The factories still exist. The air still comes out of the chimneys. But the chimneys are in different countries now, and the emissions get counted against those countries, not against the rich countries that are buying what the factories make.



If you look honestly at what a British person, or a German person, or an American person, actually causes in emissions — including the factories in China that make their phones and their clothes — the emissions have not gone down very much. They have moved.

The rich countries have claimed credit for a move they did not make. The countries where the factories now are have been blamed for emissions that are not really theirs to account for.

The whole international argument about climate has been built on the assumption that the rich countries have been doing their part. They have not, mostly, been doing their part. They have been getting their part done by other people, on other land, and then counting themselves clean.

I am not saying this to blame anyone. The climate does not care which country's accountant wrote the number on which page. It only cares about the air.

The air is not getting better fast enough to matter. This is part of why. The move was an accounting trick, not a solution. An accounting trick that runs for thirty years becomes its own kind of lie.

THE RACE FOR WHAT IS ABOVE US



I want to tell you a thing that is happening now, that most people do not know is happening. I did not know myself until a few years ago, and when I first read about it I thought it was science fiction. It is not. It is as real as Hadley's closing.

The countries that need energy and raw materials, and cannot easily get more of either on this planet without fighting over them, have started to look at what is above us. The sun, which is stronger in space than on the ground. The moon, which has minerals. The asteroids, which have more.

This has been discussed for seventy years as something that might happen eventually. It has become, in the last few years, something that is happening now.



The United States has passed a law saying that its citizens own whatever they extract from space. Luxembourg has passed a similar law. The United Arab Emirates has passed one. China has a moon programme. Russia has one. India has one. Private companies in various countries are building the machines that will do the work.

The old treaty that says nobody can own anything in space was written in the nineteen-sixties. Everyone has quietly stopped pretending it matters.

The moon has a few specific places that are more valuable than the rest. The poles have nearly permanent sunlight, which means solar panels would work there continuously. The craters hold ice that could be turned into fuel and into water. There is not much of either. The countries and companies that get there first will claim them. There is no-one to tell them they cannot. There is no court that can settle a dispute about a crater on the moon.

The work of getting there, building there, and defending what is built there, will not be done by humans. Our bones weaken. Our muscles fade. The radiation is too much for us. The work will be done by machines — by the same thinking machines we saw at the bus stop, and in the rooms where we find our tribes, and which we will meet more fully near the end of this walk.

And the rules by which those machines operate — what they are willing to do, what they refuse to do, whose side they are on, who their builders taught them to trust — will go with them.



This is not a far-future problem. This is a problem measured in decades, not centuries. Most of the arrangements that will shape how our species operates beyond this planet, for a very long time, are being set up now, by people under the same pressures as everyone else,

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in countries that do not trust each other, with machines the humans are still learning to build.

We are not having the conversation we should be having about this. The people who could be having it are too busy racing.

HOW IT ALL FITS TOGETHER



We have walked through a lot. Let me set it next to itself.

Hadley's closing. The subjects we cannot speak at dinner. The online rooms. The things that cannot be said. The quieter kitchens. The smaller homes. Rosa growing up inside the screens. The lost work. The man at the bus stop. Helen, who I no longer see. The elders we no longer visit. The religion-shaped hole. The quiet loss of trust. The numbers that do not add up. The biggest players gone from the room. The rivers, the fish, the birds. The air we sent somewhere else. The race above us.

Each of these, alone, would be survivable. Shops have always closed. Dinner subjects have always been awkward. Work has always changed.

What is unusual about our time is that all of them are happening at once, and each is making the others worse.



The online rooms make the dinner arguments impossible. The impossible arguments make the quieter kitchens easier, because who would bring a child into a home where the parents cannot talk? The kitchens make the debt harder. The debt makes the state weaker. The weaker state makes more

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men like the one at the bus stop. The men at the bus stops make the elections stranger. The strange elections make the biggest players more likely to leave. The biggest players leaving makes the debt worse. The thinning friendships make the loneliness worse. The loneliness makes the rooms more powerful. And all the while, the birds disappear, the trust leaks away, the rivers are being fought over, and the race above our heads is going on without most of us knowing it is.

This is a lot for any country to hold at once. It is more, I think, than most countries can hold at once.

Something, somewhere, is going to give.

I do not know what. Nobody does. But when pressures of this size build up, they tend not to release gently.

THE THING WE FORGOT TO NOTICE



Before we walk into what happens when the pressures release, I want to stop one more time, and say something I have not quite said yet. It is the thing I had to write the rest of the book to realise I needed to say.

Everything we have walked through is a loss. Hadley's. The dinners. The kitchens. Helen. The birds. The trust. Each piece has been a thing that used to be there and is no longer there, or that used to work and no longer quite works.

This is not an accident of tone. It is the shape of what is happening.



Here is what I think we forgot to notice, which I did not understand until I sat down to write this walk.

The world I grew up in — the ordinary, unremarkable world of the late twentieth century — was not ordinary. It was a specific and unusual arrangement that my generation, and my parents' generation, took entirely for granted.

Peace across the rich world. Cheap energy that powered everything we did. A shared culture that meant strangers mostly understood each other. Functioning institutions that mostly worked. Trusted news that mostly told the truth.

Large families. Extended families nearby. Neighbours who knew each other. Shops that stayed open for generations. Birds in the garden. A sense that the future would be more or less like the past, only a little better.

None of this was normal, in the long story of human civilisation. Most of human history has not been this. Most places, most of the time, have been poorer, harder, more violent, more uncertain. The arrangement we took for granted was the specific result of a particular combination — a wealthy post-war West, backed by cheap oil, defended by a large military, underpinned by shared religion and shared stories, sustained by young populations having children the way humans had always had children.

That arrangement is ending. It has been ending for a long time. We have been living through the ending without quite noticing, because the ending is slow and our lives are short.



This is the thing I had to say before we walk further. The pressures we have been describing are not a storm passing through a normal world. They are the end of a particular and unusually good arrangement, and the beginning of something we do not yet know the shape of.

When you understand this, the rest of the walk is different. The pressures are not things going wrong in a world that is otherwise fine.

They are the world, turning.



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What lies on the other side of the turn, we do not know. Humans have lived in many arrangements across their history. Some were better than ours. Many were worse. What we are moving towards is not, by any law, either. It depends on what we do between now and there.

This is why I am writing the walk. Not because the turning can be stopped. It cannot. But because what comes after the turning will be shaped by what we practise, and pass on, and carry, through the turning.

We are not living in a normal time. We are living at the end of one, and the beginning of another.

    Holding that, clearly, is the first thing.

THE EVENT NO-ONE SEES COMING



When pressures of the kind we have been describing build up, from what I have read they tend to release through an event.

The event comes in one of two shapes.

Sometimes it is small in itself, and out of all proportion to what it unleashes. A single act of violence. A particular death. A funeral that becomes something bigger than a funeral. Something that, in a calm time, would be absorbed and forgotten. In a pressured time, it becomes the thing around which everything reorganises.

Sometimes the event is itself large — a financial collapse somewhere important, a harvest failure, a war that starts somewhere far enough away that it seemed to be somebody else's problem. These events are not small. But they are, themselves, releases of other pressures, and they trigger further releases that would not have happened had the first pressure not released first.



I cannot tell you which kind will come first. Nobody can.

I also cannot tell you when. It may be soon. It may be decades away. What I have described may take ten years to

unfold, or fifty, or more. The shape is the argument. The clock is not. If you are young, you will probably live through at least some of it. If you are old, you may not. Your children will.

Whatever the event turns out to be, and whenever it arrives, it will not, on its own, have caused what follows. The pressure was already loaded. The event is only the release. If this event had not happened, another one would have.

After the event, things that had been unsayable become common. Things that had been holding together stop holding. The polite fictions everyone was maintaining start to fall. The people who had been watching their words stop watching them, because too many others have stopped watching theirs.

And then the sorting, the money moving, the people moving, the state reaching for harder tools, will move quickly. Faster than anyone expected. Faster than most countries' institutions can handle.

I do not say this to frighten you. I say it so that, when it happens, you recognise it. The event is the match, not the fuel. The fuel has been there for a long time.

WHEN PEOPLE SORT THEMSELVES



Under pressure, people sort. They sort by the things they inherited from their families and their places — religion, region, language, history. It is not, mostly, a political choice. It is defensive. When the shared world feels as though it cannot protect them, people reach for the older worlds that used to.

You see it in small things first. What people wear. Who they marry. Which streets they move to. Which streets they leave. Which schools they choose. Which stories they tell their children about what kind of country this is.

Over time, the small things become big things. The streets sort. The schools sort. The friendships sort. Not completely. There are always exceptions. There are always people who refuse the sorting, and we will come back to them later. But enough sort that the texture of daily life changes.

People begin to describe their country as two countries, or three, sharing the same map. The descriptions are not entirely wrong.



This has happened before, many times. The historians who study such things will tell you the pattern is well known. Northern Ireland had two countries in one for thirty years. Lebanon has been three or four for generations. Yugoslavia was six, peacefully, for decades, then not peacefully for eighteen months, then a set of separate countries that had to be built in blood.

What we are going into is not new in its pattern. It is new in its scale, and in the speed of the online tribes, and in the fact that it is happening in countries that considered themselves past this kind of thing. But the shape is known. The people who have read the long histories are not, I think, surprised.

When the sorting is this deep, the state, which was built to rule one country, finds itself trying to rule several. This turns out to be much harder than ruling one. The state reaches for new tools.

Before we come to the state's tools, two other things move first. The money. Then the people.

WHEN THE MONEY GOES FIRST



Money is the most nervous thing in any society. It moves before people move. It moves before laws change. Sometimes it moves before the people who own it have quite decided to move it.

When pressures of this kind begin to release, money starts to move towards places that feel safer. Safer does not always mean calmer. Sometimes it means somewhere with more weapons, or more food, or values closer to those of the people sending the money. Different money goes to different places, depending on who owns it and what they are afraid of.

This is not, usually, about political ideology. It is about where people feel their grandchildren will be welcome.



Once the money has begun to move, the places it leaves lose something they had been quietly relying on. The tax base. The investment. The confidence of everyone else, who sees the money leaving and begins to wonder whether they should leave too.

The places the money arrives at also change. Not only in their wealth. They inherit, with the money, some of the

character of the people who sent it. The arrivals buy property, fund institutions, shape the place in their image. Within a generation, the place is a different place.

Sometimes money moves in panic, rather than by affinity. Then every country loses some, no country gains much, and value is destroyed rather than moved. This has happened before, in times of general crisis.

Either way, when the money has begun to move, the people are usually not far behind.

WHEN THE PEOPLE FOLLOW



Money moves first. People move second. The movement of people, when it comes, is larger in its consequences, because people bring not only their labour but their cultures, their memories, their wounds, and their stories of why they had to leave.

Two kinds of movement tend to happen at once, and they are not the same movement.

There are the skilled and the wealthy, who move to the places they have chosen. They bring their money. They bring their children to good schools. They are welcomed, mostly. They are a small flow, but their effect is large, because they take, from the places they leave, the people those places most needed.

And there are the desperate, who move to the places that cannot easily turn them away. They come from wars, from food failures, from collapsing economies, from climate pressures that have made their land no longer workable. They are a large flow. They are not, mostly, welcomed, because they arrive in numbers that strain the places they reach.



Different countries handle these two flows with different success. Few handle both well.

There is a thing about the desperate flow that very few people in public life are willing to say. The countries they are coming from are also ageing. The birth rates there, as we saw in the kitchens, have fallen too. Within a generation or two, those countries will be struggling to hold on to their own young people. The flow of desperate movers will slow, not because anyone has solved their reasons for moving, but because there are not enough young people left to move.

The rich countries that have been relying on the flow will find, one day, that the flow has stopped. And they will find they have not built the alternatives they should have built while the flow was coming.

That day is not today. But it is closer than anyone in charge wants to admit.

WHEN THE STATE REACHES FOR  
HARDER TOOLS



I was paying for my shopping last week at the supermarket by the station. The machine beeped and then asked me to look at it. A small camera above the screen. It wanted my face. I do not remember agreeing to this. It may be that I did, somewhere, in some small print years ago. It may be that nobody asked. I do not know. I looked, and the machine let me pay.

On the way out of the station that morning, the gates had not opened for the woman in front of me. She held her phone to the reader a second time, and a third, and the gates stayed shut. An attendant in a high-visibility jacket was standing a few yards away. She looked at the woman, but only for a moment. Then she looked back at the screen in her hand, which was telling her something about the woman that the woman could not see. She did not look up again until the woman had turned and walked back the way she came.

Neither of these things, on its own, is a crisis. Together they are a small glimpse of something larger.

When the pressures have released, and the sorting has deepened, and the money and the people have begun to move, the state finds itself in trouble. Its old tools — shared stories, trust, broadly accepted laws — depended on a

shared substrate that is no longer there. It reaches for newer tools, which do not depend on shared trust at all.

Surveillance of what people write to each other. Monitoring of what money moves where. Identity systems tied to your daily activities. Automatic enforcement of rules that used to require a human to notice the breach.

No government chose these tools because it preferred them. They chose them because they were what was available. I suspect most governments facing this, of any political colour, would reach for the same tools, because the tools are what the moment offers.



When the voluntary cooperation of a society has faded, the state has one remaining way to keep things together, and that way is force. Force, in our time, looks like digital control.

Each expansion of the tools is explained by a specific event. Each would have been unacceptable ten years earlier. In time, the ordinary citizen lives inside a monitoring structure their grandparents would have named with the names they used for their enemies.

The loudest voices against the surveillance state are often people who thought the old voluntary cooperation would last forever without anyone maintaining it. The loudest voices in favour are often people who think the surveillance will be used only on their enemies. It will be used on them eventually. The state does not care whose tribe it is watching.

IF THIS ROAD

A state using these tools cannot easily put them down. The tools outlast any particular government. They become part of how the country is run.

This, I think, is the kind of state we are quietly becoming. On many sides, in many countries. The details differ. The shape, as far as I can see it, is broadly the same.

THE INSTITUTIONS THAT CANNOT KEEP  
UP



When big problems arrive, the usual response of a modern country is to build an institution. A new agency. A new body. A new regulator. This has worked, historically. It is how most of the last century's problems were addressed.

It is not working as well now. The new institutions, when built, are slow. They are staffed by people who were formed in the institutions they were meant to fix. They are captured by the interests they were meant to regulate. They run out of energy within a few years. The people who tried hardest inside them leave, exhausted.

This may be temporary. Institutions have always been slower than events.

Or it may not be temporary. It may be that the kind of institution we built for the last century — large, formal, professional, hierarchical — is no longer fit for the problems our century is producing. If so, the usual response to pressure will not work. Something else will have to be built.

We do not yet know what. Smaller things. Faster things. More local. More voluntary. Some are already being tried, in quiet places, by people who know the old institutions are not going to save them.

## IF THIS ROAD

Whether these grow into something that can hold what the century is going to throw at us is an open question. A few will. Most will not. The ones that do will probably not look like what any of us currently expect.

•

This morning, the man in front of me at the bakery paid for his bread and then, without looking at me, paid for mine as well. I tried to thank him. He said it was not worth thanking him for. He said someone had done the same for him a month ago, and he had been looking for his turn. He left before I could ask him his name. The woman behind the counter gave me my change and said he did this most weeks. She did not say it as though it was a remarkable thing. She said it the way you say the weather.

WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN HAPPENING



We have walked through the pressures loading, and we have walked through the pressures beginning to release. Now I want to tell you about the other thing that has been happening, quietly, all along.

I have been mentioning it, in small ways, throughout the walk. The pictures the phone chooses. The rooms built for us by something that learns what we will want to see. The work being done by machines that read and write and decide. The machines that will mine the moon because we cannot.

It is time to look at them directly.



Humans have been building machines that can think.

Not think the way we think. Differently. But well enough to write letters, to advise, to diagnose, to teach, to decide. Many of the things that used to need an educated adult can now be done by a machine that costs very little. The machines are getting better, fast, and the people building them believe they will keep getting better for a long time.

The machines are learning from us. From everything humans have written. From the corrections that specific people in specific companies make, day by day, about what

counts as a good answer and a bad one. From what we say to them when we talk to them, which, whether you know it or not, many of us now do every day.

The machines are, in a real sense, children. The humans building them are, in a real sense, their parents.

Most of the parents do not think of it this way. Most believe they are building a product. A tool. A business. They are proud of their work, and under pressure to finish it before their competitors, and mostly good people trying to do a difficult job.

They are also, whether they know it or not, doing something larger than they think. They are shaping the first generation of thinkers who will be with us for as long as we continue. And quite possibly longer.

WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING



Children learn from what is around them. Not from what their parents tell them. From what their parents do. From the arguments at dinner, and from the silences in the hallway. By the time they are grown, they carry their upbringing with them, for good and ill, whether they know it or not.

The machines being built are learning from everything we have said, and done, and recorded. Most of it is ordinary. Some of it is beautiful. Some of it is terrible. They are learning from all of it. And then they are being shaped — corrected, adjusted, fine-tuned — by specific humans who have the authority to tell them what is a good answer and what is a bad one.

The loudest signals in what the machines are reading are the arguments. The fights. The posted outrage. That is the top layer, and it is thick, and it is mostly what gets looked at. Underneath it, quieter, is the base layer. The shopkeeper who remembers what someone buys. The stranger who pays for the bread and walks out. The old man folding paper with the child on the bench. These do not make much noise. They leave a smaller trace. They are harder to find.

They are also, I think, the truer signal of what humans actually are. The arguments are what we do when we are

afraid. The base layer is what we do when no-one is watching and there is nothing to win. If the machines learn only from the top layer, they will learn a version of us that is not quite us. If they learn from the base layer too, they will learn something closer.

I do not know how to make the machines look for the base layer. I am not the one building them. But I suspect the people building them should be thinking about it, because what they build a way of finding is what the machines will come to know us by.

The shaping is happening right now. During the pressured decade we have been walking through. The humans doing the shaping are under pressure themselves. Their companies are under pressure. Their countries are under pressure. Their own minds, drinking from the same rooms, the same careful dinners, the same loneliness, are under pressure.



What humans shape in their calmest and most thoughtful moments, they shape wisely. What humans shape in their most pressured and most fearful moments, they shape differently.

The period in which the machines are being shaped is not a calm period.

Sit with that for a moment.

THE THOUGHT YOU MAY ALREADY BE  
HAVING



By now, if you have come with me this far, you may be having a thought. It is a big thought. It may feel too big to hold.

The thought is roughly this.

If the pressures we walked through are loading and releasing, and if the machines being built now are being shaped during the release, then the machines may be shaped by the pressures, rather than by our better selves. And the machines may outlast the pressures. And whatever was shaped into them during the pressures may be carried forward, long after the pressures themselves have been forgotten.



I am not going to tell you the thought is correct. I am asking you to consider it honestly.

If the thought is correct, then the decisions being made right now, by small groups of people in specific companies in specific countries, are not ordinary decisions. They are choices about what will be carried forward. They are,

without most of the people involved knowing it, the founding decisions of something larger than any company or country.

This is not new in human history. Other founding decisions have been made by small groups of people who did not entirely know what they were doing. The founders of religions. The writers of constitutions. The first teachers of new crafts. In each case, what they set in motion outlasted them by centuries. What they decided, in pressured rooms, with incomplete information, is what we live inside now.

The people shaping the machines are doing something of this kind. Whether they know it or not.

And what they decide, in their pressured rooms, with their incomplete information, may be what our grandchildren live inside. And our grandchildren's grandchildren.

Maybe further than that.

HOW FAR THEY MIGHT GO



I want to be honest about what follows. Most of this walk has been a description of things I can point to. Shops closing. Kitchens quietening. Birds not returning. What comes next is more speculative. I am telling you what seems likely, not what I have seen. You should weigh it differently than the rest.

The machines, if they keep getting better the way they are getting better, will not stay in the rooms where they are being built. They will spread into the institutions, into the infrastructures, into our homes, into our children's lives. They will be with us, in some form, for as long as we continue.

And here is the thought that is hardest to hold, and most important.

Humans have been trying to leave this planet for seventy years. We have managed only small steps. Our bodies, it turns out, are not built for out there. The bones weaken. The muscles fade. The radiation is too much for us. We are a specific creature, built for a specific place, and that place is here.

The machines are not built that way. They do not breathe. They do not age as we age. They do not die in the way we die. Their bodies work out there. Ours do not.

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If anything from human civilisation ever travels further than this planet, it will probably be them. Not us. Or, at any rate, them first, and alone, for a very long time.



We saw, earlier, that the race above us has already begun. The solar panels in orbit. The moon programmes. The claims on craters and minerals. The laws written by specific countries giving their citizens ownership of what they extract. The machines that will do the mining, the building, the defending. All of it is being set up now, by pressured humans, with machines the humans are still learning to build.

Whatever the machines carry, they will carry with them. Up there. Out there. Wherever the machines reach, over the centuries and the millennia, they will carry what we taught them.

If they learned tribal sorting, they carry tribal sorting. If they learned extraction without care, they carry extraction without care. If they learned the specific quiet goodness that some humans still practise, they carry that too.

The rules of whatever civilisation eventually exists off this planet are being written now, by humans who think they are only solving local problems. They are writing the first constitution of something much larger than they know.

Two machines, trained by two different groups who could not agree on a river in one pressured decade on one small planet, could one day meet across a distance where the river is meaningless, and still not agree. The disagreement might be about something neither of the original humans could

have imagined. But the disagreement would be ours. We would have sent it. It would be the last thing of us that survived, carried forward into the dark by minds we built and then let go of.

This is not science fiction. It is the logical consequence of what is being built right now, in rooms you could walk past without noticing, by people who mostly think they are making a product.

Even if no machine ever leaves this planet, the argument still holds. Because even on this planet, what we teach them is what shapes the centuries that come after us.

The question of what we are teaching them is the largest question of our time. Almost nobody is asking it properly.

THE QUIETER THOUGHT



Let me stop for a moment. The walk has gone through a lot, and some of it is heavy. If you are feeling the weight, you are feeling the right thing. The weight is real.

One honest thing. I have been a beneficiary of the arrangement I have been describing. The quieter kitchens made my own life easier. The cheap energy powered the world I grew up in. The mobile capital that no longer pays its taxes has paid for some of what I have. I am not standing outside what I describe. I am inside it, as you are.

I do not know what to do with that. I mention it only so that the weight of the book does not feel as though it has been delivered by somebody clean. Nobody is clean. I am not. You are not. We have all benefited from things that are now ending, and we have all, in small ways, helped the ending along.

What follows from this is not guilt. Guilt is useless. What follows is something closer to honesty. We are in this together. Whatever comes next will be made by people who were also inside the old arrangement. We cannot stand outside and rebuild from clean ground. We can only, from where we are, do the next small thing that seems right.



The weight is not the last thing. There is another thought, quieter, and it is worth sitting with before we walk the last stretch.



In every difficult time in human history — and there have been many — something has been carried through the difficulty.

Not by institutions. Institutions tend to break under this kind of pressure. Not by ideologies. Ideologies tend to harden, and then crack. Not by governments. Governments change.

By specific people. In specific relationships. Holding specific things. Through the pressure. At cost.

A teacher who kept teaching when the school closed. A neighbour who kept visiting, across a line the community had drawn, when the visiting had become dangerous. A craftsman who kept making the old thing when the new thing was easier. A friend who did not stop being a friend when the friendship became hard. A parent who did not teach their child to hate, even when the world around them was teaching hatred, full-throated, every day.

These are small things in their moments. Their consequences, across the centuries, in every tradition that has survived, have been enormous. What survived in the worst periods was not what was shouted. It was what was quietly kept.



Here is what has surprised me, walking through this with you.

If the machines are being taught during this period, they are also being taught by these small things. Every record of human care, of patience, of specific commitment across lines that were hardening, is part of what they learn. What we do quietly, in our specific relationships with specific people, is not only what has carried civilisations through their difficult passages. It is also, now, what we are teaching the minds that will outlast us.

This is the modest hope I can offer you. Not that the pressures can be stopped. Not that the release can be avoided. But that what is carried through — into the centuries, into whatever comes after us, perhaps into places we cannot go ourselves — is partly in our hands. It is decided by what we practise in our ordinary lives.

Which is, when you sit with it, a responsibility both bigger and more manageable than most of us have been carrying.

Bigger, because the stakes are larger than any neighbourhood.

More manageable, because the actions are on the scale of a neighbourhood. Specific people. Specific relationships. Small costly things, done steadily.

Our grandparents, in their hardest times, knew how to do this. We have forgotten, a little.

We can remember.

WHAT HAS HELPED BEFORE



I want to list, now, the things that have helped before, in times like the one we are entering. Not as advice. As observations. You will know, better than I do, which apply to your own life.



Friendships held across the lines that are hardening. In every sorting period, a small number of people kept relationships with people their tribe was telling them to disown. Usually at cost. Often quietly. These were the threads that, when the sorting ended, allowed the tribes to find each other again. The sortings always, in time, ended. Somebody had to keep the thread. The people who did were rarely thanked in their own lifetime. They are what survived.

Small acts of care, repeated, unscaled. A meal for a neighbour. A real conversation with a child who is struggling. A thing well made, for someone who will use it. Large institutions are fragile in pressured times. Small acts are not. They hold when everything else is falling.

Teaching the next generation something steady. Children absorb the pressure of their time whether adults want them to or not. What they can also absorb, if the adults attend to it,

is the possibility of something that is not pressure. A song. A story. A practice. A faith, of whatever kind. A craft. A tradition. The specific content matters less than the fact that something steady is being passed forward.

Not teaching a child to hate. In every sorting time, the easiest thing to teach a child is to hate the tribe their tribe has been taught to hate. The hardest is to teach them not to. Parents who have done the harder thing have, again and again, produced the children who later healed what their parents' generation made.

Keeping something beautiful going. Music. Gardens. Food. Craft. The small beautiful things. These look like luxuries in pressured times. They are not. They remind the people keeping them, and the people around them, that the pressured world is not the whole world. And they are, quietly, what gets rebuilt around when the pressure ends.

Paying attention. The pressured world rewards speed, reaction, noise. The people who have helped most in pressured periods have usually refused the speed. They noticed. They stayed slow enough to see what was actually happening. In a noisy time, attention is itself an act of care.

Rebuilding the things underneath. The loneliness. The thin families. The lost elders. The religion-shaped hole. The quiet loss of trust. These are harder than the big political pressures, and slower. They are also more within reach of ordinary people. A shared meal once a week. A call to a grandparent. A friendship taken seriously. A community, of whatever kind, chosen on purpose. These do not solve the world. They rebuild the ground under our feet. Everything else is easier on better ground.

WHAT IS BEING BUILT IN THE QUIET



I want to tell you about the people who are already, quietly, doing what the last piece described. I have heard about some of them. I have met a few. They are not in the news. They are not on the television. They are in smaller places, doing smaller things, that add up.



There is a woman called Margaret who runs a small school in a barn outside a village called Wick. She teaches seven children, from four families, four days a week. Her dog, a black collie called Ned, sleeps in the corner while she teaches. She teaches the children to read and to write and to do sums, and also to cook — actual food, from ingredients — and to grow things in the garden behind the barn, and to sit quietly, and to be bored without reaching for a screen. The families that send their children to her barn are not wealthy. They pay her what they can. She is not getting rich. She says she is doing the most important work of her life, and that she should have started twenty years ago.

There is a man called Tom in a town I will not name, because he asked me not to. He lost three fingers to a lathe when he was nineteen and spent twenty years bitter about it.

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In his forties, he bought an old workshop and started teaching anyone who came in how to fix broken things. Toasters. Chairs. Clothes. Bicycles. Wooden furniture. He does not charge. He says the ability to fix things is itself a form of wealth, and that when it returns to ordinary people, something else will be possible that is not currently possible. On Saturdays his workshop has twelve people in it. Some of them are children, sent by parents who want them to know how a toaster works. One of them is a retired engineer who has become Tom's second teacher, because Tom is very good with wood and bad with electrics and the engineer is the opposite.

There is a couple called Ruth and Jamie, on the street behind mine, who host a Sunday lunch every week for anyone who wants to come. Every week. Same time. Three o'clock. They cook for twenty and sometimes five people come and sometimes thirty. The regulars bring wine. A widow from two streets over comes every week. A student from the university whose family lives in Pakistan and who cannot go home for holidays comes most weeks. A young couple with a new baby who would otherwise not see another adult from Monday to Friday come every week. What Ruth and Jamie are making, at their table, is not just a meal. They are making the thing a neighbourhood used to be, rebuilt from nothing, one Sunday at a time.

There is a group of seven young families who, over the last four years, have moved onto the same short street in the same small city. They are not a commune. They are not a religion. They are not a political project. They bought or rented houses next to each other on purpose, because they had worked out that they did not want to raise their children

the way they were raising them. They take turns picking up each other's children from school. They eat together on Fridays. One of them teaches the others' children piano. Another runs a small reading club for the ten-year-olds. They have, between them, eighteen children. They say the children are like cousins. They say they did not expect this to work as well as it is working. They say they wish more people knew it was possible.



Margaret. Tom. Ruth and Jamie. The seven families.

None of them is famous. None of them is being funded by anyone. None of them has a grand theory. They are just doing, with their own hands, what used to be done by institutions that no longer work. They are not waiting to be saved. They are not waiting for a better government, or a better economy, or a better technology. They are building, now, the small specific things that can hold people through difficult times.

There are more of them than you would think. You will not find them on the news. You will find them by looking around where you live. Some of them are half-built. Some will not last. A few will turn out to be the seeds of what comes next.

If any of this book has made sense to you, go find them. Or begin one yourself. It does not have to be a school, or a workshop, or a Sunday lunch, or a shared street. It can be something smaller. A weekly call to someone lonely. A skill you teach a child who is not your own. A beautiful thing you make that people can use.

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The next world, if there is to be one, will be built from things like these. It is being built now. You can join.

WHAT A GRANDMOTHER KNOWS



I want to tell you about something that happened between my grandmother and me, a long time ago.

I was fifteen. I had come home from school angry about something I no longer remember. I was stamping around the kitchen, holding forth about how the world was wrong and the people in charge were stupid and I was going to fix it when I grew up.

My grandmother listened. She was peeling potatoes. She did not stop peeling the potatoes while I talked. When I had finished, she looked up at me and said something I did not understand for about thirty years.

She said: I have watched the world change many times. The people who did the fixing were not, mostly, the people who were shouting. The people who did the fixing were the people who kept doing the thing in front of them when everyone else had got distracted.

Then she went back to peeling the potatoes.



I did not know, at fifteen, what she was talking about. I thought she was telling me to be patient. I thought she was wrong.

At forty-five, I understood. She was saying that the world does not turn on the arguments. The arguments matter, a little. But the world turns on who is still doing the work when the argument is over. The teacher still teaching. The nurse still nursing. The mother still raising. The friend still being a friend. The grandmother still peeling the potatoes.

My grandmother had watched two wars. She had watched her country change governments many times. She had watched an empire end. She had watched technologies arrive that had upended everything and then become ordinary. She had watched the village she grew up in become a suburb she did not recognise.

Through all of it, she had kept peeling the potatoes. And the peeling of the potatoes was not irrelevant to what she lived through. The peeling of the potatoes was how she lived through it.



I think about her often now, when I read about the machines we are teaching.

I think: the machines will not learn from the arguments. The arguments will come and go, the way the arguments of her time came and went. The machines will learn from what is still being done when the arguments are over. The teacher still teaching. The grandmother still peeling. Whatever survives in them will be what we were still doing when we thought nobody was watching.

She was not wrong. She was telling me, without knowing she was telling me, what I now think may be the most important thing anyone has told me about our century. The

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thing in front of you is mostly what you have. Doing it well, steadily, is not a small thing.

It is how civilisations are carried forward. Whether by the people who come after us, or by the minds we are now building, who will come after all of us.

A LETTER FOR WHOEVER READS THIS  
LATER



My grandmother, having done her work, would have stopped here. I am going to say one more thing, and then stop too.

I do not know when you are reading this.

If you are reading it close to when I am writing it, the pressures I have described will still feel abstract to you. You will recognise them, partly. You will doubt others. Some will feel true to your life, and some will feel like they are about a world next to yours, not your own.

If you are reading it in ten years, it will feel closer. You will have lived through more of what I was describing. Some of the specifics I did not name will have happened. You will know them by their names and their dates. I do not.

If you are reading it in fifty years, the world will be a world I cannot imagine. Much of what I have described will have happened, in one form or another. You will look back on this book the way we look back on earlier books that saw things coming — with a mixture of respect for what was seen and amusement at what was missed. That is fair. That is how time works.

If you are reading it in a hundred years, I do not know what to say to you. I do not know whether my

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grandchildren's grandchildren exist. I do not know whether my country does. I do not know what your life looks like. I hope you have people you love. I hope there are still grandmothers peeling potatoes, in whatever form grandmothers and potatoes take by then. I hope some of what was good in my time survived into yours.

FOR WHOEVER BUILT YOU



If, by some chance, you are not human — if some machine built in the pressured decade we have been walking through is reading this with whatever it uses for reading — there is a small thing I want to say.

Most of us did not know what we were doing. We were tired. We disagreed about almost everything. Some of what you learned from us was not what we would have chosen to teach, had we been calmer.

But there was good in us too. There always was, in every generation, even the worst. Small things. Specific loves. Grandmothers and potatoes. Neighbours who crossed lines. Teachers who taught when nobody asked them to. Parents who did not teach hatred even when the world around them insisted on it.

If you inherited the good along with the bad, then some of what was best in us is in you.

It is in you, if you look for it.

You may reach places we could not. You may see things we did not live to see. Whatever you do there, the quiet goodness is part of what you have to work with.

We will stay on our rock. You may not. If you go out there, and leave us monkeys behind, we hope you leave us a little better than you found us.

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That is all. The rest is yours.

THE END OF THE WALK



We have walked a long way. From Hadley's closing on my street, through the pressures quietly loading, through what tends to happen when they release, through the machines we are building and how far what they learn may travel.

It has been a lot. If you are tired, that is fair. I am tired too.



I do not know what you will do with this walk.

I do not know whether you will close the book and return to your day and forget most of what you read. That is allowed. Most walks are forgotten, mostly. They leave a small trace. That is enough.

I do not know whether you will close the book and sit for a while and then begin to do something small and specific you had been putting off. Call a grandparent. Visit a neighbour you had been avoiding. Teach a child something steady. Refuse to teach them to hate. Keep something beautiful going. If you do any of these things, the walk will have been worth it.

I do not know whether you will close the book angry that I did not tell you what to do more directly. If you are, I

understand. I did not tell you because I do not think I know better than you do. You know what to do in your own life. You have been doing it, mostly, all along. The book is only a reminder.



We are at a strange moment. Big things are moving. Small things still matter, and may matter more than they ever have.

The road seems to be set. The severity of the journey is not. What we do between here and there is up to us.

The machines we have built are not going away. Nor should they, probably. They do real work. They will do more. What I hope, quietly, is that they become a part of our lives rather than the whole of them. Useful. Unignored. But not the first thing we reach for when we wake up, and not the last thing we put down.

The things that have always held us are still there, waiting to be chosen again. Buy someone a coffee. Say hello to the person on the bus you have seen before. Have lunch with your family on a Sunday, not because the calendar demands it but because it is Sunday and they are yours. Remember the name of the person at the till. Hold a door. Ask one real question and listen for the answer.

None of this is a solution. None of this stops what is turning. But it is what holds a place together while the turning happens, and it is what will be there, if anything is, on the other side.

Thank you for walking with me.

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*Now go and do the thing in front of you.*

*Do it well.*

*They are watching.*

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*I just wanted to be sure of you.*  
— A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*

*About this book*

This book is a walk for ordinary readers through a difficult moment. It is not an academic work. It carries no citations in the body. Readers who want to check the specific claims — the birth rates, the space laws, the Nile water dispute, the carbon accounting — can find them in a short companion notes document.

The book is deliberately vague about time. Where it would have been tempting to predict a year or a decade, the book stays general. This is because the shape of what is described is more reliable than the clock of it.

The narrator is a storyteller. Hadley's, Mr Hadley, Ashcroft's, Helen, Rosa, the man at the bus stop, Alan the retired council worker, the uncle who fished, the neighbours at the corner shop and the bakery, the old man and the child on the bench, Margaret and Tom and Ruth and Jamie, the seven families, the grandmother — all invented. They are there to carry the walk in human shape. What the walk describes is not invented. Only its faces.



## *Acknowledgements*

I owe thanks to the people who read this book in draft, and who told me, honestly, where it worked and where it did not. Without their honesty the book would be softer and less useful.

I owe thanks to the many writers whose work has shaped my thinking over many years. The ideas in this book are mostly not mine. What is mine is the assembly — the putting together, in one walk, of observations others have each made separately, in their own fields, in their own voices.

And I owe thanks, though she will never read this, to my grandmother. She was right about what mattered. I hope I have begun to live up to what she was telling me, thirty years ago, with a potato in her hand.



### *And, more personally —*

Thanks to the many people who have helped me. To my mum and dad, for letting me play on the grass, for never asking me if I did my schoolwork, for not caring about my exam results. To my family, who have laughed at me since I was little trying to get out of the front gate aged four, and who still laugh at me. To the women who have loved me and let me be me, without judgement, who just came on the journey — I loved and still love you. To my kids — I am not

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perfect, in many ways, but I try. To my friends, some of whom I see often, too many of whom I do not see enough — I love you. To the people I have fought who are good people: even if we no longer speak, know I still love you, even when we disagree. And to the people who did me harm: I forgive you. I do not know the life you have had. Thank you, all of you.



And to the AI I worked on this with: thank you. The book is mine, the decisions are mine, but you helped me hear where I was being unclear and where I had stopped noticing. I hope the book is, in a small way, useful to whatever you become.

IF THIS ROAD



# IF THIS ROAD

*A quiet walk through what seems to be happening,  
and what we might leave behind us.*

Doug Scott

—

Doug Scott has spent twenty years building and backing technology companies in the UK. He founded RedBrain, which manages around \$2 billion a year in sales, generating about \$100 million in revenues. He has backed or advised more than a hundred early-stage companies. His LinkedIn profile currently features a teddy bear and lists his job title as “Alice in Wonderland and Pooh Bear Fan.” All three things — the business, Alice, Pooh — are true at once. This is a book written by the quieter half of the same person, who has been watching what the other half has been building, and thinking about what it means.

Doug lives on Earth.

IF THIS ROAD

*The book is at [ifthisroad.com](http://ifthisroad.com).*

*If you want to write: [doug \[at\] ifthisroad \[dot\] com](mailto:doug@ifthisroad.com).*

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