

Last Christmas by David Bradley

Funnily enough, it was four years to the day since the fourth variant had emerged. So, it was Christmas Day. Four years since the death toll passed 200 million. What a gift. Four years since the last dying embers of the theory of herd immunity had burned out and even the rich and the beyond-rich were suffering.

Four years. It's hard to believe. What started as a very localised outbreak, with a mere handful of hospitalisations had quickly thrown the global community into panic and ultimately pandemic. The present that keeps on giving. Each genetic mutation unwrapping new pathogenic characteristics. New biomolecular tools to defeat even the strongest of immune systems let alone those that were compromised from the start. New protein shakes, new genetic twists and turns, they all side-stepped the vaccines, they all resisted the drugs, again and again.

Months and months of lockdowns and curfews, of firebreaks and circuit-breakers, had all seemed to work for a short time, the curves flattened briefly only to take on an exponential uptick within days. The powers-that-be would clamp down, and then release their grip, the bubbles would burst.

The armchair epidemiologists and the conspiracy theorists continued to refer to it all as nothing more than a really bad flu. Influenza with its all-time death toll dwarfed by that of malaria seemed like the walk in the park no one is allowed to take any more. No walks in the park, no trips to the beach, no visiting ancient castles with their riverside walks, no trips anywhere.

Everything is online for those who can still afford the gigaband connections and can still get an annual delivery slot. The uptake had been slow and there had been complaints even at the governmental level from the hedge-funders and the off-shorers that the companies really ought to pay their way. But, needs must. People had to eat. People had to have some kind of entertainment. No more close encounters of any kind, everyone in their place, it was a lonely life even for the loners.

200 million dead. An unbelievable number almost half the world's population as it stood when it all started. There had been a time when population was counted in the billions. Those kinds of numbers are beyond unbelievable. Unimaginable.

Billions of people. Something had to snap. And snap it certainly had, if an event that lasted more than twenty years can still be called a snap. Summers came and went, hotter and hotter each year, winters were all but a distant childhood memory for the oldest survivors. Some of the rebellious youngsters had shouted about the end of the Anthropocene, the extinction of the plastic age. It had not panned out quite like that, it was a slow burn and wave after wave of serious trouble along the way.

200 million. The population at the time of the very first Christmas, ironically enough. Obviously, exponential growth has a counterpart. As one number doubles every couple of weeks, so the number of the converse halves. 200,000,000 to 100,000,000 to 50,000,000 and so on...

Bubbles burst.