

# 'In The Fog'

Rachel Mulholland

We will say that it came upon us suddenly. We might say that the news in January was like a warning bell of an entrée. That images of a Chinese city closing up shop were mixed with other tasters – assassinations and wildfires – a kind of ‘pick-an-apocalypse’ twisted party game, one atrocity diluting the others, taking turns filling headlines and then falling into smaller print.

And for the most part, we carried on. But listening to the news began to feel like looking over one’s shoulder to see how much it was closing in. The constant tug-of-war of – *how seriously should I be taking this and how much should I just carry on as normal?*

Italy turned into a crystal ball. A mixture of what would happen and what will happen. How do you measure these things? Our hands got dry, the skin chafing and cracking. We looked at keyboards and door handles with increased unease. Shy at first to make a fuss – nobody wanted to be seen to be overreacting – but that shyness soon fell away as we embraced extreme hygiene unabashedly, with pride even. We became competitive in our stringency.

I only felt it physically – in my gut – when they announced the closure of schools. This didn’t directly affect me, but there was something so ominous about workmates huddling by the office radio. It felt like we had stepped into a scene, the type we had watched in film and documentaries countless times. Pivotal moments of history when ordinary people suddenly realise that something is happening *to* them.

I became addicted to live news blogs, waiting on the next notification and change in headline compulsively. In the morning the first thing I would think of was how much I had to catch up on. A blurred scroll on my phone before I had even got out of bed, mentally earmarking full-length articles to go back to later. It felt perversely luxurious. To not be affected felt like my small life had been elevated somehow, that well-known feeling of catharsis usually evoked through fiction. But the pity and fear being aroused began to be real. It was getting closer.

I was on a friend's hen at the end of February, back when pubs and bars were still bustling. At one point in the night I went to the bathroom. After washing my hands, I set about reapplying some lipstick, only vaguely aware that there was somebody else beside me doing the same. 'Have you heard?' this woman said, catching my eye in the mirror. 'It's in the Republic now.' We chatted for a while, expressing our darkest thoughts, because we were strangers and we could. 'I better go back to the party,' I said eventually.

People started to lose their jobs. So many people at once, with certain industries being put into what can only be described as a kind of induced coma. And we all started wondering how this works. Can the economy be sedated, put to sleep, and then reawakened without any damage to vital organs? It's still early days and we still don't know enough.

Not knowing enough seems like the largest overarching theme. Experts can be surprised too, can be caught off guard. They can predict things like pandemics of course, but it gets harder to predict the overall fallout. And ordinary people try to make sense of it for themselves on a personal level.

So many times over the past few weeks I have said '*oh yes, that too*' as I belatedly realise another consequence, another aspect of life that will be affected. We are being taught a lot about the eco-system of our lives, how everything is connected and how many seemingly unrelated things need each other for their mutual survival.

Everyone is talking about how they are feeling – scared, bored, grateful – a cocktail of anxiety and ennui and hope. A portion of the populace are working harder than ever – the frontline workers. A portion of us are working from home, with all that that entails. And another portion of us have stepped off the treadmill entirely and are living in a kind of suspended state.

In some ways a lot has already happened and in some ways it is still early days. I still don't feel it that often in my gut – not properly. I'm still addicted to live news blogs. I'm still slowly making the connections. I'm still in the fog of being surprised.

END

Rachel Mulholland is a local writer. Her work has been published in magazines such as *The Stinging Fly* and *Banshee*. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.