

## A Reality Unmasked

John Wheeler anxiously clasped his hands behind his unkempt head and rocked back on the legs of his creaking chair for the umpteenth time that morning. He started drawing in the slow deep breaths he'd learned as an asthmatic child, forcing life-giving air through his constricted trachea before exhaling with a pronounced breathy whistle through pursed lips. He was in trouble. He knew it. He could barely breathe. He thought again about calling for help. What kept stopping him?

Lowering his head John closed his eyes and tried to stop his thoughts from spiralling down once more. He felt truly wretched, trapped and captive in the dull, diminutive flat. The sickly olive anaglyptic ceiling and ripped white paper chandelier, the second-hand table doubling as his work and eating space, and the blue threadbare carpet that sucked all colour from the room created the sort of place he thought, where the lonely die and are found months later by an unsuspecting gas worker.

John opened his eyes and found himself staring at the Chinese wall calendar. Dragon-shaped numbers leered at him threateningly, the crossed-out days informing him that it had been over five weeks since this third lockdown had started and it was now Saturday, February the...thirteenth.

Still struggling for breath John jumped to his feet and started to pace the room, tapping out three sets of three on each of his temples simultaneously with left and right forefingers. His ritual. To nullify and becalm the triskaidekaphobia that had dogged him since adolescence. The superstition had really intensified of late.

Lurching across the room he ripped the calendar from the wall and tossed it face down onto the table. He cursed his prevarication. He'd meant to take it down last November after Suzy had joked about a similarly portentous date. Was it really only three months ago? How different his world had seemed then, he thought.

He and Suzy had spent a great evening at the local Wetherspoons with John's training partner Dave, and were back at home alone, laying intimately close together in bed.

'Friday the thirteenth tomorrow!' Suzy announced a little too casually for John, as she read from the horoscope section in the *Marie Claire*. 'It says Pisces should avoid unnecessary activity...I guess that's you doing the weekly shop then!'

John sighed at the memory of them laughing together, so at ease with one another. He shuffled to the window and looked out over the Victorian rooftops with the fatalistic expression of a religious icon seeking divine intervention. The drab grey sky was as leaden and threatening as the national mood, he thought. He sullenly scanned the eerily quiet high street. How he missed Suzy's calming laughter. Falling asleep in her arms coiled together like two lost children in a subway.

He suddenly tasted a familiar metallic saliva in his mouth, one of very few tastes still accessible to him since he'd started feeling congested and feverish on Tuesday. He'd been on ibuprofen every four hours since. Supplies were running low but his temperature was still running high.

He skimmed a parched tongue around the cracking vermilion of his lips in a fruitless attempt to moisten them, then reached for the glass of water that had been his only oral pleasure for days. The flat was like a sauna. His out-of-town landlord Mr Singh, who controlled the central heating remotely, still hadn't fixed the window in his bedroom which was stuck closed.

He'd tossed and turned for three whole nights, scouring the nocturnal wilderness for any semblance of restorative sleep.

He'd not ventured out for two weeks now, even for the essential shopping or exercise allowed by government guidelines. His last trip had broken the rules. He'd attended a meeting with thirty-four other civil 'freedom fighters' from the local branch of the anti-lockdown group Stand Up X at the regional leader Greg's house, which he'd proudly helped to organise on the group's Twitter feed. It had finished with a celebratory party where guideline safe-distancing and mask recommendations were flouted defiantly.

John started to cough, a rasping, painful attack. It felt as if his upper lungs were being violently ripped from their lobes. Reaching out unsteadily he lowered himself into a safe sitting position. He glanced at his phone and thought again of calling his mum, before again deciding against it. The last thing he needed now was for her to worry. He'd finally succumbed to her maternal badgering and done a lateral flow test earlier that morning. He knew now what he had suspected since Tuesday. He had it. He'd been so confident that he was not at any risk from the virus that he'd actually gone on to her about how it was all 'a hoax'. He knew now that wasn't true. His embarrassment caused him to downplay his symptoms when she rang for their weekly phone chat on Wednesday evening.

'Yeah, I'm fine. Just a bit run-down with the lack of sleep and exercise' he said, catching sight of his drawn and sallow reflection in the window and pulling the single duvet he kept in case Dave stayed over around his shoulders more tightly.

'Lots of bugs around this time of year. You've had a Covid test haven't you love?'

'I'm fine' he lied. 'And even if I did get it, it'd just be like having a heavy cold for someone my age' echoing the prevalent attitude among his conspiracy theory in-group of which

he was becoming less convinced by the hour.

Increasing viral infection and the lack of rest and nourishment was now creating a perfect storm in John's weakening body. He looked at his phone and saw that it was only eleven twenty-three. Still over two hours before he could take more painkillers and decongestant. He knew he shouldn't take them on an empty stomach but had lost his appetite. He looked at the detritus of the delivery meal he'd given up on after just two bites yesterday, its cartons sticking out of the over-filled swing bin in the kitchenette. He could discern no gratifying difference between the taste of the burger and the fries. Like eating cardboard, he thought. An accompanying loss of smell meant that he was unaware that the food's pungently salty odour still clung to the fabric of the flat.

Now fighting for breath, John took out his blue reliever inhaler from his sweatpants' pocket and placed the mouthpiece to his lips. He tilted his head back slightly and depressed the canister twice, inhaling the muscle-relaxing powder with effort. It made him cough again, but this time he leant over and kept his mouth closed, awaiting the tell-tale tickling sensation in his chest that signalled the medication starting to take hold. He hadn't felt this bad since he'd had the pneumonia as a child that had left him in an oxygen tent.

He thought about how his asthma had suddenly reappeared during his break-up with Suzy. He'd sacrificed her for the group. That definitely hadn't been part of the plan. It was the monthly regional meeting at the local pub, but she didn't want anything to do with it. Wanted them to go out together, alone. He'd explained to her that as he'd organised it he had to go. They argued. She called him 'weak and delusional'. He stormed out.

When he arrived home, she was asleep. He'd tried not to wake her but knocked over the bedside lamp in the dark. She told him to 'fuck off' and turned over.

The chill remained the following morning. He tried to ameliorate by rising early and making breakfast how she liked it; setting the table with the retro placemats she'd bought online, and serviette-wrapped cutlery the way they did it at the Italian restaurant she chose for their first date.

As John too-cheerfully carried the peace offerings of hot scrambled eggs and bacon from the kitchenette, and obligingly poured hot coffee into her favourite mug, Suzy continued to avoid his eyes.

'Thank you' she said distantly, before falling into silent eating.

An almost forgotten loneliness made John shiver, then he suddenly felt something grip deep in his throat. A precursor. An indication that the lining of his trachea was now thickening with the inevitable onset of an asthma attack. He stood up too quickly, dropping his fork and headed for the bathroom, returning moments later shaking his blue puffer. Though he'd desired her attention all morning it now felt curiously unwelcome as she watched him closely administer the medication.

'Is your asthma coming back?' There was something stern and accusatory in her expression that made him feel the question was unreasonably loaded.

'No...it's okay. It's the central heating. An allergic reaction to the dust. It'll be fine.'

He was relieved when she finally lowered her eyes and resumed eating. The tension between them was not being helped by his difficulty breathing. His breakfast suddenly looked quite unappealing. He pushed his fork around the plate lethargically, glancing occasionally at Suzy for any modicum of a thaw in the frost. Unable to tolerate it any longer he decided to acknowledge the hulking elephant in the room.

'Are *you* okay?' he whispered, as he laid his cutlery on the unfinished plate and pushed it

slightly away.

Suzy's eating came to a considered stop. Closing her robe self-consciously, as if suddenly exposed to a stranger, she picked up a serviette and wiped both corners of her mouth before pushing her fingers through her short dark hair with a sorrowful smile.

'I really thought I knew you' she said, with terrible finality.

John's heart sank. 'Look if this is about last night, I'm really sorry, okay. But I couldn't get out of it?' he said too desperately, he thought.

'It's not that!' said Lucy dismissively, finding another reason to doubt.

John held his breath. He felt old shame rising and resented it.

'You're obsessed with conspiracy theories.'

'Oh right! I see.' he said, not entirely sure what his tone intended to relay. 'But it's all fact.' he continued weakly, 'It's all online, d'you want me to show you?!' he said, rising to his feet unconvincingly.

'No, I do not!' she said with an assured scowl. 'I'm not interested in what your group thinks John. You can't argue with the science. The vaccination makes us safer.'

'Says who!?'.

'Erm...the scientists? The science! It's been proven.'

'But it's not been properly tested on humans. They don't know the long-term effects, so how can they tell us it's safe?'

'They wouldn't give it to us if it was unsafe John...for God's sake!' Suzy said, shaking her head.

John was breathing really heavily now. He craved the affirming presence of his fellow anti-vaxxers.

‘You’re being brainwashed Suzy. Like everyone who thinks *they* have our interests at heart. I’m not one of the sheep. Look at 5G, damaging our immune system, making us so ill so we go and get the vaccine. Making them even richer and more powerful.’

All previous desire to appeal to John now disappeared. Suzy was a lioness contemplating moving in for the kill.

‘Who are these “they” you keep talking about John?’

‘What?’

‘Who are *they*?’

John’s eyebrows twitched and his lips moved first into one and then another aborted verbalisation. He was flummoxed. Devastatingly out of his depth. He’d feared public ridicule ever since the excruciating time at school, when, as an often-distracted teenager, he was dragged out before the baying boys of his class by Mr Andane and asked to explain something he clearly hadn’t grasped. He could still hear their gleeful jeers.

‘Them!’ he said, pointing desperately now to some invisible omnipresent force outside the flat window. As he said it, John heard the weak timbre of the pronoun for the first time. He tried to resort to familiar rhetoric to stem the siege.

‘The powers that be. The governments. The rich. The ones who control everything.’

Suzy calmly stared at him as the silence exposed him to them both.

‘It’s a virus John.’ She said with damning simplicity. ‘It doesn’t discriminate. Everyone is at risk.’

Though desperate, John couldn’t find a suitable riposte. Sensing the endgame, Suzy turned her head a little to the left and raised her eyebrows in an inquisitive expression that offered him the forfeit. John let his gaze fall to the floor. The battle was over. He started

coughing and reached for his inhaler. Suzy started to walk towards the bedroom. He reached out to her with his free hand as she passed, taking her upper arm a little more forcefully than he'd intended.

'Sorry. Look, can't we just...'

'No we can't. I'm done.'

The finality of her tone sent an icy dagger into his heart. Within thirty minutes she had gone.

John Wheeler now saw the full devastating folly of his story. Alone now, and barely able to stand as he fought for breath in his uncared-for flat, he thought how everything he had ever been or tried to be had culminated in this unrelenting, catastrophic attack upon his still young life. He felt the walls closing in and slumped, shaking to the floor, defeated by the weakness and fear and increasingly exaggerated gasps that now emanated from the decrepit bellows of his lungs.

He felt the phone in his hand and tried to focus through tears. He remembered what Suzy had said as she walked away from the flat.

'It's a vaccination John, not a cure. Don't leave it too late.'

He pressed the call and speaker symbols before letting it slip from his fingers onto the carpet. He followed the weight of his head to the ground and closed his eyes suddenly feeling a great relief. His face started to lose all signs of the extreme endurance it had carried for so long as it transformed into youthful promise once more.

'Thank you' he whispered.

A female voice answered the phone.



‘Hello, NHS 111 service I’m Jenny your health advisor. Are you calling for yourself or someone else?’