

Dawn

At around 9 pm GMT on a Wednesday, everybody on the planet started to feel a little woozy. The wooziness turned into drowsiness and the drowsiness became overwhelming. They bumbled and yawned their ways to the nearest, safest, softest resting places, and they each fell into the deepest of sleeps.

Ten hours later, the entire population of the planet awoke. After a little blinking, eye-scrunching, head-shaking, and throat-clearing, they all realised that they felt refreshed. For some, this had been the best night sleep they'd ever had. Like after any fine night's sleep, many felt rather silly for the worries they had let get to them the night before. People were positive and brimming with resolve. The embers of near-forgotten plans and childhood dreams were reignited.

This was the grace of fresh dawn in all its glory.

The mass simultaneous slumber of the planet was the first thing which made people suspect that something was awry. The second thing was the colossal red polka dot raft floating just off the Isle of Wight, in the English Channel, which was covered with one million, eight hundred and three thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven newborn babies. The third thing was the fact that every single mother in the world who had given birth in the past week no longer had their babies.

There was no fourth thing; there was no need for a fourth thing.

If you have never seen a raft covered by nearly two million neonates, you would have been shocked. The surface was a rectangle stretching 2.6 km in one direction, 1.8 km in the other; it stood above the sloshing, confused waves at a height of 9 metres; and it was made of a durable plastic painted in white, with evenly spaced red dots of 80 cm diameter. The babies were lying very close together, on their backs, wriggling all around on fluffy white towels. Babies of all colours, all shapes and sizes.

There was Rudolf from Wuppertal, Germany.

There was Tookta from Bangkok, Thailand.

There was Daniella from New York, USA.

There was Zhi (or 'Junior') from near Shenzhen, China.

There was Juvarelle from Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo.

And so on, for one million, eight hundred and three thousand, four hundred and twenty-two other babies.

Never, before or since, has there ever been a greater expanse of sheer helplessness and uselessness. One individual baby is fairly incapable of doing anything; accumulation does little to improve prospects.

As the first adult eyes started to lay sight on the raft (from a cargo boat travelling to Le Havre) there was a curious calm and silence. Then all of a sudden a tiny wailing was heard, then another, then a third – and this contagion spread across the whole baby population until there was an almighty cacophony of need and bewilderment.

Boats came speeding through the waters, helicopters came tearing through the sky, and satellites strained as far as mechanically possible to see all they could from their orbits. A great multitude of cameras flocked to the raft, and before long shaky video streams of the strewn babies found their way into millions of households.

Eyes almost popped out of their sockets, glasses of grapefruit juice were dropped, and takes were doubled. Water droplets sprayed out of thousands of mouths in formations unique to gasps of pure incredulity.

Until somebody took charge, the *de facto* ruler was panic. When a mother loses a baby, there is panic. When a family or community becomes mobilised to find that baby, there is panic. The panic that the world now witnessed was soon bubbling into hysteria.

The Americans said it was the Chinese. The Chinese said it was the Americans. The South Koreans said it was the North Koreans. The North Koreans said it was a hoax (perpetrated by the South Koreans). Jimmy Foster from Ravensbourne Road in Bromley, who was known to stand in the park with his dog for creepy lengths of time, said it was Martians (and he had seen them do it). Paulo Ravell from Carrera 21 in Barquisimeto in Venezuela said that it was God, and that it was about time too, because The Reckoning was well overdue. Avinash Sen from Vikram Nagar in Delhi said that it was Hollywood, and that if you didn't believe him you should've just looked close enough to see that the babies' shadows weren't quite right.

Within the hour, the Wight Emergency Assembly was set up in Sandown on the Isle of Wight, with planes streaming into the airport carrying leaders, luminaries and geniuses. The Melville Hall Hotel was commandeered and as many TV screens as possible were trolled into the restaurant to show the concerned faces of officials as they communicated en route. Soon there were present, either virtually or in person, the Secretary General of the United Nations, the prime ministers or presidents from almost every nation, chairmen from over two hundred NGOs, chief economists from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Pope, the Dalai Lama, and a splattering of philosophy professors advocating a comprehensive spread of rival ethical systems.

Some tried to gather information: Just how many babies? Where were they from? How long can they survive? Would they get sunburnt, basking in the February sun?

Others insisted that there was no *time* to gather information, decisions had to be made. People had to get off the boats, start cradling babies, feeding them milk. Never have you seen so many sleeves rolled.

Nurses and doctors across Europe were scrambled. Hospitals on the Isle of Wight and on the coasts of England and France went on full alert. All manner of ferries, sailing boats, military ships and tugs were offered. Non-essential international flights were stalled. Donations poured into a disaster relief fund from across the world. Thousands upon thousands of people volunteered themselves as carers, some even making pledges that, worst come to worst, they would foster the babies.

Mothers who had lost their babies insisted that they wanted to travel to the raft, to find their babies. Some of these mothers were unfortunate enough to be surrounded by practical-minded people who foolhardily explained how impossible reuniting would be, since there were nearly two million babies, with little to distinguish them, and no way of finding out which was yours. Nobody dared to mention needles in haystacks. The mothers insisted that they *would* be able to recognise their own babies, and they *would* be able to find them. Just *how*? Maybe God? Luck? Genetics?

At this point no contact had still been made with the babies. Helicopter pilots refused to land, fearing that they would crush the babies because they were so packed-in across the surface of the raft. Sailors were trying to assemble makeshift ramps to reach up the 9 metre high edge.

A British military plane zoomed overhead. The first person to walk on the raft was Sergeant Alan Dickman, who parachuted on, with a dozen bottles of milk strapped to his arms and legs. Soon the rest of his regiment landed and they started to feed as many babies as quickly as they could.

The P & O *European Endeavour* was the first to get a ramp across to the raft. Fifty or so men and women stormed over the ramp, led almost completely by their instincts.

The world was watching. All channels were 24/7 'Baby Island' and 'Baby Catastrophe'. The internet was abuzz. The cages of the Twitter aviary were rattling furiously. Seven years later, if aliens on Xio Radus 56X, seven light years away, had directed their antennae towards

Planet Earth, they could not have been blamed for thinking that the very planet itself was saying: 'Help the babies!'

Help *was* mounting. At the Wight Emergency Assembly, calculations were rushed off on scraps of paper, checks were being made by the world's finest minds and computers; optimism was taking hold. The Secretary General of the United Nations took the role as spokesman for the Assembly and called a press conference.

Anticipation hung in the air. Hands and teeth were tightly clenched.

"The babies will be alright," He said. A great worldwide cheer. "We expect that we will be able to prevent the vast majority of babies from coming to any harm."

Boats soon arrived at harbours at Portsmouth, Southampton, and Poole, and babies were transported to hospitals to be cared for.

But although the mothers and fathers of the newborns put their hands to their chests and thanked the God or *just something* of their choice, their sorrow still remained. Many could not afford the flights to the hospitals which would soon become inundated with babies. Even if they got there, what hope was there of finding *their* child? They were terrified that their babies would be lost from them forever.

In the dark backrooms of The Melville Hall Hotel, Assembly members muttered about long-term contingency plans, involving words like 'camps', 'lottery', 'minimisation'.

In St. Mary's Hospital on the Isle of Wight, a doctor called Shelly Deckard found something. She realised that on the sole of the right foot of one of the children this was written in a tiny font: 51.49773, -0.07972. She assumed it was some peculiar tattoo, hadn't had a clue what it meant, and let it be. But then she noticed that a similar code was written on the right sole of every child that she examined: 32.4312, 2.4913 / 53.0071, 106.7245 etc. Every single child had this.

It was not long before one of the eggheads of The Wight Emergency Assembly conjectured that these were each a specific latitude and a longitude. A gang of twenty or so of them, chock full of PhDs and military honours, raced to the Sandown Church of England Primary School, which was being used as a temporary shelter, and checked a whole gymnasium's worth of babies for co-ordinates. They used global telecommunications networks to find a phone number that corresponded to the co-ordinate of each baby. The first number which successfully dialled and connected was that of 6.8167, -5.2833, to 15 Rue de Sopim, Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire.

"Hello, are there any parents there?"

"Qui êtes vous? Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé? Qu'est-ce que vous avez fait avec mon bébé? Mon Dieu, où est mon Paul?"

They had connected. This baby was named Paul.

The news was soon out that all of the babies had exactly enough information on their feet for them to be returned. A sigh of relief spread faster than a seismic shock around the world.

Soon the doctors and nurses who had been scrambled were told that their services would no longer be needed. Hospitals were taken off standby. Most of the thousands upon thousands of volunteer carers, including those who had pledged to foster the babies, were turned away. In their place, administrators and logistics experts moved in to plan how to execute the operation of returning nearly two million children to their parents. Use was made of many, many clipboards.

Within a few hours, the entire economic and productive capacity of planet earth was being dedicated to this sole objective. Wars were halted by temporary cease-fires. Stock exchanges were frozen. Rival tribes and sects begrudgingly agreed to work together. Nobody asked who would foot the bill. The spirit of camaraderie made hairs stand on necks.

And then, in a great montage of reunions, the babies were returned. The last leg of each journey was performed by deliverymen, or ‘reallocators’, wearing bright orange polo shirts.

51.2562, 7.1448 (Rudolf) was returned to his home in Wuppertal, Germany. The reallocators handed Rudolf over to his parents, who squealed with pure joy and placed him back in his brand new pink cot.

13.6859, 1 00.5204 (Tookta) was returned to her home in central Bangkok, Thailand. The reallocators travelled to the 34th floor of The Pano apartment building, where Tookta’s loving parents were waiting, tears streaming down their cheeks.

40.7470,-73.9812 (Daniella) was returned to East 34th Street, New York, USA where she was met by her brother, Jake, with a big bruise on his cheek, who told them that it was OK, his father would be home soon, which was probably true because he’d just gone out to buy another bottle of whiskey, and he’d already been an hour.

22.7681,113.9639 (‘Junior’) was returned to his small village near Shenzhen, China. His grandmother gratefully accepted him from the reallocators. His sisters, Mei-Xing and Lian, tried to say ‘thank you’ as hard as possible, but were suffering very seriously from diarrhoea in the corner of the room.

-4.2167, 15.2751 (Juvarelle) was returned to her home in Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo. The reallocators were very relieved to be able to find her parents, because their housing block had been partly turned to rubble by mortar bombing, and you couldn’t even find the numbers on the doors. The reallocators carefully placed Juvarelle back underneath the dining room table, on her thin dusty sheet, and left.

Across the world, reallocators dusted off their hands and patted themselves on the back, for having achieved a spectacular rate of success.

By the dawn of Saturday, everything was back to normal. The stock-exchanges had whirled back into action, the wars had resumed, and people’s lives had fallen back into their grooves. Contentment reigned, for everybody was back in their right place, and soon the tragedy of the raft could be forgotten altogether.