

**Author's Note:** *When I wrote the following, based almost verbatim on an overheard conversation, I wondered if it was a little extreme and wouldn't be believed. In three weeks, however, events have overtaken it. I just (on 20<sup>th</sup> March) returned from a local supermarket to find the shelves completely stripped of any useful food—pasta, spaghetti, potatoes, bread, etc.—with no online retailer willing to deliver.*

**Coronavirus: The Man in Norwich Market, 28th February 2020**

*His voice was loud but strangely thin  
And you had to look twice for its origin:  
Between stalls, face pallid, head close-shaved  
Or perhaps balding, thirty-odd years in age,  
Small in stature, eyes of greyish stone,  
Milking attention right down to the bone.*

*'I've seen the movies, how them mobs treat you  
In these pandemics: smash yer door in two,  
Do terrible things to yer kids and wife—  
And to protect me an' mine I'd gladly do life.  
We're out in the sticks, a twenty mile run,  
So for our protection I bought the shotgun—  
Said it was for rats—'cause nowadays  
Yer can't trust no-one anyways  
In this world where dog eats dog eats dog.*

*'I've trained for this time, I won't tell a lie,  
And I've seen on the news how them sods panic-buy,  
Like gannets they flock, take all for their selves,  
Like a locust plague, leavin' bare shelves.  
So when I'd got the window boards, nails,  
The booby-traps, the mornin' stars, flails,  
I thought how much food and drink we'd need  
For all them months when we'd be besieged  
By rabid gangs of the hungry, diseased,  
In this devil-take-the-last-man world.*

*'So I bought 100 tins each of beans, toms and Spam,  
Fifty boxes of Pringles and a big Spanish ham,  
All the pasta and spaghetti they had for sale—  
And fifteen six-packs of Lidl's best ale,  
Giant cans of fruit for the kids' five a day—  
Cost me an arm and a leg when I came to pay—  
But as I filled up the van it occurred to me  
That when the lecky was gone we'd still have to see,  
So I got 100 candles so we could sit up at night  
'Cause that's the one thing that's needed, the light,  
In this survival-of-the-fittest world.*

*'Now of course I feel sorry for yer old Gran,  
But it's natural selection, all part of the plan  
Of Darwin: Mother Nature always culls the least  
Able, like lions take the trailing wildebeest;  
And what doesn't kill yer makes yer strong—  
Puttin' wellie in the old gene pool ain't wrong,  
Gives the next generation braggin' rights,  
Somethin' to justify all of them fights  
In this world which looks after Number One.'*

DAVID MANDEVILLE