

I Lived Through Collapse. America Is Already There

**Living in Sri Lanka during the end of the civil war, I saw how life goes on,
surrounded by death**

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I lived through the end of a civil war — I moved back to Sri Lanka in my twenties, just as the ceasefire fell apart. Do you know what it was like for me? Quite normal. I went to work, I went out, I dated. This is what Americans don't understand. They're waiting to get personally punched in the face while ash falls from the sky. That's not how it happens.

This is how it happens. Precisely what you're feeling now. The numbing litany of bad news. The ever rising outrages. People suffering, dying, and protesting all around you, while you think about dinner. If you're trying to carry on while people around you die, your society is not collapsing. It's already fallen down.

I was looking through some old photos for this article and the mix is shocking to me now. Almost offensive. There's a burnt body in front of my office. Then I'm playing Scrabble with friends. There's bomb smoke rising in front of the mall. Then I'm at a concert. There's a long line for gas. Then I'm at a nightclub. This is all within two weeks.

Today I'm like, "Did we live like this?" But we did. I mean, I did. Was I a rich Colombo fuckboi while poorer people died, especially minorities? Well, yes. I wrote about it, but who cares.

The real question is, who are you? I mean, you're reading this. You have the leisure to ponder American collapse like it's even a question. The people really experiencing it already know.

As someone who's already experienced societal breakdown, here's the truth: America has already collapsed. What you're feeling is exactly how it feels. It's Saturday and you're thinking about food while the world is on fire. This is normal. This is life during collapse.

Collapse does not mean you're personally dying right now. It means y'all are dying right now. Death is sometimes close, sometimes far away, but always there. I used to judge those herds of gazelle when the lion eats one of them alive and everyone keeps going — but no, humans are just the same. That's the real meaning of herd immunity. We're fundamentally immune to giving a shit.

It honestly becomes mundane (for the privileged). As Colombo kids we used to go out, worry about money, fall in love — life went on. We'd pop the trunk for a bomb check. Turn off our lights for the air raids. I'm not saying that we were untouched. My friend's dad was killed, suddenly, by a landmine. RIP Uncle Nihal. I know people who were beaten, arrested, and went into exile. But that's not what my photostream looks like. It was mostly food and parties and normal stuff for a dumb twenty-something.

Collapse is just a series of ordinary days in between extraordinary bullshit, most of it happening to someone else. That's all it is.

If you're waiting for a moment where you're like "this is it," I'm telling you, it never comes. Nobody comes on TV and says "things are officially bad." There's no launch party for decay. It's just a pileup of outrages and atrocities in between friendships and weddings and perhaps an unusual amount of alcohol.

Perhaps you're waiting for some moment when the adrenaline kicks in and you're fighting the virus or fascism all the time, but it's not like that. Life is not a movie, and if it were, you're certainly not the star. You're just an extra. If something good or bad happens to you it'll

be random and no one will care. If you're unlucky you're a statistic. If you're lucky, no one notices you at all.

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One day, I was at work when someone left a bomb at the NOLIMIT clothing store. It exploded, killing 17 people. When these types of traumatic events take place, no two people experience the same thing. For me, it was seeing the phone lines getting clogged for an hour. For my wife, it was feeling the explosion a half-kilometer from her house. But for the families of the 17 victims, this was the end. And their grief goes on.

As you can see, this is not a uniform experience of chaos. For some people it destroys their bodies, others their hearts, but for most people it's just a low-level hum at the back of their minds.

What's that buzzing sound you hear now?

Today I assume you went to work. Bad news was everywhere, clogging up your social media, your conversations. Maybe it struck close to you. I'm sorry. Somewhere in your country, a thousand people died. I'm sorry for each of them. A thousand families are grieving tonight. A thousand more join them every day. The pain doesn't go away, it just becomes a furniture of bones, in a thousand thousand homes.

As a nation you don't seem to mourn your dead, but their families do. Their communities do. Jesus, also, weeps. But for most people it's just another day. You've run out of coffee. There's a funny meme. This can't be collapse, because nothing's collapsing for me.

But that's exactly how collapse feels. This is how I felt. This is how millions of people have felt, including many immigrants in your midst. We're trying to tell you as loud as we can. You can get out of it, but you have to understand where you are to even turn around. This, I fear, is one of many things Americans do not understand. You tell yourself American collapse is impossible. Meanwhile, look around.

In the last three months America has lost more people than Sri Lanka lost in 30 years of civil war. If this isn't collapse, then the word has no meaning. You probably still think of Sri Lanka as a shithole, though the war ended over a decade ago and we're (relatively) fine. Then what does that make you?

America has fallen. You need to look up, at the people you're used to looking down on. We're trying to tell you something. I have lived through collapse and you're already there. Until you understand this, you only have further to fall.

find each other.



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