OFF OUR TROLLEYS: Panic buying is back as the virus pays another unwelcome visit

Let the madness begin – virus inspired shopping is back with us

Anita ROBINSON

SO IT'S back to square one then. A second wave of spreading infection has triggered another tsunami of panic buying.

Despite already groaning shelves and bulging cupboards, people, like headless chickens, lose the run of themselves and rush to stock up on more stuff they don't need, won't eat or use half of.

And who can explain the public's obsessive/compulsive relationship with toilet rolls? Surveying my own over-stocked larder, I wonder what mental aberration I suffered when I bought sardines, which I don't like, tuna, which I just about tolerate, corned beef, which I haven't tasted for years, three types of pasta (unopened) and seven tins of tomatoes for all the hearty casseroles I've never got around to making.

There are anonymous clumps of unlabelled stuff in the freezer, so heavily iced I have to thaw them out to identify them. "What's for dinner?" "A surprise."

The super-efficient plan menus a week in advance and shop accordingly, which is all very laudable, but a tad predictable. I belong to the spontaneous 'what do I fancy tonight?' school of nutrition, whose feckless graduates literally take pot luck. Fresh stuff is even more of a faff. I can't consume it fast enough to beat the 'best before' date and end up eating coul oul'salad on a chilly evening rather than throw it out – ever to the forefront of my mind Auntie Mollie's dire prediction "Eat it all up – or you'll follow the crows for it one day" – the principle of 'waste not, want not' drummed into us from childhood.

Many people have put on weight in lockdown, possibly due to less physical exercise, but more likely boredom born of aimlessness, which leads unerringly to the fridge and/or treats cupboard in search of a little comforting something. It may state the obvious, but if it isn't in the house you won't eat it, though I have known members of either sex rise from their semi-recumbent posture on the sofa on an evening of undiluted television repeats, get in the car and drive to the nearest garage/shop/chipper/pizza place or off-licence and lay in sufficient supplies for a siege.

I read somewhere that 'sharing packs' are increasingly scoffed by a single individual. I know I can scuttle a jumbo bag of crisps (preferably Kettle, mature cheddar and red onion) in the time it takes to write two paragraphs. The term 'wine o'clock' has passed into common parlance and is now as fixed as mealtimes were before incessant snacking became the norm. Reassuringly, the sun's always over the yardarm somewhere in the world.

In the absence of 'real' shopping, stir-crazy women unable to get their retail fix are feverishly browsing the net for clothes to go nowhere in – in a size that fitted six months ago that will have to be returned.

Men are trawling the same for tools and gadgets nobody needs for jobs put on the long finger in busier days, but unlikely to be accomplished in this period of lassitude without an ultimatum from their Significant Other. No wonder delivery companies are the only services making a profit. I notice from financial columns that sales of ladies' shapewear undergarments have plummeted. Apparently the bottom has finally fallen out of the market.

Meanwhile, we ploughter grimly on, eyes rheumy and red from disinfectant fumes, grumbling that a mask makes our glasses steam up, but respecting the rules. Despite evidence to the contrary, nobody thinks they're going to become a statistic. It's come as a hard lesson to the young to discover they're not immune and their university dream of freedom and autonomy has turned into a nightmare of crowded communal living with strangers far from home.

I'm writing this on a glorious autumn afternoon. The trees are on the turn – the sycamore already golden, its little helicopters spiralling silently to the ground; the crows and magpies squabbling over the unripe acorns on the oak and five varieties of toadstool, fairylike in the grass.

Everything appears… normal. Would that it were so.

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ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 29 1920

Police Shoot Oldpark Invaders

THERE was a general attack made upon the streets immediately adjoining Stanhope Street in the Oldpark Road district between eight and nine o'clock on Monday night and a defence was prepared by those whose homes were endangered by the invading mobs. The whole locality was thrown into a state of turmoil, stone-throwing and shooting. The police made several charges against the invading crowds while an armoured car was deployed in Stanhope Street.

An Irish News representative was given a thrilling account by an eyewitness. Shortly before nine o'clock great alarm was created by the news that a very large crowd was proceeding through Ewart's Row and Louisa Street in the direction of Glenpark and Mountview Streets. It was estimated that about 1,500 persons made up the mobs from Shankill, Crumlin and Old Lodge Roads.

There was at this time only a small force of police on duty at the 'danger points'. Head Constable Clarke warned local residents to remain indoors. He blocked the passage into the Catholic quarter but the invaders opened fire with revolvers and rifles. The Head Constable shouted pluckily: 'It is the police you are shooting at. Cease fire or I will order my men to fire!.' No attention was paid to this warning and the order was given to open fire. Two men, Fred Blair and John Lawther were wounded, Blair fatally.

One of the saddest incidents took place when the Orange mob approached Glenpark Street. Mrs O'Neill at number 9 had a terrifying experience. Her house was in the line of fire and she was compelled to rush out, carrying the corpse of her infant which had died that morning. Mrs O'Neill's husband was killed during the Orange attack upon the same district in August.

Lord Mayor on Belfast Murders

YESTERDAY in the City Hall, the Lord Mayor (Councillor W F Coates) told cross-channel journalists: 'Everything was peaceful here until ten days ago... On Wednesday a further step towards permanent peace was taken when the shipyard workers resolved that they would work with any man, irrespective of religion, putting them on their honour that they were not associated with Sinn Féin … Unfortunately on Saturday night four policemen were fired on, one killed. Later that night the houses of well-known Sinn Féiners were visited and three were shot dead…There was no question of sectarian strife.' **The upsurge of mob violence in Belfast had the potential to disrupt Craig's plans to expedite a separate Unionist state and a loyalist-based special constabulary: faced with a largely hostile British press, the lord mayor was keen to dispel any question of 'sectarian strife'.**

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com