

In the World I See

For no reason at all, people just started to die.

There was no disaster or pandemic. Scientists had no explanation. The victims could be driving or eating or sleeping...and then they would just drop dead.

I wish I could tell you more about it. I wish I could say that the sky turned red or the good people disappeared or aliens invaded, but I can't. A few people died, more people died, and it just continued on and on.

I remember the day it started: March 26th, the third Thursday of the month. I remember everything I did that day because it was the same thing I did every day. I woke up at 7AM. I crawled out of bed at 7:30. I got dressed...suit, tie, pants, watch. I had a bowl of Special K for breakfast. I drove to work via Highway 101. I exited on 5th street and looked for parking.

I arrived at 9. I walked through the side entrance, rather than the front entrance, because it was Thursday and I liked to use the side entrance on Thursdays. I said good morning to everyone I saw. I made coffee with two spoonfuls of sugar but no cream. I walked to my cubicle. I turned on my computer and tidied up my desk.

My boss greeted me.

"Hey, Sam. Have you finished the analysis report yet?"

"I'm on it."

"What have you done so far?"

I laughed. "I haven't exactly started yet, but I'll have it to you by this afternoon. I promise."

"I know you will. I trust you. Just...don't let it slip your mind. It's really important that we get this project moving along."

He patted me on the back and walked away. He was a large, middle-aged Caucasian man with thinning hair, a stern face, and hollow green eyes. He was confident and competent, but I

knew there was more to him than his name plate. He had a bunch of college pictures that he lined up to decorate his office. He had an old boxing trophy that he used to polish, now and then, when he thought no one was watching. He had a wife who looked like a female version of him. He had a young son and a daughter who had just graduated from high school. I guess that I don't recall anything extraordinary about him, but I thought he was as good a person as any.

10 AM. I cleared my emails and tried to be polite and thoughtful as I composed responses.

10:45. I finished up the emails and got to work. The analysis report was done pretty quickly. I always found that I was pretty efficient between 10:45 and noon.

12 PM. I took my one-hour lunch break and talked to Tom, who had been my best friend since high school. Tom made lunch the highlight of every day; other people thought that he was crude and just a little too sarcastic, but those are the things that drew me to him. I would talk about relationships and he would talk about sex. I would talk about politics and he would talk about drive-by shootings.

"Hey Tom," I said, "how are you today?"

"Same as always...trying to make work a little less boring. Right now I'm keeping track of how much time I spend on Facebook and Reddit."

"Why?"

"You know how we get paid by the hour? I want to see how many of those hours I can spend doing nothing. Currently, my record is an hour thirty."

"And what are you shooting for?"

"Two hours."

I don't remember the other things we talked about, but I do remember him joking that he would pull the fire alarm that day. It was a running gag. He said that it would be a good change of pace and it would make for good stories, as long as he was never caught.

1:30. We had a meeting. Mark, one of the financial specialists in our department, gave a detailed presentation explaining that sales were good, we were making more than expected, and the new smartphone model could be released ahead of schedule.

Everything was going really well. We were excited and the mood was celebratory. Lots of laughter. Lots of smiles.

2:47. I glanced out the window. The sky was overcast. The park outside was empty. I looked inside again and made eye contact with my boss, who was casually walking past the printer in the corner of the room. He nodded when I looked his way. My eyes returned to my computer screen. There was a page open about the history of Apple products.

A few seconds later, my boss dropped to the floor with a thud. I heard Deb, the secretary, scream so loudly that my ears hurt. I stood up and rushed to his body, where a crowd was forming. My boss had fallen right on his back. His eyes were open and expressionless. It was as if he had been frozen in time, like a picture.

Andy, the network administrator, knelt beside him. He checked for breathing, then began to perform CPR. Susan, one of our interns, called 911. Everyone else just stood and stared.

And right then, out of nowhere, Tom pulled the fire alarm. Everyone saw him do it. He just walked over, pulled it, and nonchalantly walked out of the building as if it were something as trivial as flicking a switch.

Susan kept her phone out. Andy kept performing CPR. All of us continued to watch as the fire alarm blared and the red lights flashed. The fire alarm felt like a distant thing. We all knew there was no fire.

And that's just the way it was for the next four and a half minutes.

We heard a siren. Susan had to run down and explain that it was safe to come inside.

The paramedics arrived and everyone backed off. They checked him, attempted to revive him with a defibrillator, examined him again, and nonchalantly remarked that he was dead. They carried my boss away in a body bag.

They let us go home as they investigated the matter. They still had no idea what had happened to him.

I couldn't sleep that night. I kept thinking about my boss and how expressionless he looked when he died. I tried to imagine that there was a reason for all of this, but I couldn't. I knew that our company would probably replace him within a week and then everyone would just go on with their lives.

I thought about a party he had thrown two years ago for everyone at the office. I could tell that he had planned it carefully because his house was decorated with paper lanterns and there were more than enough drinks to go around. But it rained horribly that night and only four of us showed up. He acted like nothing was wrong, but I saw him sneak off to the bathroom and I thought I heard him cry.

Suddenly, my image of him changed. I looked around at his house...the furniture, the posters, the photos, and the mug in his kitchen that said #1 Dad...

It's that scene that came back to me, two years later, and kept me from sleeping. I didn't want to go to work the next day. I didn't want to read any emails or write any reports. I just wanted to figure out what if there was anything this all meant. Because my boss was dead. He was dead and he would never stop being dead.

I blasted Muse on my iPod and lay in bed until I finally managed to sleep.

I must have been asleep for hours. The shades were drawn but I could still see a little light leaking through from outside. I shut off my iPod, which had been playing my Muse album on repeat the entire time.

I pulled off my earphones and realized that someone was banging on my apartment door. *Shit.*

I got dressed as quickly as I could and ran to use the peephole. I was relieved to see that it was Tom. I opened the door immediately.

“What the hell were you doing?” he demanded. “I’ve been banging on your door for 20 minutes!”

He was usually pretty calm and collected, but something was different about him today. His suit, which was usually ironed and neatly worn, was wrinkled and partially unbuttoned. His black hair, which was usually neat and slick, was uncombed and messy. And his eyes were red.

“I’m sorry,” I said, concerned, “I’ve been feeling under the weather. Did you go to work today? Is everything all right?”

My eyes widened.

“Did they punish you for pulling the fire alarm?”

He looked frustrated. “*Did they punish me for pulling the fire alarm?*”

He sighed. “Sam, people have been randomly dying since early this morning.”

I hesitated for a few seconds, frowned, and then simply stared at him.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean exactly what I said. People have been dying for no apparent reason.”

“You’re telling me that people are just dying, out of the blue?”

“Yup.”

I spoke slowly and clearly, convinced that he was on something.

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

I chuckled to myself.

“So...I imagine this means that there are lots of crashed cars, bodies everywhere, and everyone else is rioting.”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“Tom, come on. I just woke up. What’s really going on?”

He led me to the window and opened the blinds. Sure enough, there were crashed cars outside and multiple dead bodies. A couple of people smashed a window at a nearby convenience store.

My jaw dropped. My hands began to shake. I started to hyperventilate. “How can this be? What’s causing this?”

His voice was calmer than mine. “I really don’t know. No one knows.”

I frantically turned on the TV, but every channel was static.

“Don’t bother with the television...they thought that maybe the airwaves were killing people. Don’t try the internet or your cell phone, either...they shut those down as well.”

“How do you even know this?”

“They made an announcement about shutting everything off.”

“What else did they say? Are they turning it back on at some point? Are we having a meeting?”

“They didn’t really say anything...they just sounded really confused and made an announcement that they would shut everything off and that there would be no further announcements.”

He paused.

“And I don’t think it’s coming back on. The cameraman died or something.”

I stood there, frozen, staring into space. Why was this happening? What had we done? Why, when we ha-

“Hey, I know this is a bad time, but...can I use your restroom?”

Without waiting for a response, he walked off and shut the bathroom door. I slowly walked to the window again, taking in the scene.

There was a woman kneeling next to a dead man. She was saying a prayer.

There was a teenager who was examining a dead, middle-aged businessman. He looked him over, checked for breathing, shut his eyes, and then took the businessman’s wallet.

There was a homeless man who was trying to break into our apartment. He was not successful...the apartment, with its secure door and guarded windows, was pretty safe. Tom came back in minutes. His hair was combed, his face was washed, and his eyes did not look quite as red.

He sat on my couch and rested his feet on the table.

“Sit down,” he said, patting the seat next to his, “and let’s talk. There are things that we need to do.”

“Right,” I said. I took a seat next to him and tried to control my breathing.

“Let’s look at this logically. People are dying, but we don’t know how many or what it is that’s killing them. It could be disease, but I seriously doubt that because I saw ten bodies as I walked up to your apartment.”

“What?”

“As far as I’ve seen, animals haven’t been dying. I’m not sure what that means, but unfortunately we can’t Google it.”

“So what are we supposed to do?”

“We can stay here, but I know that the only supplies you have are diet Coke and Pringles. That would last us about a week, tops.”

“I also have a half-pack of Ramen...”

“We need supplies...water, actual food, matches, toilet paper. But it’s dangerous outside, so we’ll need these.”

He pulled a Glock out of one of his back pockets and a Beretta out of the other.

I looked at him skeptically. “You had these the whole time? Where did you get them?”

“Someone pulled a gun on me and told me to hand over my wallet.”

“Someone pulled a gun on you? What did you do?”

“And I’ve been wearing black pants, so the guns were easy to miss. Uh...what did I do? I handed him my wallet, of course. Then I picked up a gun from a dead police officer, later on.”

“Just like that? Weren’t you scared?”

“Scared of what?”

“Someone pulled a gun on you. That sounds like a near-death experience.”

“I think I’ve had my share of death today. A little more wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Where did you get the second gun?”

“Fuck, Sam, you ask so many questions. The more you question things, the harder it is to get things done.”

I sighed and accepted the Beretta, which was my weapon of choice in Call of Duty.

“We won’t point these at anyone, right?” I asked.

“No, but definitely hold it out as you walk. It really scares people.”

We planned things out for a few minutes and then headed to a nearby Rite Aid. We thought that maybe the stuff would already be gone, but it was worth finding out.

As it turned out, the shop was closed but the supplies were intact.

I looked around, scratched my head, and sighed. “Well, maybe we can try a vending machine or something.”

“Stand back.”

I backed off. Tom shot out the front windows.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Come on!”

He deftly stepped inside and I followed, in slow motion, careful to avoid the broken glass. I couldn’t believe how close I came to cutting myself. The jagged glass barely missed me, like the taunting spikes in every level of Megaman X. I heard a little glass crumble under my shoes.

We quickly spotted out valuable supplies and filled the bags we had brought. I picked up water, toilet paper, granola bars, beer, Starbucks Espresso shots...

Then I heard footsteps and shouting.

“Freeze!”

I rushed over to the sound and saw that the manager, who must have been hiding, was pointing a double-barreled shotgun at Tom. Tom’s gun was pointed at the ground.

The manager turned around and saw me, but kept his gun trained on Tom. Tom looked at me and shook his head.

I dropped my gun to the floor and tried to sound calm.

“Look, we can pay for this stuff. I have money. We just thought that no one was here.” The manager faced me again.

“Your money is useless! Do you really think that-”

In one swift movement, Tom leveled his gun and pointed it directly at the manager.

“Let us go.”

“Or what?” cried the manager. “Or you’ll kill me? I’ve been seeing people die all day. This stuff is all I have and I’m not going to let you take it from me.”

Once again, I tried to sound calm. “Look, we’re just trying to get by. Do you really want to risk your life over a few rolls of toilet paper?”

There was a tense silence, and then the strangest thing happened. Tom just burst out laughing. Then I was laughing. Then the manager was laughing. And there we were, mid-afternoon, surrounded by bodies and debris and broken glass...and laughing. Tom, with his white suit and black tie and pistol. The manager, with his nametag and blue, buttoned Rite Aid shirt. And me, with my brand-name products that all three of us were ready to die for.

“All right,” said Tom, “count of three. On three, we both lower our guns.”

They both lowered their guns. The manager said that we could keep the stuff because it wasn’t worth it. We said that he could keep it because it wasn’t worth it, but he insisted.

We asked if he wanted to come with us, but he said that it didn’t seem right to just leave the store unattended.

So we returned to our apartment and that was that.

A week passed. We hunkered down in our apartment for a while, but then we realized how quiet it was outside. No one was nearby. Not a soul.

The first thing I thought of was to visit our friend at Rite Aid. The door was locked. I knocked but no one answered. So I entered through the broken glass and looked around, but he wasn't there. He must have left.

I guess we also could have left as well, but Tom and I loved the city. Sometimes I would go to the library and read about things like the Great Depression and how many hours you should work to be a happy employee. We both returned to the office, sometimes, and went through the motions of a workday just for the sake of familiarity.

It was about two days after things had gotten quiet. Tom and I were trying to get rid of the bodies. I wanted to take each person out and find a proper site for burying, but it got so messy that Tom insisted we try hydrofluoric acid to see how accurate *Breaking Bad* was. We compromised: He would try it on Andy, and I would bury everyone else. We both had never liked Andy.

But then we read the warning label and changed our minds.

"Fuck it," said Tom, "this shit is dangerous."

It's been two months since that day. I'm still trying to remember what things were like before, but this is the world as I know it and see it. At some point I just accepted everything.

Our friend from Rite Aid returned and parked a new Ferrari outside his store. We eyed him expectantly, but he just lowered his gaze and shook his head. Tom smiled. I laughed. We enjoyed his company for another day before he departed again.

There are so many things to do that sometimes I lose track of time. It feels so lonely sometimes, but other times it just seems so beautiful. The sun is shining, the flowers are blooming, and everything just looks a lot like it did before.

I know there are things that I miss, but my old life feels so distant now.