

## With a Whisper

London never looked so calm.

From my vantage point here on the roof, I can see for miles. All around me lie the remains of a perfect city; the buildings are flawless, the streets clean. Top of the range cars are parked neatly down the side of the roads, next to well-maintained gardens and pathways. It's like a normal day around here.

But further off, I can see something more. The glimmer of skyscrapers, vast structures of glass and steel. They form a skyline so lovely that as the sun descends over the city, I can't imagine a better place for me to be.

This is what it used to look like, a long time ago. Perfect. It was louder back then, more bustling and cramped, and at times I would look at it with disgust. I hated the sight of the huge office blocks – I felt they were oppressive somehow, forcing us into a life of submission.

Now, I'd give anything to be able to go walking around one of them. To see all the normal, everyday things that real people once used. Computers, photocopiers. I'd pick up the stained coffee mugs and try to imagine the people they belonged to. I'd glide my fingertips over the edge of their seats and wonder where they were when they disappeared.

I still don't know what caused everyone to vanish. It happened slowly at first, a few nameless individuals being reported missing on the news, a couple of posters plastered up in the bus station. It wasn't enough to bother me, or anyone else either.

I pull myself to my feet and stand unsteadily on the rooftop. It's the best place I've been able to find; gently sloping tiles with the thinnest layer of moss. Not enough to make me slip, but just enough to keep me on my toes. I clutch at the chimney and close my eyes.

I didn't realise what was happening until it was too late. The reports became more and more common, the newspapers became littered with names and photos of the lost. As the number of missing rose, a number of theories began to spring up around the whole thing.

Some thought it must be a hoax. Others came up with more outlandish explanations, like aliens or terrorism. Most of us just accepted it as chance, though. Coincidence. And when those conspiracy theorists spouted their ideas at us, we turned and laughed in their faces.

The only thing was that once the laughter started, there was no stopping it. Feigning pleasure and amusement served to conceal the panic and fear we were feeling. We banded together, poking fun at the more imaginative theories and laughing at them. We called them stupid. We told them they were wrong.

But I'm starting to think that they were right.

I open my eyes. The sun is still setting, and as I stare high into the sky I can spy tiny white stars peeking through the cloud layer. It's a perfect day. A perfect evening.

I don't even think about it as I release my grip on the chimney and take a step away. My foot slides on the moss and I catch myself. Not now. Not yet.

I didn't realise the depth of what was happening until the day I went to work and found it locked. The office was empty, its workers' belongings still placed lovingly at their desks, Friday's forgotten lunches left abandoned in the fridge. It took me a few hours of frantic phone calls to realise that there was simply nobody left to come to work.

Even so, there were still people left. We were few and far between, and our numbers diminished daily, but we were there. We networked. Everyone I met, I exchanged numbers with. I added them all online and begged them to post every day so that I could see they were still alive. I did the same, posting the simple words 'I am here' to my Facebook every day.

I've long since abandoned that practice, though. Nobody's posted for months.

I hold out my arms and inhale deeply. Then I begin to turn. I do it slowly, so slowly that I can barely tell I'm moving, but as I rotate on the spot I feel it all coursing through me, that adrenaline rush you get from being one step from the abyss and starting to dance. Something I've felt so many times before. The feeling of being alive.

I think the last person I saw was James. He was a loutish boy who lived a few doors from me. He was the type of kid who always had Dorito dust on his fingers and an Xbox controller in his hand. He mostly responded to my greetings with a series of grunts and groans. In that way, at least, he was unremarkable – but in other ways he was the most solid thing I had. I knew that after a day of hunting down other survivors I could return home and be sure that he was huddled safely in his nest, playing Call of Duty and blocking out all the things that were threatening to drive me insane.

The day he went was probably the worst. My new routine included checking on him every day, striding into his house and sticking my head around his bedroom door. But one day, as I entered with a six pack of fizzy pop and a sarcastic comment at the ready, I found nothing. All that was left was a slowly spinning office chair and a widescreen TV with the words 'GAME OVER' blaring at me.

I'm spinning faster now, and as I do so I can feel tiny droplets splashing against my cheek. I don't know if it's raining, or if the thought of that empty room is stirring up emotion in me, but I don't care. It's not like anyone's going to see me anyway. Nobody's seen me in over six months.

If you'd asked me before, I might say that six months alone is a doable task. I might even have suggested that I could get so much done, and become so efficient being on my own. But that's not the case – not for me, not for anybody.

A person can only put up with their own thoughts for so long before the weight of those thoughts threatens to crush them entirely. There's only so far you can carry on walking before your legs give out under you. So many clichés, things I used to laugh at, and they've all turned out to be true.

My spins become wider now, and I find that with each step I'm moving up and down the slope. My feet slip, but I no longer make any effort to control or guide them.

Does it matter if I fall? One person alone in the world can't do anything. If this has been a hoax, then it's gone too far. If this is a social experiment, then here's the result. If it's all a trick, then I suppose here's their grand finale.

I open my eyes for one fleeting moment, glimpsing the horizon as I do so. The sun has almost set now, its red glow slowly vanishing over the buildings and out of sight. How fitting. The end of humanity comes with the end of a day.

I throw my head back and laugh – it seems deafeningly loud in the eerie silence, but it's the first time I've really laughed in months. Here, spinning on the rooftop and giggling at the sky, I finally feel like I used to. Like I'm alive again after so long. I grin as I near the edge of the roof, gathering my breath to choke it out one last time.

"I am here."