

When The Comet Came

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'Even those who'd voraciously predicted the world would end when the comet came were surprised when it actually happened because it didn't collide with the moon and send it spinning off into space; the Earth didn't shake; the dead didn't rise; there were no tsunamis or volcanoes and the Christians weren't raised up to heaven. In fact, it took a while for anyone to even realise it was happening.

'It started with the phones. Just as the comet got close enough for everyone to be able to see it whenever the night's sky was clear enough the phones went crazy. They'd ring when they shouldn't and remain silent and lifeless when someone called. They'd suddenly turn off for no reason in the middle of a conversation or get no reception even when there was nothing blocking the signal. The phone companies scratched their collective heads and blamed it on the handset manufacturers. They, in turn, blamed the phone companies right back. There were questions raised in parliament but even though it was inconvenient, everyone got used to it after a while. To be honest it made a nice change to be able to get on a bus or a train without having to listen to three or four half conversations all being shouted loudly into separate little black boxes at the same time.

'Then the first plane fell out of the sky – you remember it, the one where the engines stopped working just after take off from Hong Kong and it crashed into the sea – that happened the day the comet first outshone the moon. There was a lot of coverage on the news but nobody realised it was anything unusual until the same thing kept happening again and again. It wasn't just passenger planes but cargo and military aircraft too. There was no pattern, no consistency and every conceivable type of plane seemed equally vulnerable: that got people freaked and pretty much overnight flying stopped. Business meetings and international conferences didn't happen; Caribbean holidays weren't taken; stag parties had to settle for causing trouble in their home towns but, on the whole, society carried on as normal. That was until the blackouts started. The comet was visible even in the daytime by then and the rumour-mongers on the blogs and in the tabloids were putting two and two together and were ending up with five almost every time. The politicians appealed for calm and told everyone they'd get someone to look into it but in reality they knew as much about what was happening as the bloggers.

'As the comet got ever closer, things got ever weirder. People started getting ill without getting better. It wasn't any strange new disease, it was just that the medicines which had made the pharmaceutical industry so profitable for so long suddenly stop working. Not just one or two but pretty much all of them. We'd have gone online and asked the homeopaths and other alternative medicine types what to try instead but by then the internet had been down for a week and the nightly rioting had started.

'Still no one could explain what was going on, even when people started dropping dead in the streets. Again, it wasn't anything new, just your garden variety heart attacks, brain haemorrhages and things like that, but it seemed to be happening a lot more often than before. It wasn't only the old and the infirm either, without anti-virals to keep it under control flu was cutting a swath through the young and the healthy. It wasn't one strain, it all of them: Spanish flu, swine flu, bird flu and probably a few others that had never been big enough before to get their own tabloid names. This kept people indoors much of the time and most only went out to collect their government food rations or to go looting – the masks everyone wore to stop themselves getting whatever infections were going around made people bolder since no one could recognise them and it was amazing how quickly we all turned into criminals once we realised we could get away with it. Some ask where the police and the army were while all this was going on but the truth was they were there alongside the rest of us, smashing in the shop windows and breaking into the warehouses.

'The fact that people spent most of their time holed up in their homes meant that when the first block of flats exploded a lot of people died. Maybe it had happened somewhere else before but how would we know? Both the TV and radio systems had gone down a few days before and every form of transport that had a microchip in it, and that was pretty much all of them, had ground to a halt so there was no way to find out what was going on beyond the city limits. There was no one left to give an official explanation and all we had to go on were the whispers on the street. The more rational said the gas supply must have ruptured, the conspiracy theorists said it was aliens who'd arrived in a spaceship hiding behind the comet. By that stage, I couldn't decide who I believed more. That day the comet blazed larger and almost as bright as the sun. It was painful to look at and it meant the old concepts of night and day were pretty much meaningless. If the comet was up when it should have been night there was no darkness, if it was up in the day time it was like we had two suns that set at different times. There was no longer any rhythm to life and it drove people crazy: that's probably why the random attacks started. Before, the violence had mostly revolved around rioting and looting, meaning it was easy to avoid if you wanted to but now it could flare up anywhere at any time and people started leaving the city. I stuck it out

for another week but then, as the screaming that echoed through the streets grew louder and more frequent, it got too much even for me.

'I didn't know where I was going, I just joined the others traipsing along the road out. I've no idea what time it was when I left or how long I walked for. I'd long since traded my watch for food, not that it worked by then anyway, and with the two-sun effect it was all but impossible to tell what time of day it was. I might have walked for a day, it might have been three. By then the city was a distant memory and the flow of people around me had dried up to a trickle. I don't know where the rest had gone, they just seemed to disappear as we walked; then I became one of them. Suddenly realising I had no idea where I was I sat down at the side of the road to try and get my bearings and found I couldn't get up again. I watched others stagger on as I keeled over and lay amongst the weeds. I rolled onto my back and looked up. The real sun was just setting but the false sun of the comet still burned high in the sky.

'I tried to work out what had gone wrong but I couldn't. There wasn't anything new; nothing had really changed. It just seemed like everything that could go wrong had gone wrong at the same time and we, as a society, couldn't cope. I didn't even know if it really had anything to do with the comet – that might just have been a coincidence, or maybe it was only the last straw. Maybe we'd just pushed the planet too far and finally it had pushed back or maybe we'd reached a critical mass and what happened was inevitable. Maybe our systems were too complex, our machines too complicated, our society too unbalanced between the haves and the have-nots and, unknowingly, we'd been living on borrowed time. The comet's arrival might have just tipped us over the edge of some physical, social and mental precipice we'd been teetering on for years. Whatever the cause, there was no doubt the world I'd once known was gone. I closed my eyes to try to get some rest but even through my eyelids I could still see the light from the comet.

'I crawled away, looking for shade. Finding a small cave, I pulled myself into the welcoming darkness where I could finally get some rest. I think that's what saved my life. I didn't leave again for over a week but I didn't need to. Enough water trickled down the walls that I could quench my thirst by licking it and I hadn't been troubled by hunger since I started walking. I only emerged when I realised it was finally dark outside and properly dark at that. I staggered from the cave to find night had fallen and I frightened myself by letting out a scream of delight. I slumped against a tree and watched the first normal sunrise there'd been in weeks. There was no one else in sight but a faint smell of rotting flesh drifted towards me on the early morning breeze from the bodies of people who'd died on the road. I wondered where the comet had gone but I didn't need to for long. As the sun crossed the horizon I spotted a dark hole on its otherwise glowing disk. Our star, the

centre of our solar system, had engulfed the comet and brought normality back to our planet.

'Life will never return to the way it was; too many died, too much was destroyed; but humanity has picked itself up and dusted itself down, and we're slowly putting our society back together again. Before, I didn't really do anything productive, I just worked in a call centre where I constantly bothered people who really didn't want to speak to me. Someone made a fortune out of it but it certainly wasn't me or those I called. At the end of each day, I'd spend an hour getting back to a flat the size of a shoe box I couldn't really afford but which was worth so much less than I'd paid for it that I couldn't sell it and still be able to pay the bank back. Again, someone was making money out of properties and mortgages and other things like that but I was the one drowning in debt. Once home, I'd listen to my neighbours yelling at each other through walls that were too thin because the construction company put profits before quality and eat lukewarm ready meals that claimed they were made of beef but tasted like they contained something very different. After that I'd drink too much beer as I stared at a screen of some kind or other, sometimes two at once, until I passed out. In the morning I'd get up and do the same all over again. It was existing but it wasn't really living.

'Now, like almost everyone else who survived, I work the land and while I still yearn for the old days from time to time, I don't really miss them. I'm not saying life isn't hard but you have to admit it has more meaning and in some ways it's better than it was before. I'm happier knowing that this is all there is. There's no push to always have the newest toys or the most money or the hottest clothes; no screens for people to hide behind and no gossip magazines or paparazzi showing us what some brainless celebrity's been up to with some footballer who should have been at home with his wife and kids. There's no advertising to make us feel inadequate or unhappy or tell us what we should be doing or how we should be looking; to tell us why we can't be content if we don't conform to some ever-shifting norm that someone somewhere has randomly decided is the only way for anyone to live. There's no corporations left to rape the Earth for profit and no banks to tempt you into debt, then trap you there until you end up working as much to pay their share-holders as you do to feed and clothe your family. Social success is no longer judged by the number of friends you have on some arbitrary website rather than whether any of them will be there for you when you really need it. People talk face to face now, like we're doing, rather than simply posting impersonal updates to everyone they've ever met and quite a few they haven't. You can live for today without being constantly told that now is so last year and that you should really be concentrating on what will be coming next week; or next month; or next year. Yes, that world came to an end but was it really a world worth saving? Aren't we better off without it?'

