

How It Started

by Sam J. Miller

At two AM I went to bed, and the mill shut down shortly after. The silence jerked me out of sleep so fast I almost screamed. Choking and sweating, I lay there and tried to figure out why I was so scared. And then I realized: for the first time in half a year, I was hearing absolutely nothing. My sleeping cycle had adjusted itself to the massive machinery's noise. Every night I slept soundly through the six main turbines powering up, and the threshing bin kicking into high gear, so the sudden lack of sound hit me like a bomb blast. Every last winch and crank and gear had stopped. According to grizzled old Rodrick, the Hudson milling plant had never shut down for want of work—not even in the darkest deepest days of the Great Depression.

Silence was just the start of it. Normally there's so much light coming in off the train yard and the silo security poles that I can read in bed at midnight with no lamp, but now I might as well have been in a coffin under six feet of dirt. Even the red digital readout on my cable box was gone. Cool wind came in my open window, smelling like grain and truck exhaust, the impossibly sweet breeze that follows a hot summer day.

I pulled my battery-powered radio from under the bed, and sifted through the stations in search of news. There was nothing, not even static. Just a low sad buzz on all the stations. Down around 88 I thought I heard someone whispering, frightened and far away, in the basement of an abandoned farmhouse five hundred miles from nowhere. All of a sudden I was five years old again.

Apocalypse scenarios cycled through my head. Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles reducing civilization to dust. Robots rising up and ripping apart the infrastructure we depend upon. Mostly I was stuck on zombies, thinking of the hundreds of films I'd seen where savage unstoppable ghouls swallowed up the entire planet.

"Hey," my next-door neighbor said, in a normal tone of voice that sounded like shouting. Mostly all the workers lived in that little ring of squat two-story houses. I was about to answer him, when the man who lived above him said:

"Hey yourself. Pretty spooky, isn't it?"

"Christ, I'm about to wet my bed."

I recognized the voices: Westfall lived on the first floor, a tough old drunk, and a younger guy named Richie lived up above him. Both men worked the silos with me. They were friendly like most of my coworkers, but we were not friends. I didn't have a friend in five hundred miles. I wanted to say something, jump into the conversation, prove to myself that I wasn't dead, but I was scared my voice would sound as thin and slippery out loud as it did inside my head.

"I take it you got no telephone, no TV, no electricity, no nothing, right?" Westfall said.

"Roger that. What do you think could cause something like that to happen?"

"No idea."

Richie lit a match, not ten feet from my window, and used the flickering light to find his cigarettes. He sat at the edge of his bed, naked and skinny and shivering and sweating even harder than me. After a long puff on his cigarette he shook the match out, and disappeared.

"I tell you one thing," Westfall said. "The mill's got a generator, and enough gas to get through a solid month. So if it's quiet right now, it means a lot more is wrong than some downed power lines."

"Like what?" Richie asked, uttering the words I mouthed.

"Like—" and Westfall took a long pause just right for a big swallow of whiskey straight from the bottle. "Like fucking hell, kid. Like the end of the fucking world. Or whatever."

All three of us listened. Every mill employee must have been awake right then, maybe fumbling in the dark for matches or flashlights, or quieting down crying kids, but mostly we were lying in bed too scared to even move. Like something was outside,

something big and terrible and hungry, and if we made the slightest noise it would know where we were. A lone siren started up, sounding impossibly distant, and was swiftly switched off.

Below me, at her bedroom window, my first-floor neighbor prayed. "Jesus," she said loudly, between soft mumbles. My voice still stuck in my throat, or I would have hollered down how funny-sure I felt that Jesus, like morning, would not come.

