

# Once, There Were Humans

Moxy Park

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# Contents

How we got here . . . . .	1
“Are you still alive?” . . . . .	3
Fire . . . . .	6
Hit and run . . . . .	11
Difficult choices . . . . .	16

## How we got here

I'm Tom. I used to be a tech journalist for the Birmingham Post. I had a really nice flat in Moseley which I was about to give up so I could move in with my girlfriend Beth. She lived in Perry Barr, and I'm going mad because I haven't seen her for a week.

I hope she's still alive.

It's been five days since the Guardian printed its last headline in its usual glib, knowing way. It just said "Thank you, and goodbye". My paper shut up shop the week before; we'd gone weekly near the end of 2009 and were finding less and less to write about during the last fortnight. Whatever is going on now is beyond the remit of a business paper.

If you're reading this after the fact – I doubt many will have the time or the resources to read this as it happens – then you'll have read elsewhere that it all "happened so quickly". That's such rot. We'd seen the news from Africa, the Middle East, then Russia, but it wasn't until it started to spread out towards Germany, France and then finally to the UK that we listened.

But by then, as the cliché goes, it was too late. I imagine we assumed that, like petrol shortages, SARS, bird flu, pig flu, and natural disasters in places where the people are beige and don't speak English, as long as we ignored it, the problem would sort itself out.

But as the infected started to lurch not from our TV screens or monitors, but through our own windows and doors, the problem became very real, very scary, *very*

quickly.

I'm alone as I type this. I'm on the twelfth floor of my block of twenty, and have so far been relatively unscathed. The only injury I suffered was two days ago, when a forty year-old woman tried to stab me in the neck for my car keys. I'm no fighter, but I'd have thought that a twenty-five year-old, reasonably fit man should have stood a better chance against her. But I guess her fear was greater than mine. She wanted that car so she could be with her kids, and I never would have stood in her way.

So it's Friday night. All the channels are showing an emergency broadcast message – I must make a note to try and record it for you, for posterity's sake – and the audio version is on the BBC local and national stations, the commercial ones having abandoned their masts. I've not been out of the building since that Wednesday when I tried to make a break for it, but that was when the infected started stumbling up the high street.

I remember thinking "Oh God, I hope I never see something more pitiful than this". I wasn't aware however, of how much even the more right-wing TV stations had "protected" us from the truth, as I saw a studenty-looking girl clawing at an older boy's face, tearing skin from bone, dribbling and puking into his mouth and onto his eyeballs. The most horrifying thing was that I think he recognised her. Maybe they were at college together; maybe they were old family friends.

It was at this point that any feelings of sympathy began to drain from me, and fear took complete hold. I drew my curtains but I'd been seen, and the numbers clustered

around the entire perimeter of my building have swelled with each misguided attempt at escape by a desperate neighbour.

I miss Beth terribly, and the longer I sit here in my own sorry, I Just got a text from beth. going out to find her.

## **“Are you still alive?”**

I was a bit rude to have left you so quickly yesterday. I apologise, but I’m sure you can understand the circumstances.

“r u stil alive???” That’s the text I’d received while I was waxing lyrical about a woman who couldn’t spell, and who scattered punctuation like a crop duster spraying chemicals. She is, as it happens, incredibly intelligent, but more importantly at this point, *alive*.

She always sent me texts like that. The question “are you still alive?” was not borne out of a real sense of my own endangerment – at least I don’t think so – but was just her way of saying “I miss you”.

The first thing I felt when I read that was a feeling of great shame. How had I sat here watching the window, the Internet, and the mountain of dishes still unscaled, while my girlfriend of three years was in danger, or dead?

So I packed a few essentials: my phone, an old netbook I’d been given to review, a couple of chargers, cables, and the sharpest looking knife from my kitchen. You would have laughed at the number of times I stepped out of my door, then back in again, then out as I wrestled with the question of whether to bring my wallet. I’d guessed

then that, while two thirds of the population were tearing the remaining third apart, there would be little chance to accrue any more Nectar points.

In the end I took it, and left. Then I came back, grabbed a torch, my *headphones* – I kid you not – a pen and my notebook.

The impulse to run headlong out of the front door and into that moaning, thrashing crowd outside was breathtaking, but when I ran for the lift, it was the “up” button I hit. You always imagine in a time like this, that basic electronics would suddenly fail to function, but the lift arrived, the doors opened, and I looked straight into the face of Pete, the middle-aged school teacher who lived on the floor beneath mine.

He hadn’t been infected long, by the look of him. His skin was pale, but hadn’t taken on that kind of leathery look that I’d seen on some of the faces outside. There was blood trickling down from his chin onto his sweater, and a damp patch on his crotch where he’d obviously peed himself.

His last moments must have been of complete and abject terror.

He saw me in a split second, but unlike that poor student from two days ago, there was no recognition in his eyes. They were essentially *dead*. I knew how preposterous that sounded – even in that split second these thoughts were running through my head – but, there he was, staring at and through me. I knew the reports of people “coming back to life” after being infected were crap (“dead is dead”, my brother had said while watching the news in his house last Sunday), but I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I

wasn't looking at Pete anymore.

I watched his hands begin to stretch out towards me, his mouth open and a low, pitiful, helpless moan escape from his throat. As his mouth opened I noticed that part of his tongue was missing, cut – or bitten – off in a rough diagonal line. I could even see the crimping at the edges, and blood coagulating around what must have been bite marks.

He took two shuffling steps out of the lift. The doors started to close and open comically while he stepped slowly into the hallway. In a minute-long second I can barely remember, I took out my knife, rammed it deep into his – its – chest and watched the protruding handle waggle as he continued to drag forward. He hadn't missed a step.

I ran back to my flat, fumbling for my keys to release the Yale lock that would have automatically clicked into place once the door was shut, slid in the key and opened it. The Pete thing was still a few paces behind me, so I shut the door and looked frantically for the heaviest thing to hand. I rummaged through my kitchen cupboards and my heart stopped as I heard the thud of the Pete thing's fists against the door.

At this moment I cursed my uselessness with tools. Beth and her brother had put most of my flatpack furniture together, and anything else that required more than the application of a screwdriver was dealt with by my handyman father. I ran to the bedroom, ripped my bedside lamp from the wall socket and walked slowly to the front door.

*My battery's running low, and I'm not exactly in a position to charge it right now. Will publish now and*

*conserve battery life until I can find a safe place to sit and charge. Will hopefully speak to you tomorrow. Sorry to leave you on a “cliffhanger”, but as you can tell, I obviously survive.*

## Fire

*I've just read back my last post. Sorry to leave you in such a hackneyed way; it wasn't intentional. I'm now supplied with enough batteries – actually, enough computers – to keep me going for a while (I'll get onto that later), so I'll return to Friday night, if that's OK.*

So there I was, bedside lamp in hand, pinned up against the wall by the main door of my Moseley flat, while something resembling the walking undead from a 1930s horror film – “Return of the Thing from Space that Ate People... from Space!” or something – was moaning and thumping his sorry way through the minutes.

And then it stopped. There was a pause, and – sigh – it started up again, but with renewed ferocity. It was also accompanied by loud, high-pitched screams and pleas for me to open the fucking door. It didn't sound to me like the Pete thing I'd met only a minute ago, and as I asked myself the question “what if it really is someone in danger?”, the possibility of saving someone in peril outweighing the possible danger to myself.

I opened the door, and two women fell into the room. A quick glance up and down the corridor gave me all the explanation I needed. In all kinds of register – alto, tenor,

baritone, bass – came that moan, as pitiful and saddening as it was chilling. I thought I could hear some that had moaned themselves horse; their rasping, sometimes phlegmy tones adding richness to the sound, and filling me with dread.

There were probably about a dozen; three or four walking from the left-hand lift, another eight or so clustered behind the door to the stairs on the right, whose narrow glass panel they must have punched through. I could see flailing arms more than pale faces, some already in an advanced state of decay (I found out later a bit more about the virus, which I'll go into in another post), all clamouring to get through.

As I glanced down towards my feet, I saw the body of the Pete thing, its limbs splayed awkwardly, its clothing a mass of white, blue and rich, dark red. One side of its face was pallid and already decaying more rapidly than I'd have imagined possible; the other was an indistinguishable facial soup. Where he'd been struck on the right side of his head, his skull had virtually collapsed, giving the eye an extra bulge. A second blow had created a cavity in his chin, and forced the lips to appear to fuse and meet his sunken nose.

I tell you this not to shock or inflame, but because I'm a reporter. OK I was a junior on the Business and Technology desk and no Charles Arthur or Bill Thompson, but I don't know how many more are blogging, podcasting, video logging or scratching pen on paper for the benefit of future readers, so I want to report the facts as I see them. I might not be the best equipped, but I'll always be honest.

I shut the door quickly as the lift mob continued to

make their way in my direction, and turned to my rescuers.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

“What the fuck was you waiting for?” was the ungracious retort from the eldest of the two, who was probably no more than 20, and who had a thick accent which is the kind reserved for the top deck of the number 61 bus.

“I’m sorry, I -“

“It doesn’t matter”, said the younger – maybe 18 or 19? – in a placatory, yet distrustful manner.

“I’ve not seen you around... How did you get in?” I mumbled.

“We was at her mates’, Becca’s” said the first, tucking her severely straight blonde hair behind her ears before letting it settle obstinately back, exactly where it was before. She was tall, thin, and blood-spattered.

“Becca and me are students at uni”, said the second, in an accent I could quite place. “We were watching the TV and talking about our work, and suddenly the electrics cut off and we heard a noise from the back door.” She pronounced both letters in “TV” with equal stress, and “the electrics” was conflated to “the-lectrics”; she rolled her Rs a little. Dutch maybe, I pondered.

“Becca opened it and one of those things just attacked her. We didn’t know what to do so we just... ran. All we’d done all day was watch reports of what those things do and the... virus or whatever, and how, if you get bitten or scratched or spit on, it gets into your blood stream and you become one of them.”

I couldn’t quite see where the other girl fit into this, but I didn’t press the point. I pictured the happy scene of three

girlfriends together, procrastinating and telling themselves that watching the news was more important than their fatuous studies. Thank God they did.

“I’m Tom”, I said.

“Marguerite”, said the European-accented brunette, “and this is Clare.”

Marguerite (she later assured me of the spelling) offered a long hand for me to shake, while Clare stared at the blood-stained cricket bat that had saved me from wielding a lamp with a force I knew I wouldn’t be able to match.

I shook Marguerite’s hand and offered drinks, which they declined.

“So, how did you get in?” I asked again, ever the hungry reporter.

“There was a load of them things chasing us”, said Clare, her thick accent rendering “things” as “fings”, “so we broke into this house and locked the door, but they broke the windows and got in and we ran to the upstairs and got onto the” (pause to swallow and breathe) “roof and ‘cos all the houses are connected we ran across the roofs and then we saw your fire escape” (another pause; she was getting red in the face, and I felt for her, deeply) “so we ran up and... and”.

She took a moment, tried to gather herself, but after another “and” she found she had no more strength. She looked at the cricket bat, seeming to register it for the first time, then released her grip with a flinch, and crumpled onto the floor, sobbing quietly.

Marguerite crouched beside her, putting a slender arm around her, and took up the story.

“The door to this floor was already open, so we came in, but there was three or four of them on the landing inside”. The fire escape opens to an indoor staircase, used mostly when the lifts are out of order. Opposite the fire escape is the door that lead to my corridor. It was behind that door that the eight or so creatures I’d seen, were clamouring for food. For us.

“We didn’t know what to do, so I ran down the stairs, and they chased me. I shouted to Clare to go back outside for a minute.”

She paused.

“I have a lighter”, and as if to justify this, she fished it out of her jacket pocket, along with a pack of cigarettes by way of guilty explanation. “So I saw a notice and ripped it off the wall.” I was finally glad to see those fire safety warnings had finally come to some use.

“I set it on fire and threw it at them. I didn’t know if this would work, but they didn’t like it, so I sort of, jumped over the... railing?” (she looked at me to be sure she’d got the right word) “and held on to the side with one leg on and the other dangling over the side”. She flapped her right arm in demonstration, and proceeded to explain how she’d half-climbed, half-shimmied her way back up the half-flight of stairs on the handrail, head down, shrinking against the fire, past the fear-stricken creatures fixated by the mini-bonfire, until one of them grabbed her.

“It touched my leg”, she explained, in a tone which suggested this wasn’t, as I would have thought, the most awful thing that could happen to a person. “I kicked it in the face and swung back onto the stairs.”

She then explained how Clare had seen what was happening, had re-entered and was now waiting by the door to my corridor, slamming it shut as Marguerite ran past. She told me of seeing the Pete thing at my door, and how Clare had dispatched it with her bat (which she'd ingeniously discovered in a neighbour's garden in a brief detour during their rooftop run), just in time to hear the doors of the lift open ahead, and the glass panel of the fire door behind, shatter. Guessing the creature had smelled or seen me, they counted on there being signs of life inside.

“Shit, I need a smoke” said Marguerite. “Do you mind?”

“Well, I can't really ask you to go outside, can I?”

She smiled, and sat in silence, Marguerite smoking, Clare's tears, sobs and sniffs beginning to slow, and thought about what we should do next.

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## Hit and run

Clare, Marguerite and I sat in my small, twelfth-floor flat, digesting the story the pair had told me. They'd made an escape from a friend's house after one of the Infected – a growing mass of people I'd seen little of but would grow

more acquainted with – savaged her and then ran for them. So far I'd come face-to-face with only one, and had it not been for the text I'd received only minutes before from my girlfriend, I would have been happy to stay glued to the rolling news channels and recurring radio announcements, surviving only by raiding my neighbours' cupboards.

But as I sat, watching Marguerite smoke, I thought more about Beth, and realised that I hadn't even replied to her text to tell her I was alive, and coming for her. I took out my phone, and sent a simple text:

“im coming”.

I looked at the two women who'd shown more bravery than I thought I was capable of, and asked “so, what do we do now?”

Marguerite took a final short drag, walked to the kitchen and dumped her fag end in the bin. “We find a way out.”

For a moment I imagined she'd said “fight our way out”, and I thought back to her story, of lighting a small piece of paper and setting a fire large enough to frighten four of the Infected.

A couple of things hadn't quite made sense in her story. If the two had jumped from rooftop to rooftop, how could they safely have jumped onto the fire escape without the yawning throng outside making so much as a single mark on her? Apart from sweat and the tears now drying on Clare's face, the two looked relatively unscathed.

I gathered this probably wasn't the time to bring it up, so we set about making a plan. This isn't an autobiography or a novel, so I'll spare you the dialogue.

We discussed what we already knew. Blows or cuts to

the body apparently did nothing, but a powerful enough blow to the head seemed to turn out the lights. They were afraid of fire, and disinterested in their own kind, wanting only to spread the infection. A quick stocktake revealed that our armoury consisted of a cricket bat, a lighter and a lamp, and the banging which had started up again suggested we had little time to mount any kind of carefully planned attack.

Throughout our conversation, Clare remained staring fixedly at the TV, which was still on, but silent. Now and again Marguerite would hold up a hand to silence me, as footsteps shuffled past my door to another.

Quietly, and with very few words, we gathered up all the tins from my cupboard into a bin bag, moved the heaviest and handiest objects nearest to the door as possible, then set about making cocktails, using a handy online guide<sup>1</sup> (and if ever you needed confirmation that we as a species are doomed, read the comments).

When we had decided we were ready, Clare turned off the telly with a purposeful gesture, walked to the door, and on my signal, opened the door to them.

The first almost had the look of a drunken husband who's finally been let into his house after banging on the door for half-an-hour, at 3am. As he lunged towards me, I swung Clare's cricket bat and landed a smart blow on the right temple. I heard the skull crack, but I hadn't finished the job.

As it fell and I steadied my hands for a second go, Marguerite

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.rotteneggsx.com/r3/show/se/55123.html>

was chucking can after can of mushroom soup, beans, tomatoes and sweetcorn at anything that moaned. She managed to land enough blows to slow them down for the second or two it took me to reset, and ready myself for the next one. This time I swung, missed, and staggered back into the living room, tripping over the coffee table.

The creature bore down on me, its dead eyes rimmed with blood, dust and sleep, as I half-sat, half-lay on the glass topped surface. As it crouched I aimed a kick to the chin which sent his bottom set of teeth crashing into the top set. I heard a small, wet sound and saw already clotting blood ooze slowly from his mouth as his tongue gave in to the vice-like grip of his jaws. Another kick to the chest was enough to propel him backwards so I could right myself and swing a connecting blow.

The noise, and the sight of an open door had, it seemed brought more trouble, but Clare had had the good sense to close the door when she saw I was in trouble. Marguerite and I swapped places for the second round – all three of us judging Clare to be best placed where she was, safe behind the door – and as the next wave jostled their way through the narrow doorway, I witnessed a young student's immense stamina, and breathtaking ruthlessness.

With the strength and accuracy of a batsman in an Ashes tournament, Marguerite flawed creature after creature, her tense forearms rarely slackening, as I threw increasingly smaller objects – a plant pot, a vase (both full), a clock radio, a MyBook hard drive, a novelty mug and a large pepper grinder – in the general direction of the doorway, buying her just enough time to land a fresh blow,

or to prevent attacks on my person. The bottleneck of such a narrow passageway gave us the ability to dispatch about one-and-a-half of the walking dead at a time, and I found I was able to do a surprising amount of damage with my wooden pepper mill.

After two minutes which felt like twenty, the coast seemed clear enough for us all to make a getaway. As Marguerite and I ran out of the door – not before packing our home-made bombs into my gym bag – towards the now empty lift, with the number near the fire door still growing, we heard Clare scream, and turned round to see her on the floor, with one of the hands of the Infected round her ankle.

We ran back, saw her spadeagled on the floor, and flinched as we watched thin rivers of blood trickle from her ankle as black fingernails scratched and scabbled, piercing the skin.

The Pete thing was at my feet, the knife still sticking out of its chest. I pulled it free, and, willing my body to show an ounce of the power Clare's friend had shown, sliced her attacker's hand off at the wrist.

Marguerite pulled her free, and we ran an awkward six-legged race to the lift, hit the Down button and sank to the floor, Clare's weight suddenly seeming too much to carry.

“Shit shit shit” muttered Marguerite, voicing her panic not only at her friend's medical situation, but our own aswell. We had no idea which, if any floors would be safe, so I stopped the lift at the fifth floor and readied myself, bat in hand as the doors opened.

We were given a moment's reprieve; enough time to

evaluate Clare's situation and figure out what to do next. But as we heard the smashing of glass from below – I suppose even double-glazing can only last so long, with so many open palms, fists and heads pounding against it – we knew we had to make a choice.

Claire's situation did not look promising. The four long slits made by the creature's fingernails, sharpened by the contracting of the skin that happens after death – this was something I was later to discover about the so-called infection – were seeping and glistening, the individual tracks of blood combining into a single, thick line that ran down her leg and soaked her sock. She was losing blood at a rate we couldn't slow.

The look that her friend flashed me communicated more than these 1,300 words ever could. She knew exactly how we were going to escape, and though she wasn't to join us, Clare would play a vital part in her plan.

*I can't write any more of this. In fact, consider this the last post. I'm sorry, it just feels crass. I'll leave the blog up, but if you're reading this in 2010, don't hold out for any more.*

## Difficult choices

What do you choose when running through a maze of rooms in a stately home, pursued by something wailing, snarling and seemingly always behind you, no matter how fast you run? Do you a) stick together in an all-for-one and so-on tactic, or b) opt to split up, knowing that some

will survive, and some will inevitably add to the numbers lurking around the corners?

But first a bit of housekeeping. I realise it's been a while, but things have been difficult. Not so difficult as to stop me from writing, but since I gave up in my last post, I'd found picking up the netbook with its by now dead battery made me feel... tactless, like one of those photo-journalists lining up to take a shot at something he can prevent. Not that I thought I could prevent what had happened up until the point Marguerite drove a cricket bat into Clare's skull. Even after our rooftop rescue by a devision of the Meat Wagon crew – a bunch of electronics salesmen, accountants and web developers; the kind who go paint-ballling once a month – who'd got their hands on a privately-owned helicopter and spotted us. (It's not actually as unlikely as it sounds; there are a lot of former RAF pilots who can't squash the flying bug, so take to the countryside with a tiny tin can, doing short rides for charity or to relieve the boredom. You can't do the whole rope-climbing trick, as they're so thin and light, and the weight ratios so finely balanced, the rescuer would be more likely to pull the thing out of the sky than climb aboard.)

Anyway, I'm wildly digressing. My blood's running a little hot, sorry. My point is that, I wasn't ready to open the lid and start typing; it just felt distasteful. But somewhere between meeting the boys from the Meat Wagons and learning to use – then using – some less ad hoc weapons, I've felt a return of that nagging sense of "duty". So, should you be reading this at the time I'm writing it, and should you care, I'm still alive. But more importantly to anyone

who may come across this after the fact, I'll try and fill you in as and when I can, and get Marguerite to tell her side of the story, as I'm still not convinced about her own rescue tale (I've since found out that fire has zero effect on zombies, so the whole light-the-paper-and-run thing was at the least embellished, and at the most downright fabricated).

So back to my original question. A few of us were gathering supplies – food, weapons, any luxury items we could carry – from one of those maintained stately homes you don't have to travel far from Birmingham to see. I honestly don't remember which one; this was a few weeks ago and a lot's passed in that time; it's just a dilemma that's never really left my consciousness: stick together or split up? If you stick together, the chances are almost 50/50 that everyone will survive, there being strength in numbers, and the increased probability that someone in your group will have a heightened sense or two, and detect a Walker or a Dragger a split second before you do. But if you split up, there's no guarantee that anyone will survive, as each one who dies simply adds to the numbers of those pursuing you. And what are the odds that you're the one with the heightened sense of sight or sound?

I've never been a fan of Every Man for Himself, however this is pretty much the motto in the Meat Wagons, and every time a raiding party comes back a person down, I'm reminded of this question. Just in the same way that "an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind", doesn't "every man for himself" eventually mean "no men at all"?