



# ALL, ALONE

*Comfort comes.*

BY TIM CASSFORD

It's hard to say when the voices start. It's not like they're silent one second and there the next. There's a gradual shift between the two states, I suppose. Sometimes it's only when you stop to think clearly that you notice they're there. Or that they've gone, and the world is silent again.

The pills help. I know they help and so I take them, but then everything's ok, so why am I taking any pills? Am I sick? It goes like this, round and round and round. Sometimes I wish it would end, that things would just be ok, and that would be it, finished, like a good book. But life isn't like a book, never mind a good one. It just goes on and on and on, slowly getting quieter and quieter, until it's only when someone stops to think clearly that we can see that it's gone.

So this is what I do, as often as I can remember: after I come into the house, and the doors *shush* behind me, I go and sit on the edge of the sofa bed, and I close my eyes, and I listen. Really truly listen. And I can hear the gentle *thub thub* of blood as it pulses through me. And I can hear the tiny *creak* in my neck as I move my head from side to side. I can hear the distinct hums of the refrigerator, the air conditioning, the air filters and the computer screen. The susurrus of my life. But nothing else.

The voices have stopped.

I think of the tablets, and I bite down on my thumbnail. It was healing well. I go over to the computer and I start playing some games. Messages flash up at the bottom of the screen, my online friends. Sometimes I reply to them, but not often. Everyone knows

they're not real people, only ghosts of a computer program to try to convince you that you exist, that people care for you, that your life has worth beyond your ability to contribute to the economy. Everyone knows that they're not real, but who is everyone? I try to think of the last time I saw someone in the flesh, but the memory peters out, elusive as love.

The clock on the display wall catches my eye as its numbers silently shift upwards. I used to hate the clock, resent its silent plodding. You can't get rid of the clock, only change its size and style. For a while I shrunk it down as small as it would go, but then I kept thinking it was a fly or a bug on the wall, and that was even more distracting. The last thing I need is to be seeing flies that aren't there. So now it does its impotent best to attract my attention by being inconspicuous. It's half past two. I have no idea which.

I try to do some work. I check my mail to see if my manager has noticed any change in my output, but no. There are several polite reminders noticing that I haven't taken my pills in, I count back the dates, five days now. The first few messages look like generic circulars, the tone of the last two is more pressing, more urgent. Am I sick? Do people get sick so quick?

I get up and stretch and yawn. The clock moves its hands much more gracefully. I go over to the refrigerator and take out my cold box of medication. I scan the barcode through and the pack pops open. I roll the pill out into my hand and it sticks to it awkwardly. I hadn't

realized I was sweating. I swallow the pill down and reach for the glass of water already waiting for me. There's no bitterness.

Someone once told me that drug companies would do their best to name their new medications with as many Xs, Ys and Zs in as possible. People would think they worked better if they couldn't pronounce the names. Or maybe I read it somewhere. What a world.

These pills work, everyone knows it. It's only a problem when you forget why you need them, when you're not sick; when you think you're well.

It's hard to say when the voices start. There's a shift, a gradual shift, and little by little you notice how much more comfortable everything is, like the whole world is just that much better. Like drinking hot chocolate on a crisp, cold day, or relaxing into a hot bath, or drinking a glass of fine wine, or reaching the end of a good book.

I try to remember a time before the pills came along, before they were necessary, before we all needed to hear the voices, but I can't. Maybe we spoke to each other; maybe we were each other's voices, each propping the other up. But who would do that?

When the voices come, they are a gentle whisper in my ear, a soft rustling of leaves, a faint birdsong. Gradually they take form, and I'm happy to wait. They're speaking to me. They're for me. I listen. Tears of happiness form at the corners of my eyes.

"You are loved." ■

**Tim Cassford** is a doctor and lives and works in West Sussex. None of the problems with the NHS are his doing. Probably.

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