



Confrontation

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Good Samaritans

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1

On the day of the tragedy, I went into a church and tried to pray. Having been raised without religion, I found myself unable to summon the necessary feeling, or at the very least to channel it in that direction.

In the weeks following, I was also moved, uncharacteristically, to carry around the flag. Not a flag, so much as a red, white and blue ribbon a neighbor gave me several nights following during a brief candlelight vigil. I stopped wearing the ribbon when I read of the Arab shopkeepers in the Midwest who were covering their store windows in flags in a desperate attempt to keep xenophobic thugs from attacking their stores.

I run a large corporation's local branch. The branch is located in lower Manhattan near the site of the disaster, but not so close that it was affected by it or that we could apply for a compensatory loan, though our insurance company, which charges us too much as a rule, called soon after to find out if we had in any way been affected. Having ascertained that we had not, they quickly removed certain provisions from our next policy and jacked up the price. I assume much of this was to be expected, though I have of course never experienced such a tragedy before, nor do I hope to again, ever.

At the time, I was frequently alone in my office, having only a very efficient secretary and the delivery man to speak to. On the day of the tragedy, my secretary was at home, on a day of rest leave, a large shipment having gone out the day before. We were not expecting any pickups and I was catching up on some invoices. I was not aware that the tragedy had even occurred until I happened to look out of my window and saw a long plume of black smoke extending across the sky. Assuming it was some kind of electrical fire, I casually noted its progress during the morning.

It was not until the Super knocked on my door at 1 P.M. that I finally realized we were experiencing anything extraordinary. I concluded I ought to go home. Since I live on the Upper West Side of

the city and work on the Lower East, I walked, and it was during this walk that I encountered the church. A woman I was walking with suggested we enter it, I don't remember her name, nor have I encountered her since. We walked together for a section of street and I left her there, praying. During our walk, I exchanged pleasantries with a man who was covered with gray dust. He told me he had been "very, very lucky."

In the days that followed, the southern part of the city was closed to all but neighborhood residents. On a major street many blocks north of my office, there was a half hearted cordon, which I was able to bypass without much effort. Because our business depends a great deal on deliveries, it was all but useless for me to be there each day and yet it felt appropriate to sit behind my computer screen, reading the online newspapers as the stories were updated. Every now and then, with a senseless, reassuring roar, a fighter jet careened overhead, angrily chasing history. I remember noticing, one morning, that tanks had taken up positions on a major street around the corner from my office. I think they were gone within a few weeks; the planes came out again every now and then, in response, it seemed, to stories in the newspaper. The delivery man began making his regularly scheduled appearances again and I resumed business.

About a year after the disaster, I once again looked up from my work to see a plume of black smoke. Within minutes, my computer went dead. This time, my office neighbors and I reacted with collegiality. We waited, patiently, and then went downstairs together. On the day of the disaster, there had been rumors as to other attacks that had not panned out; so, on the day of the blackout, we discounted the story that the entire Northeastern section of the country had gone dark. This proved true. I walked home again and along the way encountered an old man making his laborious way along a block. I asked whether he needed help and we bantered briefly. I soon left him behind.

2

On her way out for a drink, she notices a heart-shaped stain on a wall, three feet above the ground. It seems to have been the result of floodwaters.

She thinks that she should work on her sense of direction. Coming out of the subway, she is unsure which way is uptown and which way down. She knows where she is going for her drink, but she cannot remember the landscape as well as she thinks she should.

She has asked to meet at this particular restaurant purely for the sake of enjoying the large swathe of sky visible from its outside café, but once seated, she realizes she is looking at a part of the horizon that has been giving her trouble. For some time, she has been having difficulty remembering where the buildings stood. Her subconscious keeps placing them in parts of the city where they could not possibly have been. Or, having lost them, she thinks, they are now everywhere. She has the uncomfortable feeling that the city is slowly spinning around her and that each time she looks up the landscape will have changed.

In order not to be preoccupied, she asks to switch places with her date. But her date, who is not normally insensitive, misinterprets the suggestion, assuming without foundation that she wants to look at someone other than himself or is perhaps embarrassed to be seen with him. He spends an unfortunate portion of the evening contemplating the meaning of the seating switch and adding to a panoply of self-serving accusations as to the honesty of the female sex. Although the date had every promise of being romantic, it is the first wrong step in an evening that eventually goes awry.

When he leaves her off, he does not offer to kiss her, fearing rejection. Even though she had been dreading the possibility, she interprets his failure to offer even the customary buss on the cheek as a signal that something is wrong with her appearance. The next day, she tells her analyst, who is momentarily preoccupied and looks up in dazed silence, not admitting she was not paying attention. The analyst decides it is time to get a dog, but relents in favor of a cat, assuming she does not have adequate patience or wherewithal.

3

"Once, I was sold, for a handful of beads."

The city shudders. Who remembers? Riots? Drownings? The Triangle Shirtwaist.

"I am a ship which has sprung a leak." Crews labor below ground

on my retaining walls; travel the subway system with pumps, chasing accumulating pools.

"I can no longer hide you." The minutiae of the lives of the dead are revealed in regular articles in the newspaper. Few are spectacular. In a show of solidarity, citizens exit their tiny apartments and stand together holding candles at a pre-arranged time. Tenants who had for years treated their neighbors with contempt exchange pleasantries and first names. The brevity of this reconciliation is breathtaking. Like fugitives, the citizens quickly allow the names to disappear from their memories, their minds focused desperately on the prospect of safer days ahead.

"I cannot protect you from fear." On the large boulevards uptown parallel apartment buildings bend away from each other in shame; the alteration so subtle that only the buildings themselves are aware.

Does a fortress taken by siege droop? Can a man-made thing acknowledge insult?

4

After the blackout, my assistant gave notice. This was of course understandable, given the circumstances, but she could perhaps have been less emotional. She did not go as far as to claim that I had anything to do with the disasters myself, but I could not help thinking as I listened to her rant, that that was where she was going in her thinking.

As far as I know, her period of employment with me was a positive experience. She managed to save money and to buy a new car and a small house for herself in the suburbs. But once she had made clear what she meant to do, she insisted on telling me what she felt was wrong with the way I conducted my affairs. She told me she thought my habits were disquieting and that I was a strange and reclusive man and that she had only stayed with me for all of those years out of fear that I could not be relied upon to give her a good recommendation. Now, she said, it would be pointless for me to badmouth her in a reference as any employer would dismiss such criticism as post-disaster stress. She also, somewhat perversely I thought, made a half-hearted threat of a harassment charge due to a dinner

we had once shared following the Annual Conference in which she had drawn me into an unfortunate discussion of her preferences as to wedding attire. As I had no intention of writing her a remotely negative recommendation, I wrote her a stellar one and I mailed it off to her the following day.

Because of the nature of my business, I did not mourn her loss. I immediately engaged an agency to find a replacement. The Main Office requires my vigilance; I must address the question of acquisition and cannot focus my energies on organizational tasks. My days are focused on making choices; on tabulating costs, on comparisons. When I have written my reports, when I have ordered the necessary items, when I have received them, when I have passed them on to a trusted associate who succeeds in sending them to their appropriate destination, then and only then can I rest. I depend on someone to carry the ball forward to the finish line. I do not claim that assisting me in this endeavour is exciting. I'm sure it is not. But it is necessary. So I was much relieved when on the fifth day of their engagement, the agency sent along a suitably-dressed, polite replacement for an interview.

She seemed personable enough, if subdued, and very competent, and due to my need to get back to the regular rhythm of my work as soon as possible, I hired her on the spot. This proved to be an excellent decision as she was a very diligent worker who seemed to prefer not to concern herself with anything that might be a distraction. Unlike her predecessor, she showed no interest at all in changing the radio station or in unproductive discussions of the time allotted to her for lunch. Indeed, had I not insisted, it is my belief that she would have taken no breaks at all.

It was spring. Election season. The newspapers were full of stories of the investigation of the government's response to the disaster. She had been working for me for more than a year without significant incident. I continued to be satisfied with her progress, yet it became apparent to me that she was rather lonely. She never got phone calls and did not paste above her desk the usual remembrances or photographs that might go with having children, a family or even a steady boyfriend or best friend. I considered whether it might be appropriate for me to propose any extracurricular social interactions or to try

to introduce her to an eligible man. But as I myself lead a rather solitary life and have been on various occasions bewildered by similarly well-meaning attempts at intervention, I thought better of it.

My superiors were very happy with our progress. At the end of her first year in my employ, I was told that we had succeeded in bringing in the largest quantity of useful materials in the entire north-east region. I was aware that this was due in no small part to her efficiency and I made sure to recognize her efforts with praise and a pay increase. For good measure, I did this in full view and hearing of the UPS man who smiled at her appraisingly. She took this remarkably lightly. It is not easy for a person whose job is a cog in the process of producing a complex end product to appreciate how important her small role is—money and praise are really the best means at an employer's disposal—yet she seemed entirely indifferent.

It occurred to me that it is probably not possible for the person who occupies the assistant's job in my office to develop a personal identification with the job since the relation of its importance to the ultimate output is so remote. Yet it was impossible to afford her more responsibility.

As I puzzled over this, I began to be concerned with my interest in the problem. As I am a person of long experience in business, I understand the importance of keeping feeling out of office transactions. It can only cause dissension and a decline in productivity. It is for that reason that I wholeheartedly endorsed the company's policy against "fraternizing" in the office. I considered it proof positive of the appropriateness of my decision that my former assistant's immediate reaction was outrage, followed by tears. "You are such a selfish man," she said.

What surprised me most about her comment was that it appeared to hold within it a kind of nostalgia for a former incarnation she imagined for me in which I had perhaps been more giving or pliable. I tried my best to understand this. Perhaps, earlier on in our relationship, we interacted more congenially. Took a meal together now and then. This was certainly my intention. How can two people work side by side each day and not have any personal interaction? But it is unfortunately easy for a different cast to be put on matters. One disregards that possibility, I think, at one's peril.

My former assistant was always putting casts on things. Her initial utterance was followed by an equally preposterous, I thought, declaration: "They simply want to spoil the happiness of others. Say what they like, how many marriages start out as office romances? Who is more devoted to their job than a person who has found love there? How can they blame love? For the sake of their liability?" This interlude confirmed my suspicion that she read too much romantic fiction; there was always a bodice ripper bursting with fleshy exuberance in the upper right hand drawer of her desk.

She resented me. I provided for her a livelihood and I think that became more important subconsciously to her than she understood. Perhaps in the end she resented the very cleanness of our relationship that I had worked so hard to establish.

Whatever the case, as I thought about it, I found I did not regret it of my new associate that she intended to keep our interactions on such an even keel. Rather than draw unproductive personal conclusions, I interpreted her quiet as a sign of modesty and dedication to the work at hand, qualities that I have always considered of paramount importance.

5

She thought he was a funny little man. Full of attitude, spit, polish. Concerned principally with work. She liked him at once and further liked the businesslike atmosphere his office presented. She felt it was exactly what she needed.

Steady work that required attention. Kept her head down. In the office, she could empty her mind of confusing thoughts. She did not think he particularly cared for small talk. She did not feel hungry in the office. Her mood brightened significantly.

Each day there were packages. She loved the packages. She did not care what went in them. She reveled in the joy that this evidently brought her boss, who seemed to like nothing better than to discover that the packages had been sent off without fanfare or incident. A year went by almost without notice.

One day, with great solemnity, he tried to communicate something to her about an honor they had received from the company. She tried to follow what he was saying, but could not. She tried to

smile, as she felt that was what was expected of her, but found her face would not move appropriately. He told her that she would receive an increase in her pay and motioned over the delivery man to witness what he was saying. She nodded with what she thought was appreciation but his disappointment was clear. She was surprised and uncomfortable. She tried to communicate her happiness, but she found the effort of speaking too great. After so many months of speaking only minimally, she had lost the ability to easily form words. She felt as if she were standing behind a glass panel, shouting. But I am, I am happy — don't you see?

6

The city shifted uneasily. "How am I?"

Consciousness had briefly caused it to become self-conscious. I am a city and what is my stature? Cities are aware of cities. Babylon, Paris, Constantinople, Rome, Athens, Moscow, London, Vienna, Beijing, Tokyo, Cairo. Greatness lies upon pillars like dust, like silence. The city's function is to remember. The city is memory: lists, attics, information, trickle of air conditioner drip, changing traffic light, hardening pigeon shit, human excrement, chewing gum, discarded sandwich, subway bed refuse tended by rats. "I may be rotting, but I am not afraid."

Spring comes. The flowers bloom. Shadows shift, light settles on the buildings. The city shimmers. Tasks left undone, people left unsaved. More buildings, more—up, up, a fervent gray bouquet offered to the heavens. Its engines re-doubled, harder, harder, work harder. But at what and why? Once questioned, once nervous— "No tank has ever rolled across my streets in anger . . ."

Considering this, it realizes how its own memory is clouded, how buried, it remembers horrors its pampered inhabitants can't possibly imagine. Not Constantinople, Berlin. Forged in anger. In boastfulness; its tender corners known only to a few, its stridency its calling card. Forged by anger and by money. Will it end that way?

7

On the way home from work one day, in the heat of the summer, my train stopped just short of my subway stop and remained there for

nearly an hour. I was reminded again of the disaster and of the black-out and of the tales of the personal sacrifices of the few.

The air conditioner remained on in our car, but from the steadily increasing patter of conversation, it became clear that the car behind us had lost its air conditioning. As the time passed, word came back that there was someone in the car behind us who was having trouble breathing. Someone in our car shouted back to those closest to open the door between the cars. Then a surly character swore and threatened any would-be Samaritans with bodily injury if they complied and several voices around him chimed in in agreement.

The leap between the thug's words and the kinds of slogans that were then regularly being written in the newspaper about my countrymen was breathtaking. I was suddenly aware of the frightening proximity of chaos. I am not a tall man, or an expert in the martial arts and I do not carry a handgun. Luckily for all concerned, the subway began moving again and the incident dissolved into the evening. It occurred to me how much I treasured the organization and rationality of my work. As I sat at home, watching the evening news, I found myself considering how I might speed up the time between that moment and the next morning—though in truth, I felt as if, ever since the disaster, time had been hurtling forward without break.

8

When he came into work the next day, her boss seemed rather uncomfortable, as if he had not slept well. She meant to say something to him about this, but she also did not want to feel uncomfortable herself. In the day's silence, she felt encased, safe, irresponsible.

There were days on which she wondered what it meant, if it meant anything at all, that she felt so comfortable, silent, in the same room with this man. Perhaps this stillness was the best she could do interpersonally. She did not want to consider this, but each time she put on a mailing label, each time she wrote in the return address—

She did not want, could not afford the possibility—she recoiled at the thought—it would be a long time. She was living by accretion. Like a snail, like something creeping slowly, sloppily, along the pavement. At night, she sometimes woke from dreams thinking of the other part of herself now missing. Where was it?

She often pictured herself among the dying. She had read an account of a man wearing his shirt like a mask over his face who had gone from floor to floor saving people before perishing. His apparition visited her regularly. She thought, had he been—she would not want to know since if he had, she would be proud—and yet it would mean that the fear that inhabited her on a daily basis was all the more shameful.

She wanted to think well, wanted to think. At least he hadn't been on one of the planes. The children on the planes was the worst part: a parent, comforting the children, whispering the urgent reassurances of civilization. Sometimes she pictured herself with them; as them. She imagined herself among the corpses removed from the remnants of the planes still with their seat belts on. Hope, faith.

She had not heard from him in his final minutes. He had never been hers to lose. In fact, she knew him only from his picture on the subway wall, left by a relative who refused to bow to the likelihood that the disaster was the reason he had not called. Beloved brother, friend. Something in his eyes drew her in. Love at first sight with a picture. His only trace as he was sucked from the earth; a publicity photo, an informational help wanted plea. Bring back my brother, bring back my friend. She hadn't retained his name. Then she saw the picture in the paper. His biography. He had been an actor; near the buildings for a — Her tears had dripped over the paper, obscuring pertinent information.

9

Like ants.

A new traffic hub! In my lower extremity, movement, rumbling, a light massage. From rotted food to mountain, from disaster site to traffic hub. But I feel, but I remember.

They say the day in question was a beautiful, beautiful day.

How do they quantify a day? I do not understand in days. I understand in years. How much silt worn away? How many holes plugged? How much more tonnage supported by my joists? Each skyscraper a limb. On some days, I wish they had not added so many limbs. Limbs like tentacles. When one is shorn off, I feel pain. Excruciating pain. Imagine two. Of course, because I am a city, I feel only in extremes. It is the only way I can.

Hear it in my song; a whistling above the city, a moaning. Too many tentacles, too many ants crawling, tickling. Gunshot holes like stickpins. And yet, it was a beautiful day.

10

The day I decided it was time to get to know my new employee better was a beautiful day. The sun was bright. Blue. The reason I had concluded this was that I felt, after much deliberation, that the maintenance of social distance between an employer and an employee is, in all likelihood, a kind of false construct, exactly as my former assistant had tried to persuade me. That after all Destiny was not interested in want ads and pressing needs for assistants. That people were put together for a reason. I do not know what it was that brought me to this new and rather radical conclusion. I can only guess that it was the odd and rather pleasing feeling that her indifference brought me. I believe that is what the women's magazines call, "Mystery."

The occasion I chose for my intervention in her affairs was the Conference. This happens once a year in early summer. The company traditionally requests that all members of the staff of every office be addressed simultaneously by the chief executive. She agreed to come without fanfare or indication of expectation. I had by now come to understand that her apparent indifference was a kind of shyness and so I no longer took it seriously. She chose, I thought, a delightful ensemble for the day — a purple shirt with a dark blue pantsuit. I smiled at her appreciatively.

We sat together at the speech and read our information packets as the room began to fill. On the wall ahead of us were myriad screens. Fragments of the presentation we were to see blinked on and clicked off as we sat down. We had been given a biographical sketch of the CEO, the details of which were of course familiar to many of us. He grew up in the Midwest. He believed that leadership was very important. That innovation was important. That believing in one's personal relationship to the end product was important. These thoughts are thoughts that I myself have found useful. I like to dwell on them as I work. To consider how I might better inculcate them into my daily life. So often life does not provide guidelines; our leader's

thoughts make it so much easier to get through. He held a position in national sales. He worked overseas. He helped to save one of the company's businesses by "finding efficiencies and synergies that . . ."

I looked over at my assistant. She was engrossed in the materials. I could smell her shampoo—a pleasing perfume. The room was filling up. I looked around for familiar faces.

I am not well known at the company. This is, as I am well aware, a failing on my part. I should make it a goal of mine to become more involved, especially since I man an outpost on my own. It would help me with advancement. I suppose my inability to do this is in a way instructive as to my character. I am a loner. Not so much a lone wolf, but one who prefers the small pond to the big one. The truth is my superiors have given up writing this observation on my reviews; perhaps they have come to the conclusion that I am not worth the trouble. Whatever the case, I am resigned to the roadblocks this characteristic has created for me.

I do know Bob, from Shipping, who comes by our office every now and then to check on our forms and to issue new ones if we need them. We have talked of having lunch one day but have never followed through. I saw Bob and he waved and I waved back. There is also Lisa, who processes my checks and with whom I must take up issues relating to my assistant. Lisa was also with Bob and she waved.

The lights dimmed and the speakers chirruped. The room was now filled. The screen filled with the CEO's face. Perhaps it is very difficult to be on display constantly, the very face of a company. I could see his pores. He seemed rather tentative and uncomfortable. I worried for him. His mouth moved and his cheeks seemed to react to that movement involuntarily. As I watched I became too caught up in watching his face, his tics, the movement of his mole, to really catch what he was saying. By the end, I felt all the more devoted to him as I could see the effort the speech must require, the toll it took. He finished and the lights came up and there was polite applause. I looked over at my assistant and she was crying.

That face had been too much. It was impossible, she thought, to see its pores like that, up so close, and not feel oppressed, vacuumed.

She tried to look away, to shrink. To disappear into her seat. Instead, she stared into the gigantic nostrils, watched the tendrils flutter in a narinal wind. She sat transfixed, did not hear what, if anything, the mouth said, but filed away, oppressively, inside her soul, the pinkness of his gums, the whiteness of his teeth, the solemn ordinariness around his eyes, the hair's distressing limpness. She thought the face might represent the future: a future in which personalities dimmed, faces lost their beauty, a future limned in the mundane. Make it stop!

"Inn—" she felt a tear leave her eye and drop "o" she shuddered "vation." The room erupted in applause. "Please," she said, in a voice which sounded like dry ice. "Can we go?"

I felt at a loss. We would have to leave, but how could we without attracting negative attention and disrespecting the CEO, disrupting morale. Yet, if, as a consequence of her experience of the CEO's speech, she were to leave my employ, my own branch might never recover. Perhaps there had been something in the speech I'd missed. Perhaps I had become inured. Despite the discomfort of those sitting on either side of us, who had waited on our leader's every word, I stood and helped her out of the room. "She's not well," I said, in as kind a tone as I could muster, to a woman who frowned at me and asked if this was the way I showed my "passion for the business."

We made it out, relatively quietly, and I admit, it was not without some surprise that I discovered I had steered us to the café where my former assistant and I had shared our fateful meal. It is a nice café, nearby, quiet. I favor it, not out of any particular taste or preference, but because it is well situated and convenient and not overpriced. I also appreciate the fact that after many years of visits, the house staff makes an effort to seat me well and to remember what I like. So I was particularly pleased when, upon arriving at the café, the senior waiter, Mr. Fussoni, found a capacious table located away from the front door, where she could recover away from the gaze of the other diners. He gave me a bottle of their best white wine—and murmured to me that he would charge only for the house brand, since the occasion was of such great importance. He congratulated

me under his breath and winked broadly. I did everything I could to focus on my assistant who seemed to be coming around. I thought for a moment that it was not unlike one of those scenes in the movies when the heroine comes around and casts eyes of love on whomever it is who first crosses her field of vision. I was considerably embarrassed at this thought, although one cannot account for one's own subconscious, and I endeavoured to keep a simple and honest expression on my face, so as not to seem to be hoping to profit from her distress. She looked around the room blankly.

I thought again of that day with my assistant. We had been to the Convention together, and had received some good notices on our work from Bob and Lisa. We were happy, casual. Our meal together felt natural, unplanned. We might have been two old friends sharing wine and food. She had spoken, I thought rather poignantly, of how happy she was to be going to a wedding that weekend, how much she liked weddings, and she had without guile come around to discussing her own preferences as to wedding attire. It was then that she looked at me and I made my mistake.

I do not profess to be a man who has a great understanding of women, but there was an openness in that look—an absence of inhibition—that put me on my guard. Perhaps I am too conservative in my outlook: I am reserved and not immediately attracted by forwardness. This combination limits my opportunities. It is why I am a bachelor still and married to my job. My former assistant was not unattractive. And, as she began to talk to me of her friend's wedding, at which she was to be the maid of honor, her eyes widened. She described the fabric of the dress her friend was going to wear, how it was going to be made especially for her.

As she spoke, I pictured her, standing to the right of the bride as she said her vows. I confess I may have closed my eyes. As a matter of information, I do not think that this was wrong. I was simply caught up in her enthusiasm. She stopped talking when I opened my eyes and stared at me and smiled. She ordered more wine. Somewhere in the restaurant a waiter dropped a glass and it shattered.

"Do you want some extra time off?" I said. It was the first thing that came into my mind. She frowned, smiled, then took my hand. I felt immobilized. She dropped my hand as if it were a fish's fin.

"I am sorry," I said, after a moment.

She looked at me, undeterred. Very gently, she put her left foot over my right ankle. I was like a man looking over the edge of a cliff tempted by the possibility of flight; I clung to my fear of gravity as to life itself. She saw the change in my face, I saw her see it. She drew back and removed her foot, slowly, resignedly.

I ordered a Scotch and soda. I am not, as a rule, a drinking person. I prefer the maintenance of my faculties to their corruption by artificial and ultimately sentimental means. She looked resigned. I had dangled her bravery, played her like a puppet. I asked for the check.

As my new assistant came slowly to her senses, I groped furtively in my memory for a *modus operandi* should dread opportunity knock again.

13

Already they have forgotten. They spread out their newspapers on the empty subway seats beside them and read; they dress for spring. They laugh, they carry on, they live. They cannot see the memories of my former citizens, their voices, their songs, their cries of passion, still falling on the earth like ash.

14

Where was she? In a dark Italian restaurant near the convention center with her boss. She could smell butter. She thought perhaps she could smell a not particularly flattering deodorant. The air conditioner rattled. She felt tired and hungry. She wanted a drink. It had been impossible to ignore that unflattering mole. It looked like a blackened spaceship—an international conveyance for mind control. And that room full of sheep. Had one of them baaa'd, she would not have been surprised. What was he saying? She could not remember, *passionvaluessynergisticblueskiesthinking*—mind-control gobbledygook, enticing, entrancing. She had been right to trust her boss, however—she had asked him to take her out of there and he had. And now, alone, in this room, this place—where were they? A restaurant, near the convention center. He was looking at her. Waiting, waiting for something. She wondered what it was. She waited for it with him.

After a minute she said, "I want a martini."

He smiled, evidently relieved, and disappeared into the gloomy recesses of the restaurant. A waiter appeared and brought her her drink. There was a thin layer of ice across its surface. She took a small sip. An air conditioned gust blew across the back of her neck. She was reminded suddenly of a time she went skating at Rockefeller Center when she was a little girl. She was skating along and somebody pushed her down and she fell on her stomach and slid several feet forward and lay against the border of the rink, wondering whether someone was going to pick her up. Would anyone ever come? She lay immobile for a time, thinking. Her mother had said, "Get up! Get up!" Eventually she had, but she had learned that she was capable of taking comfort in lying on her stomach on ice, that to take refuge in the silence inside her own head was safe, crazy, tempting. She took another sip. Had he disappeared for good? But here he was, touching his hair. He smiled, reminding her of a dog she had once known. She took his hand and kissed it.

This she meant well. She did not mean this badly. It was not intended dilatorily or as mockery or condescension. Neither was it amatory or sexual. It was as a gesture of thanks. For the extraordinary gift of sticking with her, of being willing to remove her from the presence of that bombastic mole. She looked into his eyes, which were brown, darting, dull. She had frightened him. He did not move. She felt a mothering pang, a desire to administer. She stroked the back of his hand. He reddened appealingly. She took another drink of her martini and placed his hand on her knee.

She understood he would not be moving further. Perhaps he had never had a woman. She did not care. Anyone could, it was as easy as falling off a log. She felt a presence at her left elbow. She turned. A waiter.

She let his hand go.

"Tagliatelle, with broccoli," she heard him say, in a nervous voice. "Tagliatelle."

Food? But she did not know—she did not want to eat. She wanted to, she looked back into his eyes. It was as if she were wooing a statue. And yet, he was here, flesh and blood. Did she mean to eat him? "Tagliatelle!" she said, as if she were speaking through a megaphone.

"Tagliatelle?" she said, after a moment. "What is that?" The sound seemed to echo in the empty room. She hadn't meant to speak so loudly. Hadn't meant to—what? Exist?

"Pasta, Madam," the waiter said.

"I know what it is," she said and put both hands on the table, face up. "Yes, of course, Tagliatelle."

15

Two small black slippers. Removed, now dry, clinging. From two small white feet. Feet on the end of two short legs. Legs on the end of a shorter body. Once, I had a German section. Now, no longer. All moved West or elsewhere or back home. Perished in what was only seconds, in the swirling waters off my shoulder. Many had never been on a boat before, most died. Those who survived never went near a boat again.

16

My childhood, my life up until now, my parents, my job. And now her. Decisions to come, problems, issues, pending doom. I could not help myself, it made no sense I know, but there it was.

And then it dawned on me. I should let her kiss me, I should kiss her. Why not?

Having decided this, I thought I perceived ahead of me a bright light, a new path. Suddenly, I felt the soft touch of her lips on mine and all went black.

17

In the dark, tousled room, she could hear a loud thumping sound, as if a helicopter were hovering outside her window. The incessant, numb thumping terrified her and she awoke shivering. Her head hurt, the room was cold, over air-conditioned. She had a vague recollection of having done something she shouldn't have.

This was not the first time she had heard the helicopter sound. Soon after the tragedy, she had awoken in the middle of the night to this same sound and had seen a searchlight flashing over the nearby rooftops. The next day she searched the newspapers for an explanation but found none. Over the months since, the helicopter sound

had returned like a recurring dream or a flashback. The sound grew louder. She looked out her window but couldn't see anything. She thought it must be above and behind her and vainly searched the opposite windows for its reflection. She had the feeling that the helicopter represented a memory she was meant to retain. Something had breathed again in her tonight at the restaurant. And she decided that even now, with this helicopter here, with this throbbing headache, she would keep it alive.

She looked at the bed. There was a human-sized lump. Had she taken her boss home? No. She breathed a sigh of relief: it wasn't him at all, just an empty lump of bedclothes. She remembered now, he had dropped her off, chastely—she was thankful for it. He had murmured something, what?

18

The sound of happy Germans singing. Even the treacherous waters off my flank are more forgiving. There are those who wonder why people love firemen, but I know, a city knows. Any city does. Wood inlays every apartment, every part of me, from top to bottom. Lined with wood. Not just wood but would. Would have done. A family, a mother, three daughters, on a jaunt. It has not perhaps been an easy week, they go together. One lives to be 100, the others don't live, are cut off, crushed under the collapsing, burning deck. The youngest one, wearing her favorite black slippers, jumps off into the water. The next one crouches down as small as she can, hiding, and is crushed. Later, the mother identifies her earrings and her other daughter's slippers. At the trial, they convict the boat captain, though it is said the fault lies as much with the owners of the boat company and a negligent inspector. Now it develops that there was a man casing the towers in the weeks before; a commission is investigating. Surely there will be lessons learned?

Nothing is so universal as the assumption among human beings that disastrous loss of life leads to lessons. I say, perhaps. Perhaps the General Slocum, combined with the Titanic, led to improvements in boating safety. But how many more forgot the General Slocum entirely, simply because of its victims, as, in a very few years, sympathy for Germans waned for obvious reasons? People turn away

from disasters even as they honor them; in claiming to commemorate, they are really speeding the process of forgetting. But I foresee a day when . . .

19

It was over and at least mercifully quickly. She let me walk her home. I don't think she was angry. I had thought perhaps that a lifetime of disengagement would be ended at that very minute. Although I'm glad I did not take the leap, it put me in mind of an earlier incident I had sought to forget. Upon joining the company, I had been offered a choice between the main office and my branch. The main office position was one of great responsibility. I had joined the company happy to be considered for such a role; but I decided in favor of something I knew I could do well, my current job. Once out of the main office, always out of the main office. Perhaps, I am waiting for something. The call from the home office? The amorous assistant? But I have been offered these and I have turned them down. Perhaps I am just waiting. Living. Myself a cog in an ever-turning wheel.

20

. . . About how he did not like to change—did not want to change and that he was sorry. She thought how nice it was to be on the receiving end of sorry, of politeness, of regret. She opened her curtains. The sky was bright blue, exactly the same as it had been on the morning of the disaster. She tried to remember where she had been standing and why. She had been at the top of a stairway leading out of the subway, wondering why no one was moving. She had said, "Move!" in a loud voice and people had parted. And she had been allowed to push ahead of the milling, astonished, horrified crowd, in time to see the second plane hit. The thing is, she remembered, it had been the most beautiful day. The sky had been just like this; bright blue, icy blue. And the thing that had been most deeply tragic, that remained deeply tragic, was that even now, beautiful was mixed with catastrophe. Disaster, blue sky.

She thought of how it had been to kiss her boss. She thought this was in fact a favor she had been meant to grant. Perhaps it was one he deserved. It was as if the experience had been choreographed

for her. She did not mind; indeed, for a while, she thought playing a part was nice. That was what she would do. Perhaps this was but the first step in a dance. What the next step was she did not know, but she thought she would dance it as well and the one following and the one after that, until.