

Oklahoma r e v i e w

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DOWN BELOW

You had only lived downtown for three months. Guests gasped when they walked into your loft: you had purchased a perfect view of the World Trade Center Towers. Two beautiful monuments to the human race, standing like dutiful sentinels a few hundred feet from your living room window, filling up the sky, shadowy and strong, blotting out New Jersey and all points west. Cocktail conversation was often distracted because of the beauty of this view, the power of seeing the landmarks up close.

Gone—five years ago—in one insane dust-filled morning. Gone. And with it, the brave, fierce, I-can-do-anything woman you used to be. Crumpled to the ground like the towers. Aching to be rebuilt.

So—you're still a New Yorker—face your fears already! Call Sarah and announce your production company is going to hold a contest. Bring some new filmmaker's vision to fruition. Create something. Something out of the ordinary. Special. Not the usual 9/11 crap. God how you hate those overused numbers. The thought of them makes you ill.

Six hundred sixty-four entries, most of them montages of video footage from the AP wires, interviews with politicians, interviews with relatives of the deceased, a history of dead pets. One visionary stumbles onto a curious angle: survivor guilt. He's interviewed fifty people who lived through the catastrophe, lost no one terribly dear to them, who washed off the dust and were moving on with their lives. You hold this proposal in your lap until it is bent into a permanent cylinder. You meet the young man, are taken with his arrogance and drive, his wild black gypsy hair, his youth. He tells you he's impressed by your mind, intimidated by your past work, awed. The meeting imbues you with the power that was once your second nature, and out of gratitude, you grant him the funding. He laughs and holds your hands in his. You are pleased by the looks he gives your legs, the attention he lends your strong handshake. He emails you constantly, and you put work aside to reply. You feel like a teenager. Reckless. Alive. You learn to use your instant messenger and now his notes become insistent.

Merciless. Hungry.

You tell him you're a grown woman with a husband and two sons. He asks if you are happy. You change the subject back to work, where you are his boss.

This goes on.

>you working?

>thinking.

>about me?

>you wish.

Before the IM can ping again, you change your status to *busy*.

You type an internal press release: first edits due Friday, film finished in plenty of time for the five-year anniversary. You lean back in your suede chair: this one's a winner. And the impertinent young director? You put the thought out of your head. Pour yourself a glass of red from the good cabinet. You deserve it—this project is going to drag you out of debt. Damn the mortgage. Screw day care and after school programs. To hell with the carrying charges. You toast and raise the globe high. Fifteenth floor sunlight filters through the old vine cabernet.

Red.

David's lips brush your cheek. This is a memory. *It's 8:30. Wake up, sleepyhead. I have a meeting in half an hour.* David also whispers into your hair that he's made French toast; left some in the fridge for you; Sam is happily playing with his firetruck at the foot of the bed. This is an old memory. Sam is just learning his colors and all activity stops whenever a hook-and-ladder passes by. In this memory, you drag yourself to the bathroom.

Not pregnant again. Your toothpaste tastes like chalk.

"We'll try again tonight," David says and earns a foamy grin.

"Red! Red!" Sam shouts as his father shuts the door.

This is your first memory of September 11th, 2001.

The film is a five-year retrospective of a day you'd prefer to forget.

Your computer pings. You have a new email.

Really busy? too busy for a cup of coffee? I want to see those witch eyes across a foamy sea of latte.

You let the message sit there, burning into the screen. The wine smells of cherry and oak: a gift from an impertinent film director. He gave it to you weeks ago. He used the words *mouthfeel, sensual, ripe*. You roll your chair to the window and gaze out at the large construction site where nothing is being built, where the foundations sit exposed to the elements, and the trains occasionally pass by. The Hudson sparkles, and boats slide across the calm river. A breeze lifts the bruised American flags still decorating the pinnacles of various skyscrapers, as if checking them for damage. The baby cries and you allow yourself one quick gulp of wine before you shout, "Awake already?"

Poor thing. Had to have a New Yorker for a mother. Well.

You scoop a toy out of the basket near your in-box—ah, the creepy caterpillar with fangs that jiggles when you pull a string. Used to be Sam's. Little Sammy loved that one.

He was holding it when your kitchen shook. Wine glasses clinked. The new maple cabinets groaned. Something fell off a high shelf and slapped to the Italian tile. He was in the center of the floor, holding the creepy caterpillar with fangs, his French toast forgotten. Looking at the enormous window: the upper floors of One World Trade are crowned with false thunderclouds—velvet black against the brilliance of the blue sky, rimmed in the orange of warning cones. If it were not so horrible, it would be the most beautiful thing you've ever witnessed. Orange billows of flame sear through the smoke, bright as a

welder's torch. You don't know how Sam got out of his high chair. The sky behind the tower is blue, too blue. Not a cloud except this endless chimney of smoke issuing from this aching gap between the floors, and soon, from several higher windows. Millions of pieces of paper flutter from the sky; an endless thundershower of memos and documents, schedules and half-written letters, old files and financials, Ivy diplomas and antique stock certificates, family photographs and kitschy cartoons, presentations still warm from the printer. A rain of pens and highlighters sounds hail against the window. It is beautiful. Terrible. Sirens wail: more sirens, more... Sam's eyes shine for the fire trucks, but even for him there are too many. Broadway is awash in flashing lights. Motherhood forces calm through your veins. You think of your firehouse on Liberty Street; tell Sam that his friends are surely coming to the rescue. Sam can't stop crying, only it's not Sam. The baby is crying. Not Sam at all. His brother. No one said "Red!" There was just the baby gurgling, happy to have turned over for the first time. Now crying. The baby, needing you. Snap out of it. It was five years ago. The baby crying like you're never coming back.

"Shut up, you little monster!" You are kidding, of course, but did you really say that to a baby? Stricken, you stare out at the gray void where a PATH train sweeps along the curve of the exposed slurry wall.

"I didn't mean it," you say to the window.

Sam is seven. He has overnight playdates and categorizes dinosaurs. He never talks about 9/11. He hates memorial tributes because the drums and bagpipes interfere with his cartoons. He plays with toy planes and occasionally throws them across the room or uses them to crash into towers of blocks, but of the event, he remembers nothing.

He saw it all. He was there. You had just managed to put a call through to David's office. David was not yet there, and you screamed at the temp when she was slow: *but he has a meeting at nine!* thinking he was dead. Praying he wasn't dead. Never dreaming he might be curled up in some trite midlife crisis on cheap sheets in some wannabe actress' apartment in Jersey.

You were dialing your mother just as the second plane hit and your floor shook again. The appallingly blue sky was once again alive with the terrible birdlike chaos of suddenly empty inboxes and outboxes, file cabinets and mailrooms. Like lightning, not so beautiful as it struck the second time. Your covered ears could not block out the hail-like rain of rubble still hitting the roof, your window, the pavement fifteen floors down. Sirens screamed to the rescue.

"Red, mommy. Red!"

More sirens; a chorus of greedy ravens. The world, breaking in two.

And Sam remembers nothing.

His baby brother is six months old, and all Sam will say of him is, "Maybe I'll like him when he has more teeth." Age disparity. It's your fault. Had you moved to the suburbs right after the event, you might have had the baby sooner. But you and David fought to stay. Campaigned for the neighborhood. Joined the Community Board.

Rebuild! Renew! You were sure you had the strength for it

Then, a year after the Event, well after deciding to go ahead with the fertility tests, try twice as hard for that second child, David dropped his own bombshell. He hadn't had a meeting that morning. He'd had an affair. In Jersey.

Survival by infidelity. It was a preposterous situation. You had just spent a year grateful that he had survived and now you wanted him to die. He told you how much he loved you, how wrong it had been. Your angry tears stained his powder-blue shirt, smeared your mascara, ruined his Dolce & Gabbana tie. A secretary from his office. A meaningless morning tryst—it was so cliché you laughed, mirthless as an open coffin. How long? you'd asked. He answered truthfully.

From now on, only the truth from him.

I ended it that day. His epiphany. *I love my family.* He'd cried in his mistress' arms for an hour, wondering if you and Sam were okay. *I got a second chance.* Wasn't this past year the greatest ever, considering everything? *I want to make this work.* You, of course, agreed to go to counseling. Rebuild, renew.

In the construction site nothing is moving, though the yellow backhoe loader wasn't there last week. An airplane flies up the Hudson at a low altitude. Perspective makes it seem like it's flying into the Financial Center buildings. Sam is in first grade, learning arithmetic. He's a good student. His six-month-old brother is crying. Your pendulous breasts surge with milk and you know in seconds they will start to leak and then, to hurt.

You stare at the hard-packed ground far below you and imagine rolling down that long, long ramp like you used to roll down grassy hills as a little girl. Click the IM from busy to IN. If the baby waits three more minutes, and if your breasts leak a little, well, baby will grow up with a mom who was more than just a mom and you can always go out to Century 21 and buy a new shirt. The IM pings.

>So? cup of coffee? What's the worst that could happen?

The baby is now screaming full voice.

Priorities, you tell yourself. Silence the computer. Power-off the screen. Slam the office door. Pour the rest of the wine down the kitchen sink, terrified now that the tiny drop you drank might filter into your bloodstream and poison your breastmilk. You leave the wine globe and the empty bottle next to the rest of the unwashed dishes in the sink and you holler at the baby, "Mommy's coming! Mommy's on her way!"

Who are you kidding, Mommy? Kids call you by your first name, as soon as they learn it.

The living room window is open despite the cold. You can hear the clatter of the ceaseless jackhammers, destroying the newly-paved roads to finally replace wire infrastructures damaged five years ago. Sam is seven. Too old to care about construction trucks. Right now he is erasing a chalkboard at PS 234, the best public school in the city. He is in the first grade and his baby brother is doing airplanes on a hand-me-down Gymini on the other side of your kitchen island. The dishes are piled on the counter, waiting for you to feel a little more responsible. An excavator lifts a metal plate with its toothy bucket and the plate falls to the hollow asphalt with a resonant bang like an explosion. You flinch.

Sam's small body shuddered when the plane flew into the second building. You clung to your baby, ignored his struggles for freedom. At the far left of the south tower, among the worst of the new flames, a flash. Again: flash! A momentary bright white light. Then nothing. Then: flash! Someone signaling! You want to call someone, do something, and all at once you realize that your son is screaming. You turn his two-year-old eyes away from the sight at last. Salt tears slide down your cheeks despite your attempts to wipe them away. The cat is gone.

It is no normal Tuesday. The towers are burning, burning, framed by your living room window. Your TV is on; you don't remember touching the remote control. The commentators talk about the possibility of terrorism and you know that you're in danger. You take Sam to the neighbors', pound with your fists, begging aloud through the door, "Be home, be home."

Abigail stands in her nightshirt, phone in one hand, visibly shaken. You can't even care. "I'm sorry," you say. There are no words for what you are feeling. "Sam," you start again, unable to finish even the thought.

"Come in," she says.

This apartment looks like a normal home, a normal morning, though Abigail's husband is speaking in worried tones through his cellphone. You break into sobs, and Sam looks at you, terrified.

Your neighbors glance at each other. You want to yell at them to make them hold you, to make them tell you it'll all be okay, but you can't even talk. You beg for their company instead. "Come see from my house," you say. They had envied your view, once.

You attach Sam's brother to your swollen breast and walk that way, some sort of Indian Earth princess, to the bathroom, where you brush your hair with your free hand. You apply mascara and blush and a little lipstick until you feel safe again. Normal. You switch the baby to the other breast. Your breathing steadies. The baby makes soothing sucking sounds, and even though it is your own body he's using to make them—which still feels weird, nursing will always be weird—the tiny, regular clicks comfort you. Your body is not your own until he is weaned, but for now you don't mind being you child's tool. It is nice to have a purpose; to have a clear direction. The bathroom has no windows.

You're late. You have an afternoon meeting with Sarah, your co-producer, at the new coffee shop on Maiden Lane. Before, you used to meet her for breakfast at the Cosi/Xando on the WTC plaza. They knew you there, had named you "Pretty Lady." You assume the teen you called "the chai-guy" made it out alive. He would be 23 now, a man. The baby cries as you thrust its legs through the Baby Bjorn. Your diaper bag holds extra bottles filled with breast milk, Cheerios, five diapers, the script changes, a few red pens, a burp cloth: you've had almost eight years of practice at motherhood. You'd think you'd remember the wipes.

You are happy you had the baby. For Sam. It's good to have a brother. Your husband clung to his brother when their father died on August 31, 2001, of prostate cancer. Less than two weeks later, their private pain was eclipsed by three thousand other deaths. As you scoot down the hall to the elevator, a glance at your watch tells you you're later than you thought. And, you forgot to buy apple juice. And toilet paper. David asked you to mail the ConEd bill and you left it on the counter. And the carrying charges on the co-op are going up, and you need to change the automatic payment amount in your computer. The elevator dings and you don't get on. You go back.

You went to David's father's funeral with your whole extended family. You said to your brothers: when I die, I wish to be cremated and have my ashes scattered over Manhattan.

Two hundred dollars are added to your online banking routine, the ConEd bill is in your pocket, you are nearly out the door, and then you remember there's an instant message you haven't yet read. You vow not to read it. You know it isn't Sarah.

>hey, you still there? making me wait?

You tell yourself not to type a reply. Will yourself to click "AWAY."

>sorry. the devil spawn required a sacrifice.

The infant in question kicks in his Baby Bjorn.

>what exactly IS the spawn of a devil and an angel called?

>very funny. Angels don't have sexual organs.

>they have lovely breasts. That should count for something.

What if David had died? What if he had decided to stop for a cup of coffee before descending the stairs to the PATH train? What if, four hours after the second building crashed to the ground, he hadn't been able to call Florida to tell someone, some living person he was all right, just happened to be in New Jersey?

>I have a meeting. With Sarah. Your heart should be pounding.

>My heart is definitely pounding.

>Go away, you horrible boy. I'm a respectable and untarnished woman.

>That's just good advertising.

You click the "AWAY" icon before you get yourself deeper in trouble.

You arrive to your meeting a full twenty minutes late. Sarah looks up from her double espresso. You apologize and prop the baby onto a banquette. The coffee shop smells of banana muffins and melted chocolate. The proprietor brings the baby a donut. You shake your head, thanking him, explaining the baby doesn't eat solid food yet. Another mommy raises her eyebrows at the transaction, and you feel inexplicably ashamed. She folds herself over her child, shows the pale toddler a triangle. You feel inadequate; it would never have occurred to you to search the tablecloth for a geometry lesson.

"So, what do you think of our boy?"

You take a deep breath to calm the butterflies. "He's good. Better than expected."

"Yeah, but he's making heroes of those losers. I thought this was going to be funny."

"9/11?"

"Well, you know, survivor guilt. I mean, it's been five years and it's not like these people lost anyone."

"They lost the neighborhood. The buildings."

Sarah looks at you funny. "They're *buildings*. But, whatever, he's on schedule and under budget. What more can we ask right?"

"Sarah? Do you remember the chai guy?"

"Whatever made you think of that?"

"Oh," you lie, "I saw a guy that looked like him on the subway."

"The chai guy. Yeah," she laughs. "Think the chai guy made it? He was a hottie."

You busy yourself with the baby.

Raw footage streams on Sarah's laptop: the shells of ruined buildings, people sifting through the rocky debris like children in a sandbox, unwilling to go home though they suffer from exhaustion. This is your own fault. You funded this. It is a five-year anniversary special, after all. Did you think you'd be spared the footage?

Sarah wants to look at the numbers again, to think about firing the cinematographer and hiring someone new.

"This guy I met," she says, winking. "he's divine. Wants kids."

On a normal Tuesday, your meeting on the plaza would have lasted two hours, spilling sometimes into three. At around 10:30, (what time did those towers fall?) the local day-care center used to take their kids across the Plaza. Eight toddlers per plastic push-bus, some holding hands, some sleeping. Usually there were more kids than seats: black, white, Asian, Afghani. Two or three day care providers walked along with the extra charges like expert dogwalkers, three kids on a leash, sixteen in the buses. (10:18, the first tower. 10:29, the second.) You used to tease Sarah—she'd decided to wait to have children, later her marriage would end in an amicable divorce—you used to say "kids for sale" as you sipped your perfect chai latte. "Buy one kid, get one free."

Now you say, "Yeah, okay. Go ahead with it. I trust your judgment."

"Okay, thanks, I just think..." Sarah's eyes narrow. "You okay? Everything alright?"

"Everything's fine. Couldn't be better." You pick up the check and pay without looking. Your PDA beeps, you curse the hour and air-kiss Sarah. You pack Sam's brother into the Baby Bjorn, thank the gods he doesn't need a diaper change. Then you're off, running to PS 234. Late again.

The kids were transported across the very center of the Plaza, past the rushing fountain, past the locals showing their out-of-town guests the neighborhood, past the joggers and the bicyclists on the long trail that bordered West Street, past the tourists examining maps on the benches, past the street vendors who sold silver jewelry, I♥NY caps and T-shirts, green Statue of Liberty foam crowns. They went somewhere unknown, these day-care kids, and on a normal Tuesday, you forgot their faces as soon as they were wheeled away.

Many of those kids were orphans now. Some were students at Sam's public school. Which of these wary eyes watching the woman in the leather coat hurrying up the stairs had once gazed at her from a plastic push-bus?

"I need fifty bucks," Sam says. He doesn't say hello. Doesn't touch his brother.

"Fifty? Why fifty?" you reply.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head with attitude. "I just need it, is all. Don't be a cheap parent. We can afford it."

You bite off the stream of curses that jump to your lips.

"You'll ask your father when he gets home, Sam," you say with clipped consonants. "I suggest you alter your tone before you make the request. A little deference wouldn't hurt in your negotiating technique."

"You're a terrible mother," the seven year old replies. "But I guess I love you anyway. Hey, can we go to the bookstore?"

The ruins of the Borders bookstore at Five World Trade looked like a black sea shell for months, a garrison against faith of any kind. Before, that corner had always smelled of donuts: a new Krispy Kreme had opened next door. Little Sam loved to watch the donuts ride on the conveyer belt before story hour. Peaceful music was piped from the eaves to keep the homeless people from congregating there. How you loved to watch the donuts ride...

Your home is only five blocks from the relocated bookstore.

You press your fingers to your forehead as if this might stave off the splitting pain. "Sammy? Can you go with your father this Saturday?"

You can't ever shake the feeling that it's not a real bookstore, but the ghost of one.

>where ya been?

>playing hausfrau.

>in a French Maid outfit?

>hardly. You're supposed to be editing.

>can't. Keep getting distracted by my boss.

>Work or she'll fire you.

"Who you writing to?" David asks. He is reading email off his Blackberry.

"My cousin," you lie, "Which reminds me, I was going to order her a wedding planner. Mind watching the kids for a minute?"

"No problem," David mumbles, only half listening.

Each tower had its own Zip Code. 10047 and 10048. Are they still available? Or were these numbers retired, like the baseball uniform of a great player?

Just a week before the world ended, you'd had a wonderful family picnic. A Celtic band played in the Plaza and Sam danced on his little fat legs, making strangers smile. And one block over on the Hudson River Walk, your dance partner at a public square dance was a young man with Downs Syndrome—the music drew you in as you and your husband admired the sun setting over your city. Sam tottered along between you, pointing out dogs, fearful of pigeons. How you loved that walk—the yachts pulling in to the North Cove, the sunset sails going out, the twin towers copper in the fire of the setting sun, tops lost in the pinkish clouds.

"Orange," Sam said, nodding thoughtfully.

"I love you," your husband had said on that same promenade. You were looking out over Jersey. Sam was searching the sky for airplanes and helicopters. Back then, they were infrequent, special. This

was the night before David lay in his mistress' arms, the night before his big social epiphany—that he loved his wife after all, that his son, their life, was worth fighting for.

Instead of an IM, he has emailed you old news footage of some sculptures that a group of artists had been putting up for the *Quebec!NewYork* art festival within a covered walkway that connected the World Trade Center to the Winter Garden. The joyous footage was followed immediately by close-ups of the same covered walkway's collapse onto West Street, and now all you can think of is that lost Cloud Organ out on a raised platform near the Hudson's edge, which was supposed to play music in accordance with the weather. What had it played when the sun was blotted out for a week? A memory of the eager young artists, forgotten but for this footage—from dawn til dusk, they clambered barefoot to build their sculpture at the water's edge, industrious carpenter ants.

>nice footage. love the angle. any interviews?

>don't you have to bring someone his slippers?

>very funny. did you get any interviews?

>Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your sweet hair

>Seriously.

>Seriously. I did. I'm in your neighborhood. Let's meet and talk about work.

You click "AWAY" and swivel your chair to look out the window again. Lights are coming on in Jersey, though it isn't entirely dark yet. A white commuter train tunnels through the construction site in a large arc, filled with husbands and wives going home just a little bit late.

You throw a wadded up ball of paper at the closed window, watch it land at your feet. You open the window. Below you is a muddy green dump truck transporting twisted metal. Construction workers are paving the section of road they had destroyed that morning. The air stinks of melted tar. No. The air stinks of burning jet fuel and something else, something toxic. Abigail is telling Sam it will be all right, that he is safe, that there is no need to worry. You gape at her for the lie, but perhaps she hasn't seen. You lead the neighbors to your home. The front door is unlocked and swinging. When you return to the living room, you see how you've left it—Sam's breakfast scattered across the floor, toys everywhere. You search for the cat. Your guests stare out at the horrifying damage: both buildings in violent flame, people in the windows of the upper floors, searching for air. They are so high above you that you can't make out their faces, only their tiny body shapes as they lean forward out the windows. And start to jump. They look like pasta. Like breakfast cereal. Only black against the flames.

Little shadows of men; plastic monkeys and dolls. Falling. They are shaped like people, but they fall like discarded toys against the endless rectangular building. Falling, falling, falling. They have to be toys.

You leave the lights off and kick your feet up on the window sill. You regret pouring the bottle of wine down the sink. Now you have to open another. From the living room, you hear David singing with Sam. The baby is quiet, probably rapt. All they really need is attention. Kids. Sometimes they're easy. The off-key tenor and the boy soprano are competing on volume, competing on joy:

You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself around...

A glow of fairy dust is spread across the dark faces of the skyscrapers; the streets are busy as noon. Only the river embraces night: a swath of black ink, dotted with gemlike party cruises. Inside, your custom-built office seems illuminated by glowing feathers. Mars and Venus and the Moon, one would never know there were other lights in the sky. Who needs the sky, with all the activity at street level?

The flashing lights of a fire engine, yellow, red, white. Ladder 10 is open again, and Liberty Street stations several well-decorated fire trucks, covered in vivid murals of the dead. Sam always asks to go the other way around the construction site to get to soccer practice—the short way. He no longer looks up when a siren breaks through the clamor of shrieking air brakes, idling motors, and honking cabs. Sam the newly mature seven-year-old prefers the quiet. He likes to read, hidden under his blanket, with a flashlight.

You put your whole self in, you take your whole self out...

You can hear the dizzy laughter in their voices. The baby is silent. No opinions, no preferences. Not even a favorite color. But babies grow fast. You wonder how you'll ever handle another fire truck phase. The Ladder 10 firemen (when not on alert) had always been eager to engage Sam, would lift him up on their shoulders to show him the big hose and the red truck. They would have been the first ones into the building; among the first to die. To explain this to Sam, you sifted through impotent words.

They saved so many lives.

They did what they had to do.

They're heroes, honey.

Your wine globe looks like a Christmas ornament with the reflection of the distant fire truck lights sparkling across the bulbous glass. You close your eyes against a sudden onslaught of guilt.

Sam: stiff as a china doll, his face puffy with effort, his hands high above his head. You picked him up and begged the neighbors to allow you to bring him to their home. They seemed reluctant to leave the view. You handed Sam a banana. Didn't even bother to peel it, just let Sam hold this familiar comfortable thing. He stares down at the yellow fruit and lets you carry him into the unfamiliar home. You have forgotten all his toys on the kitchen table, but you refuse to set foot in there again.

You ask Abigail whether it would be all right to stay in her house for the day. "I can't handle my apartment alone," you say. She quickly agrees, though she mentions the possibility of going back and forth, but then her phone rings again and she reassures another family member or friend that they are both alive. Papers are still fluttering from the sky, some of them on fire, and for a split-second you wonder if they'll ever stop. The building shudders beneath you, and you scream and scoop him into your arms. Your neighbors dive to the floor, and now all of you are huddled together, crawling away from the window, which has gone black. The newscast on the television provides the only light in the room.

Sam is howling. Even the neighbors are yelling, though they are merely yelling instructions at each other: "Get away from the windows! The tower just fell! What do we do?" You wonder where they get their strength.

"Where's your camera?" Abigail asks. You look at her, aghast. "Come on! You're a filmmaker. You should be shooting this."

You can barely speak through the bile rising in your throat.

"I just want to hold my baby."

- > *Come down for a drink.*
- > *sure. just let me kill off my husband first. I have an axe around here somewhere...*
- > *Use a chainsaw, smaller pieces.*
- > *A chainsaw in a Manhattan apartment?*
- > *An axe?*
- > *Point taken.*
- > *Lush Lounge. When can I expect you?*

You let the cursor flash for a long time. Your mouth tastes dry and sandy; the taste of the wet washcloths which the neighbors told you to keep over your mouth and Sam's. You have become their marionette. You want to ask them how they can think straight with the stink of the gasoline and the dust, the acrid dust, but you merely place the washcloth over your child's mouth according to instruction. He seems smaller. His whole face fits easily under your hand. You can't even feel the ridge of his nose under your palm.

Sam pushes your hand away, annoyed by the cold wetness. He squirms, kicks. You can't hold the washcloth tightly enough to keep him from inhaling the noxious dust; you're terrified you might smother your own child to death. You start to shake uncontrollably, lose your grip, are afraid you might drop him.

"Help! Help!" you yell, and Abigail's husband is instantly at your side. "Take him!" you say, thrusting Sam into his arms. You collapse into a fit of trembling and self-loathing. What kind of mother gives her son away? The group rushes you towards the elevator, down to street level. Your washcloth tastes of batteries, of dirt and cement. Your eyes burn, even in the elevator.

Memories: all those people hanging out the windows. Signaling. Or jumping. Your neighborhood buried in rubble. In bodies. The elevator ride seems endless. Ghosts accompany you to the outside world.

Maiden Lane, a narrow street normally full of pedestrians and shops and history, lies beneath inches of soot. It is dark and quiet: too quiet. The ash must have silenced the sirens, or covered them. The thick dark air swirls and burns your eyes and stings your lungs. You want to spit the bitterness out of your mouth; instead you swallow. Under the washcloth, your lips and your chin are on fire. You can't see. You turn to where the south tower should be, a single block away and see only darkness. Not even the frame of the tower still stands. You gasp through the washcloth grateful for your neighbors. Grateful for humanity. You run to catch up to Abigail's husband who seems better able to keep Sam breathing through the wet rag. You haven't stopped praying.

"Give him to me. I need my son."

Already, the guilt of living weighs you down. You trudge on carrying your son, unable to spare a thought for strangers, so deep is your need to see your own immediate family safe. All these people praying, you think irrationally, what if God tunes in while David and Sam are not foremost in your mind? You can't remember telling David you love him. Can't remember if you thanked him for making French Toast. Can't remember if he kissed you this morning. Can't remember his face, his eyes, what he was wearing when he went off to work. What he answered when you said goodbye.

You have only traveled one block east. A man in an ash-covered uniform stops the refugee parade and shouts "A child! We have a child!" and before you can do a thing Sam is wrenched from your arms. The policeman throws himself in front of a Range-Rover. (How could you not have noticed that the streets are empty? Not one car in these narrow and winding streets, normally bleating with taxi cabs and

limousines.) The sooty SUV stops short to keep from hitting the uniform and its precious bundle. The rescue worker pushes your screaming son through a passenger window.

“Take this child to safety!” Even through the panic you hear how this burly man’s voice cracks on the word *child*. What horrors has he seen?

Your hand is yanked forward; Abigail is shoving you in behind Sam into the truck. You climb in over legs and arms, surrounded by strangers. Everyone is shocked by his presence, shocked that a child has been involved in the day’s events. You are shocked that you almost let your son go, almost let him get into a car whose color you couldn’t even see because of all the soot.

“What happened?” Sam says.

“A policeman saved you,” you reply.

The two elderly women nearly sitting in each other’s laps squeeze hands. The dust is so bad outside that no one opens the windows even though Sam has wet himself. The washcloths have vanished. A surgical mask appears in your hand; one is covering Sam’s mouth and he falls asleep, stinking of urine and still clutching the dusty banana.

Out the window, a million people are walking in a thick parade, north. A rib-shaking thud echoes through the memory of the morning and it is really true: the second tower is falling. The sky vanishes above you, around you. All sound is silenced save for the rumbling of the earth and the choking SUV engine as it drags its load of strangers forward, north, ever north. You crane your neck to see your neighbors on foot, dashing towards the lobby of a building, holding hands like teenagers though they’ve been married fifteen rough years. You hope you’ll see them again. The truck guns its engine and drives onward through the black clouds of smoke and debris that billow up each east/west street. First John Street, then Fulton consecutively blocked by dense walls of darkness that could have come from giant squids so complete are their inky voids. The truck barrels through, narrowly missing pedestrians, not caring. It drives until it hits a wall of traffic; then it slows, last in a parking lot of cars going north. Your mouth is full of sand, ash, bile. You retch, but hold it in, swallow painfully. Someone’s arms encircle your shoulders. You don’t even flinch. You don’t know where this truck is taking you, and you don’t care, as long as it takes you away.

>Can’t wait all night for your reply. Come down if you can.

You’ve made a rump roast for dinner, with brown rice and organic baby broccoli, and it’s the most ordinary day of the year, a normal Tuesday, in fact. The house looks lovely, the sofas are wonderfully comfortable and bring out the greens in the rug. You’ve turned the computer off, put candles on the table. Both of kids are, for once, playing together—Sam is dangling the evil caterpillar over the baby and mimicking his chuckly baby-laugh—and David is home early and willing to stay with the kids. It should, technically, be a wonderful day. Rebuild and Renew! as the billboards say, but then, they don’t live here. You washed the soot from your hair and you did the fertility testing and you went to fifteen months of couples’ therapy and you got on your feet again and your production company was given a loan and the fertility drugs failed so you decided to do the GIFT procedure even though it would be painful but you wanted that second child and the surgery succeeded and your apartment was cleaned by the EPA and you bought new couches and a new crib and you agreed to forgive, but not to forget. There is an impertinent young director waiting down below in a swanky Tribeca Lounge.

Sam’s mommy still occasionally has to step away from her unobstructed river view and close the curtains.

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