

Chapter 6

I sat on my porch firing one cigarette after another into my lungs, my dead mouth. In spite of myself, I developed a routine. I couldn't sleep all the time, and Gregory had had an attack of the scruples ("First, do no harm") or something and refused to sell me any more sleeping pills, so my natural rhythm took hold, and I found myself consistently awake at six in the morning. Gregory became my running partner because we both needed to find a new way to regulate our metabolisms, and it was during an easy run through the arboretum that he told me what had happened.

"One afternoon my adviser sat a bunch of us down and told us, 'confidentially,' right," he made quote marks with his fingers as he ran, "that the hospital was having 'inventory problems,' and would be taking extra security measures to make sure the problem wasn't, you know, on our end. So they'll be implementing random drug screening sometime this year. Anyway, the obvious message was, 'get your shit together,' so I decided it was time to quit. I mean, I'm sure there are *ways*, you know what I mean, to still get it, and I sure as fuck didn't need the nightmares (from withdrawal) but it was time to get serious, anyway. I feel better, at least. Now. You?"

"Sure," I said, "I guess. So, no weed or anything?"

"That's right."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. It does."

"Can I buy your stash?"

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I subscribed to the *New York Times* and set the coffee maker to brew at six a.m. Then, with my coffee, cigarettes, and newspaper, I would sit on my little porch until seven. Once a week, on Thursdays, I saw my neighbor as she left her apartment at 6:45 in the morning. She would trot down the stairway—out of site, but her cadence on the ringing metal was unmistakable—and walk across the front yard to the driveway where she parked her Jeep. She would glance in my direction and smile and say good morning and I would smile back and wave. It was the only time I saw her all week. She was tall and thin, dark complected. Her ethnicity was in question. Her hair was almost black, cut above the chin in a stylized bob that was high in the back and angled toward her chin on the sides. She had tattoos on her back, one between her shoulder blades and one in the small of her back that dipped below her waistline, but I could never make out what they were. I suspect there are others. I've never talked to her, though I looked forward to seeing her every week.

I kept to myself as much as possible, a recluse on the streets. I radiated the sort of negative field some people have. The look that says, *Don't say a word*. Was this intentional on my part? Is there some conscious part of me that chooses whether or not to be approachable? Or is it in my nature, something from within, something other people can sense? Baristas, our modern bartenders, say nothing but normal niceties. They smile reassuringly. No one makes small talk while waiting in line. People on the streets avoid eye contact. Is it me? Am I one of Joyce's Dead? Am I Lowell's narrator, reciting, "I myself am hell; / nobody's here."

I didn't go back to Marianne's house for the entire summer, never getting closer than this café, where I sit and write and which is only a few blocks away. I thought often about going back there—everyday, in fact. I left my apartment with the thought that maybe today would be

the day I felt up to it, but I never did. I imagined I could look over the buildings and see a yellow glow radiating above the city from the house, an aura of—what?—promise? warning?

After two months, I began making daily trips to the Graduate Library. At the library I read poetry, so much of which I couldn't understand: Homer, Shakespeare, Byron, Shelly, Dickenson, Pound, Lowell, Plath, Collins. But not Caxton. Caxton could wait. I read criticism that befuddled me. Derrida, Eliot, Foucault, Fulton, Pinsky. I read back issues of *Ploughshares* and *The Paris Review*. The list is too long. I had the feeling that I was going for an MFA without the support of an institution, so, at times, I became frustrated and didn't know where to turn next, but there was always more to read, more novels, more poetry, more essays.

I also ran every morning and drank myself to sleep only some of the time. The hangovers became less severe, my excesses less extreme. I was slowly rising.

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My full emergence happened on September Eleventh, Two Thousand One. It's cliché to say so, now, after seeing all the coverage of the event, the stark, shining, terrifyingly tangible limbless Apollo. Ground Zero marks an absence that calls our existence into question, and it was grand popular culture—reality TV—to hear all the declarations from Americans who vowed, in the aftermath, to change their lives. But our reaction has been to not change anything. There is simply something more to fear. My own change had nothing to do with any sentimental motivation. It was largely by chance.

I awoke that morning, as any other morning, at about six. I remember thinking it was time to wash the sheets on my bed, but, then again, why bother? Just the same, climbing from my bed, I pulled the bedclothes from the mattress and piled them on the floor. I showered, shaved, dressed, and walked downstairs with an armload of cotton. I piled the sheets into the

washer and turned it on. My eyes felt heavy and I felt as though I'd forgotten something. Then I realized I could smell no coffee brewing. I'd run out the day before. So I put on my flip-flops, stepped outside, lit a cigarette, and began my walk to Espresso. The caffeineless morning's humidity was oppressive. It pushed on me from all sides. Still, there were runners on the sidewalks, girls in sports bras, wiry men in plastic shorts and tank tops with the Nike swoosh, beefy athletic boys looking like gods with their bare torsos as they charged beneath the plentiful shade of Ann Arbor. I felt like they were judging me as I shuffled across the campus smoking, and I wanted to stop them and explain everything.

I grabbed a table outside, according to routine. John was not there that morning, and I wondered where he was, and I was a little worried.

At eight forty-five, I took my empty glass inside and walked around the corner to wait for the bookstore to open. Smoking, pacing, another morning ritual. I liked to get into Borders first thing before they got busy. I would take a stack of books and magazines to the café upstairs and flip through them, deciding which to buy. My days were all coffee and literature, and I still didn't feel like I was making any progress.

At eight-fifty my cell phone rang. It was Ryan. "Are you watching the news?"

"Why?"

"Someone just bombed the World Trade Center, or something. They don't know, but it's all over the TV. It's serious, you should see this."

I told her I'd find a television and call her back. Why this urgency? Of course, it was a big deal, another bombing, but part of me thought, "Why bother running for the TV, you can see it later." But I'd told her I'd call back, so I started home. Then I remembered how close I was to Marianne's, and I still had the key with me, as always, prepared for the eventuality that would

give me the courage to walk through that door again and start the real work. I walked to her house and, pausing under the weight of the moment, inserted my key and walked into the dusty house.

September eleventh was the eventuality I'd been waiting for.

The TV with its bunny ears was in the sitting room to my left. I tried to turn it on and got nothing. I tried a light switch. Nothing. The electricity had been turned off.

Outside in the sun I hesitated a moment. All around me were closed up houses and an empty street and sidewalk. I walked up to the porch of number seven-twenty-four and knocked. A well-groomed graduate student type answered the door. "What's up?"

"Are you guys watching the news?"

"Yeah, come on in."

We walked into the TV room where five others sat watching the smoking North Tower of the World Trade Center. A couple people glanced up when I came in, but no one said anything. The news anchor talked to fill the silence, though I can't remember what he or she said, now. It was just talk, sound. My memory has refracted the whole event so that I can't remember when the talk of hijacked planes, of terrorists, or attacks began. And I can't remember when the people in the room started to talk, but I think it was only after.

The TV screen jumped from an image of the towers with the anchor transposed in the upper left corner to a full-screen shot of the street. People were running, looking shocked and confused, like everyone, except that they were *really there*. The screen jumped again to fire trucks rushing toward the buildings. It jumped again—

—to a wide-angle shot of the towers and something on the left of the screen that shouldn't be there. The cameraman saw it and zoomed and a second plane came into the frame

looking huge and out of place against the New York skyline. It banked sickeningly to the left and it seemed to take only half a second for the camera to track it into the South Tower. The building swallowed the jet before our eyes and belched fire and debris out the other side as though victorious. Then even the commentators lost their cool. An anchorwoman said, “Oh my God. A second plane has crashed into the South tower. We’re getting confirmation that several flights have been hijacked. They’re—they’re using them as, like, *missiles*. Bob, this is, this is unprecedented, isn’t it?”

We watched, unspeaking, for several minutes. Cell phones rang, finally, including mine, which I didn’t answer, everyone reaching out to make sure they had not been left alone on the planet. A woman wearing her pajamas still, her hair in a ponytail, clutching her mobile phone in her right hand, answered hers after a half-ring and left the room saying shakily, “Oh my God, have you heard from Bryan?”

Someone said, “Do you think we’ll have class today?”

“No,” said the guy who’d answered the door. “And anyway, who cares?”

The rest of us just watched. We watched as they replayed the crash once, twice, three times. They replayed it from different angles. They cut to live footage again. The smoking towers, Hell’s chimneys. We watched more ground shots of people fleeing, fire crews rushing in, hysteria in Manhattan. Bodies tumbling from the upper floors. The shock seemed to be magnified, not dulled, by our remoteness to the event, our mediated removal.

Someone commented, as many people would say over the coming weeks, that it was like we were watching a movie. Someone mentioned the alien invasion film *Independence Day*, in which many of our architectural landmarks are destroyed, a film I had watched with a shocked but also enthralled smile on my face.

Time stopped as we watched the replay and the “talking heads” and flipped between channels as though a different channel would have more information. Then, as we watched Aaron Brown on CNN talking to someone about a third crash, this one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., the feed jumped back to the towers. A mass of smoke obscured the South Tower, and the anchorman was obviously confused. Our hearts resumed their frenetic beating when the news station found the video that showed what had happened: the upper floors of the South Tower buckled, and it collapsed. It was like every controlled demolition you’ve ever seen: the building imploded. We watched and listened as reports were called in of people jumping from the building moments before the collapse. Then the North Tower came down: a twin cascade of gray. After the first tower collapsed, we had waited for the second. It seemed a given that it would come down. We were filled with such fury that a twisted part of us *wanted* it to come down in order to permanently establish our anger—because it felt good to be this angry. At that moment of absolute moral clarity, we knew how it felt to be God.