

Day 1 September 11, 2001

Oh my God, oh my God.

“Can you grab the field glasses?” Ron's hands are so weak, they've slipped out of his grip.

Picking them up for him, I glimpse his nude body. We both are stark, raving naked. We'll deal with that later. I focus the binoculars down on the street.

The enormity of what is happening enters a human dimension. A hurtling chunk of something has destroyed the rear end of a car stopped at the intersection. Pieces of body, unrecognizable clods of flesh, are scattered across West Street, outside our building, in front of the Marriott Hotel. Traffic is stopped. I see a black man in black Marriott livery come out with a stack of brilliantly white, ironed, folded tablecloths. He goes from place to place, spreading a tablecloth over each body part.

When this all started, it was around 8 a.m. We were getting up. I am brushing my teeth when I hear an enormous BOOM! and come running out. I join Ron in front of his picture window. We just stand there, gaping up with craned necks at the top quarter of the north tower of the World Trade Center, burning. Flames are roaring upward, bright orange, with huge clouds of black smoke churning out, opaque against the bright blue sky.

“It's boiling smoke,” Ron says.

Hugging each other, me crying. The windows of Tower 1 are bursting in the heat, a sparkling shower of glass cascading to the ground. The double-glazed window in Ron's study is shut, making everything outside oddly quiet. The breaking windows across the highway are making a distant popping sound, like fireworks going off. How many are trapped there? Devastated. Nauseated. The beginning of a work day. Everyone was in their offices. Now it's

maybe fifteen minutes later. Our window is like a vast TV screen showing a disaster movie. Our own private viewing. We are still standing there, mesmerized.

I was here when the first attack came on the World Trade Center in 1993 and watched all that day, counting 171 emergency vehicles. I knew back then there eventually would be another attack on the Twin Towers. At some point I said to myself, "They must be frustrated because they didn't succeed in blowing the whole place up. When they get a chance, they're going to try again." The towers are a symbol and what they wanted was a symbolic act. An explosion in the parking garage, however devastating, wasn't going to do it for them. But right after I had that thought, I forgot it. I knew it was going to happen but it was unacceptable, so I didn't accept it. I just forgot about it.

Now, in the far corner of Ron's window, I notice a large commercial airliner, flying very low, on the north side of the north tower, in a place where a plane shouldn't be.

"What's he doing there? Flying over to take a look?"

It veers off to the southeast. Perhaps five minutes later we hear a gargantuan roar coming from the south, behind our building, out of sight. It sounds like a plane, going full throttle. Boom! Double boom! A second hole, in the second tower, the south one. Fire comes volleying out our side of Tower 2, directly across the street from our apartment. Flames move very fast horizontally across nearly the whole story, charring the floors above it. Building parts dangling and dropping within seconds. What's happening outside is unbelievable. I turn on the TV to see what's really happening. They finally admit it's no accident.

Very quietly Ron says, "You know, I think the towers are going to go. Maybe we'd better get out of here." Again his unnaturally quiet voice, "I can't stay here. If the towers fall on us, I'll die of fright."

Between us and the World Trade Center, there is only West Street. All at once it's obvious that if either of the towers falls at a certain angle, our building, Liberty Court, is

directly in the line of fall. Above the raging flames, the perpendicular steel I-beams are red hot, wilting, beginning to bulge out.

The fires are going to be impossible to extinguish. There is no place to aim hoses from. No building nearby is even half as tall as the towers. Sooner or later they will burn to weakness, and then they will fall.

Malcolm is going to be wild with worry. We need to have breakfast. I catch myself in a mirror. My toothbrush is still dangling out of the corner of my mouth. Portrait of naked woman with toothbrush. Where did all those thoughts come from? Remove toothbrush from mouth, lay it on Ron's desk. Oh yeah, and we'd better get dressed. That's just like you, Julia, in the midst of unspeakable horror, to start thinking about something else or cracking jokes. Apparently this is an Attention Deficit Disorder thing. When caught in chaos, we ADDs get distracted by irrelevant trivia or the comic implications of even the worst situations. Luckily, I took my Ritalin before all this started. That usually disables my inappropriate humour. It's beginning to kick in. Soon I'll be able to concentrate.

Like me, when he heard the explosion, Ron had emerged from his own bathroom naked and unshowered, using his cane for support. But no toothbrush. Now I help him brush his teeth and put on his clothes. What do you wear to a catastrophe? I decide to wear black, washable pants and T-shirt, fairly respectable, maybe we'll never be back. Sturdy sandals because I may need to walk for miles. We eat peaches over the kitchen sink. I load the backpack with items from our safe deposit box. I brought them home from the bank on Monday because Ron's illness is progressing. We need to update our wills. Now more than ever. On top I pack checkbooks, cash, water, some apples. I can't carry Ron's manuscripts. Or mine.

And we can't take Pearl. I layer the bathroom with two inches of newspapers, put out huge bowls of dried cat food and water and lock her in. She has gone blind and senile and can't find her catbox any more. If we are gone very long, she'll pee all over the house.

I shoulder the backpack, and give Ron his cane. Just then my sister Katharine calls from Denver.

"I'm a little busy," I say. "The towers are going to fall... "

Our plan is to go up to get Ron's three-wheeled electric scooter, which is stored on another floor. But when the elevator comes, everybody is going down. We decide to skip the scooter.

A woman with two dogs is saying, "My daughter's in the elementary school on the other side of the World Trade Center. I don't know what to do. Should I try to get to her?" My ADD self silently wisecracks, "you'll need to borrow a hot air balloon." Gallows humour.

As the elevator doors open, there's a man trying to get in. He's got a big tear in the knee of his pants, and he's bleeding. "I was outside when the first explosion hit. I fell down running to get away." This is definitely not funny.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"I'm OK. But I'm very frightened."