

The Deepest Day

I was in graduate school and I didn't have class until noon, so I regularly worked until late into the wee morning hours and then would fall asleep, exhausted, until the last possible moment before I had to be at school. I used to watch TVLand in my bedroom before I went to sleep; something about watching The Dick Van Dyke Show was very comforting to me in the dry, empty hour between 3AM and 4AM. I never imagined as I watched it and drifted off to sleep that I would wake up in a very changed world, as different as the shift from black and white to color.

So I slept through the first collision. Around 9:30AM, my friend Bethany called and woke me up. She knew that I would be asleep. "Wake up!" she squealed into the phone. "We're at war!"

"What?" I asked, fumbling for the remote control. Bethany seemed nearly gleeful, and it bothered me; she'd told me before that she felt our generation needed a war to define us, and as a military history buff, she was getting far too excited and was not nearly concerned enough, in my estimation. "At war with whom?" I asked.

"Terrorists! I don't know! We don't know yet!" she exclaimed. "Turn on the TV!"

I turned on the TV just in time to see the second plane crash into the other World Trade Center tower. It looked like a special effect, not a news story, and I felt cold. I knew it couldn't be an accident. My fear was just blank; I didn't understand what had happened, I didn't know there were more planes in the air, I didn't know there would be a crash at the Pentagon and another in rural Pennsylvania.

In that moment it never occurred to me that it was the work of anyone but another American. I only lived a couple hundred miles from Oklahoma City, and visions of Timothy McVeigh went through my head as the news commentator speculated on who might be responsible. I knew that Americans would cry for war. I knew we would demand it. But I didn't know what we would do if our enemy turned out to be ourselves, which I knew it already was, in plenty of small acts of handgun terrorism every day.

Then I remembered that my friend Josh had been laid off the month prior from his web job with Poets & Writers, and he'd taken a job as a page in the World Trade Center building. As it turned out, I should have been thinking of my friend Anne's mother, who was staying at the World Trade Center Radisson Hotel, and I should have been thinking of my boss, Denise, who was serving her two weeks of duty as a Naval Reserve Officer at the Pentagon that day. But I didn't even know yet what horrors awaited us.

I began to get a very tight feeling in my throat and my eyes burned. "Bethany, I have to go," I said quickly. Her lack of compassion was not helpful—I did not share her hawkishness and couldn't talk to her anymore that day.

I called my mother at her office and sobbed over the phone for a little while. Then I took a shower and I went to school, not because I had class, but because I did not want to be alone for one second longer. Everyone I saw on the way there—on the bus, on the street, the students in the halls—

everyone looked like they'd been punched in the face. Men I knew were huddled in small groups outside the English building, smoking, even the ones who'd given it up years ago, and they were talking in hushed tones about the possibility of a draft.

I was single and lived alone, which was a status I'd previously thoroughly enjoyed, but suddenly I'd never felt more disadvantaged by it in my life. I felt absolutely bereft, alone and vulnerable. I was not safe. No one I knew had ever been safe. And there was no one to turn to, no one but my friends, and none of us had any answers. I found my friend Mark and asked him if he'd invite everyone over to his house that night; his house was the regular gathering place in good times, and I thought that maybe it would be easier if we were all together during the bad times too. He agreed. Many of us went.

I had tickets to see The White Stripes that night at JR's. Instead I spent it on Mark's couch, watching CNN, listening to my friends argue intermittently. Sometimes their voices were outraged and passionate. Sometimes they were defeated and small.

I don't remember a thing I said to anyone, but I remember being so grateful that I wasn't alone. As awful as the world seemed on September 11, the silver lining for me was being surrounded by a group of friends who were all there to help each other make it through the night.