

S A M G R E E N E

W I N D O W S

(part one)

Eric stands on the roof of his apartment, facing west. The sunset is beautiful but bland, predictable. Eric thinks of words like casual, boring.

The sound of a car alarm floats up from the street, somewhere, but Eric isn't listening. He flicks his half-finished cigarette over the side of the building, and the butt falls quickly, unevenly, without grace. For a moment he feels a pang of remorse: something vague and rootless and quick. He turns around and zips up his jacket.

David steps from the stairwell, red-faced and bundled up, and walks across the asphalt roof towards Eric. He is carrying two beers – Heinekens – and the New York Post, wrapped in plastic under his arm. Not smiling, Eric meets David in mid-stride, tries to kiss him briefly on the lips but ends up kissing his beard. They flop down on white lawn chairs someone had left, last summer, not thinking. While David opens the Heinekens with his keychain Eric leafs through the Post, searching.

“She doesn't know shit, Eric,” David says, quietly.

Eric flips to the second page of the Arts section. She – Andrea Peyser, a journalist – is calling it a “Shameful Art Attack”, but he knows this already. Eric feels the need to bow, accept defeat, tow the line. He feels the weight of public opinion, of censure. They want to take what he has done, reduce it to garbage, an offence, something indictable. He wants to apologize, wring his hands, shed tears on some imaginary podium in Times Square. Beyond all this he feels guilt in the process, in the careful hours spent sketching and then sculpting, in feeling brave and daring by playing with the taboo.

“She doesn't know shit,” David says, louder, trying to be helpful.

Eric puts down the paper but doesn't fold the pages away. Again, he looks west, watching the sky turn orange and brilliant. He thinks to himself: this is my life.

David pulls the newspaper away, off Eric's lap, and folds it in half. He is looking at Eric with a worried expression on his face, his lips pursed and wet from the beer.

Feeling self-important, ridiculous, Eric turns away from the horizon, sighing.

“Should we go inside?” he asks.

David bites his lip.

“It's still ringing,” he says.

“We'll unplug it,” Eric says. “I guess.”

They go back down the stairwell, enter Eric's studio, unplug his phones and get into bed. Neither wants to think about anything except the black and white movie playing on the History Channel, the volume turned so low that the nameless actors are barely audible. With the curtains drawn, the room is dark, quiet, cavernous, and the TV sends pale waves of light across the bed.

The sun sets over the horizon. Buildings stand as shadows against the sky, then reverse, flickering into light and life against the deep blue of night.

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The woman walks toward the photographers, confident, smiling. She is wearing a layered two-piece set, pink lace, paired with black dress pants and sandals. Her stomach is swollen beneath the bodice, a tight ball of flesh. To Richard Drew, she is impossibly pretty. He has seen many models – his usual real estate – but this one is different, dark haired, beaming, alive. Drew can't decide whether this is the make-up or the glow of maternity. He takes her picture.

Only 8:50 in the morning and the models are already squinting. The day is clear, sunny, and warm. The sky is an unbroken body of water, blue beyond blue. By noon the day might be hot, as though it were still summer.

Bryant Park is still green, still the small oasis of sensuality and unclaimed space, despite the camera crews and photographers and the line of models with their swollen stomachs and buoyant smiles. This is something different, Drew hears someone say. Actual pregnant models. Drew doesn't care; he takes the picture. He looks up past the women and the carpet toward the Library, scratches his beard, takes off his hat and runs his fingers through what grey hair is left on his head. He wishes the dark-haired model was back, wants to photograph her somewhere else, somewhere with shadows and ambiance and style. Wants her in some low and immediate way, and being fifty-four years old, this makes him smile. He takes off his glasses, squeezes his left eye shut, and focuses the camera on the next model. She is younger, blond, not for him.

The photographers and camera crews don't talk while working. Drew enters the rhythm of aiming, focusing, shooting the body. He likes the sound his camera makes, the short click as he presses the button. He likes watching the black shutters close over the image in the frame. He feels as though he is collecting clues, accumulating evidence, cataloguing his learning, wondering how much more he needs to know about lenses, lighting, what and where to shoot. This is practice, he thinks. Practice for the real work, done from time to time, when he gets lucky enough to find the opportunity to travel and record history as it happens. Real history, he thinks, not fashion shows or celebrity lunches or car accidents. Drew makes the best of the morning, shooting and believing that each trivial click of the camera makes him a better journalist.

Another model: red hair, blue blouse, tan slacks. Freckles. Attractive, eight months pregnant, swollen. Drew takes the picture.

"Fuck off", someone says, low, surprised. Drew keeps taking pictures.

"Fuck off", again, the same voice, urgent but unreadable; it could be happy or sad or furious. A CNN cameraman, with an earpiece, his head bowed, not looking at the models. Drew watches him, thinking of personal tragedies and lottery tickets.

Then a flurry of frantic dismantling, packing up, zippers being zipped. Bags are opened and instruments disassembled, cigarettes thrown on the grass. Drew catches bits and pieces of conversation, listening.

The CNN man speaks to a small Asian photographer, to Drew's left, saying something fast and high pitched. The photographer shields his eyes, without expression, and then suddenly jogs across the park.

Drew is about to say something, ask a short innocuous question, be disappointed, but the CNN man turns to him, his jaw working.

"A plane just hit the World Trade Centre, North Tower."

Somebody else stops taking pictures. "It hit the tower?"

“A plane just crashed, hit, slammed into the North Tower. It’s gone, the Tower’s on fire”. The CNN man is almost finished packing, looks to leave. Crews start lowering their cameras, start staring south, covering their eyes, trying to see for miles across Manhattan but only seeing the same blue sky, the sun already getting hot.

The black-haired model is back, wearing something white and breezy and hip. She stops at the end of the carpet, still smiling, but she looks back over her shoulder, looking for some cue, obviously confused: no one is taking her picture.

Drew sees her standing there, beautiful and pregnant in the sunlight, for the rest of his life. He keeps her this way in his memory, unbidden, uncontrolled, but a perfect detail, the perfect footnote.

His cell phone starts ringing, a small electronic chime, and he wonders how many people are dead.

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“This is probably the best tawny port you can ask for, on a budget,” Matt says.

“Really affordable, Peter, but delicious,” Lillian says, like an actor.

“Nice,” I say, swallowing, tasting butter and nuts and caramel. Sandra arrives at the table with a plate of chocolates. She’s sweating, her forehead glistens, and I know that in a few hours she’ll want to split a cab, uptown. I’ll be asked into her apartment for a cup of coffee. She won’t initiate sex but it will be available if I want it.

Matt and Robert lean back in their chairs, light cigarettes, start filling the room with smoke. They’re flushed, look satisfied. The meal was good, the room is hot, and everyone is buzzing from the port bottles Matt and Lillian have rescued from their cellar. Sandra and Robert are both New Yorkers, but Matt and Lillian are from Toronto. I met them at the Globe and Mail, my first year. They’re both slightly fat, affected, but it’s good to see friends. New York is friendlier than I remember.

“So Robert,” Sandra says. “Tell me about Julia.”

“Where to begin?” Rob asks, laughing. Julia is Robert’s new girlfriend, from New Jersey, and is the subject of amusement and controversy among his friends and associates because she is bohemian, black, and ten years younger. The wine has loosened me up; I’m able to laugh along, listen to what he’s saying, but not for long.

“She’s a real handful,” Rob says, implying more.

It’s nice to float along with a conversation – any conversation – that doesn’t involve me. I’m already tired of the questions, the probing. They want to know why I’m here, the details of my assignment, where I think I’ll end up. I’ve answered them truthfully, all evening, dutifully giving them what they want know. There is no mystery or excitement in my work, just the careful and meticulous sifting of information, the long hours on the web, in chat rooms, on message boards, walking the streets with photographs. Finding a name for the man is one thing; bringing the news to the family is going to involve emotions, systems of thought I’m not accustomed to. I feel inadequate, poorly equipped. Toronto is a world away.

“So Peter,” Rob says, late for dinner, oblivious. “Tell me: who is the ‘falling man’?” He literally puts rabbit ears, air-quotations, around the words.

I don’t know, I want to say, and be finished, drink my wine and possibly sleep with Sandra.

“I think, at this point, it’s safe to assume that the man in the picture is Norberto Hernandez,” I say, not wasting time. “This guy was a pastry chef, from Queens. Worked at the restaurant ‘Windows on the World’.”

“But you’re not a hundred percent sure, right?” Sandra asks.

“No, not a hundred percent. But I’m fairly sure it’s Norberto.”

“I thought the dude in the picture was black,” says Rob.

“Yeah, so did I, but the staff at the restaurant led me to believe otherwise. If you enlarge the frame, the guy looks Latino.”

“Now this ‘Windows on the World’,” Rob says. “That’s a pretty ritzy place, no?”

“Yeah, for the big shots.”

“Lots of big business executives eating when the plane hit?”

“Yes, actually. They were holding the Waters Financial Technology Congress. Maybe employees from Cantor Fitzgerald and Marsh and McLennan were sitting down for coffee, maybe meeting over muffins. I know the restaurant lost ninety-one patrons, seventy-nine employees. I don’t know if anyone really important was there.”

“Wow.”

The conversation moves on: Lillian’s cooking; the subway; airport security; cold remedies. Rob finally steers it back, anxious to figure me out.

“I’ve seen that picture before, somewhere. TV, right?” he asks.

“Well, you could have seen it here, in New York, if you were looking. They probably won’t publish it again. But a lot of other papers, hundreds actually, ran the photograph – the Denver Post, the Commercial Appeal in Memphis, the ...”

“Sorry – why won’t they publish it again?”

“It’s been deemed inappropriate by most publications. It’s ... too much, apparently; they’re calling it indecent. Pornographic was a word I heard used.”

“That’s right,” Mark says. “You don’t see the people falling, like you used to.”

“They didn’t fall,” Lillian says, again with some dramatic tremor in her voice, like she’s acting. “They jumped.”

“That’s why it’s sensitive,” I say. “Papers got a lot of flack for showing the jumpers at all. It hits people close to home, gives the flames and the wreckage a human face.”

“Fuck, I would’ve probably jumped too, given the alternative,” Rob says, whistling, trying to make the sound a bomb makes, falling.

“How many people jumped?” Sandra asks, looking in my direction. A few strands of her hair are stuck to her forehead. I drink the rest of my glass.

“Well, that’s up for debate. The New York Times ran a fairly modest figure, something like fifty people. USA Today put the figure much higher, more like two hundred. In the North Tower – where Norberto worked, on the 107th or 108th floor – something ridiculous like that – they’re guessing that one in every six people jumped.”

“Jesus,” someone says.

“And if that’s the case,” I continue, compelled, “we’ve got a major instance of mass suicide. Normal people – not depressed, not cultists – killing themselves. That’s powerful. That’s something big and terrible. And some people don’t want to read, or see, anything about that.”

“I guess not,” Rob says.

No one says anything. I want to leave but I don’t want to be rude. Tomorrow is going to be difficult, but it’s a story I want. I want to write and do my job while the

event hangs over the city, the country, while the moments of reflection or epiphany during that day are still fresh and vivid and seemingly indelible: the way I walked around the flapping photographs, the missing people smiling in polaroids and big blown-up prints, shaking and scratching in the wind, some flitting and tumbling down the street, already lost. The names they're using – names like 9/11, like Ground Zero – are already becoming casual, boring. We're all going to forget.

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They go up with a whoosh, a drop in the stomach, high in the sky and fast, gliding floor by floor to the top. Jonathan Briley stands in the elevator, restless, thirty feet of black electric cable wrapped over his shoulder. He wears a white jacket supplied by the restaurant, something starchy and uncomfortable. There is a small, grape-sized stain of coffee near the left coattail. This is not something Jonathan notices; it is as insignificant as his tomorrow or his next year, what he ate for breakfast. He chews gum slowly, savouring the taste of spearmint, letting each piston-clench of his jaw spill out more sugars, more sweetness. The sound of the elevator is one long, mechanical hum, one resonant throb, a backdrop that speaks of fluid systems, working grids, powerful and complex connections that Jonathan can't place, can't associate, yet are reassuring in their obscurity, their immensity. As the doors open to the lobby, last stop, Jonathan can see the windows, past the restaurant, large and clear, and the morning shines out beautiful and empty.

That'll make me look, he thinks. That'll make the work good. Somethin I can watch. That view. My God that view. So many people. I won't stop lookin, gotta pull me away from that view. The eye ain't satisfied with seein, and the ear ain't filled with hearin – or what is it? Somethin like that. Somethin Dad says.

Jonathan is tall and slender, handsome in a goatee and short hair. His eyes are soft and wet, like he's been crying. His skin is smooth, a light brown. His hands flex impulsively around the cables, precise and strong hands; they know dials and cords and tools, know the feels of forty-three years, fights, scrapes and cuts, the soft skin of his wife's thigh. Jonathan chews the wad of gum slowly, meditatively, savouring it.

He moves quickly and confidently through the lobby, past the round tables with the pink tablecloths, the fine cutlery and the napkins and the pitchers of water that catch the sunlight through the window. His shoes are clean, neat; they leave no trace of scuff or blemish on the floor. Waiters, busboys move from table to table, making the last small touches before the doors open for breakfast and men and women stream through, svelte and powerful in pinstripes and pantyhose, attaché cases and palm pilots, laptops and cell phones with access to e-mail. Business done in the centre of business in the centre of the world. Jonathan chews his gum thoughtfully, whistling lightly. His heart is light and unburdened by worry; he sees the task unfolding before him in thought, stage by stage, each easy and necessary step linked to the next, sequential. His morning is organized behind unshakeable principles of sound and engineering, of electric currents, input and output, what he's learned to manipulate time and time again.

He opens the doors to the kitchen. The smells of breakfast warm and comfort him as he maneuvers between boiling kettles, baked goods, pastries arranged on plates, great frying pans searing grease and bacon fat, sausage and steak, piles of eggshells fragile and lonely, toast popping into the air gold and brown, butter melting, cooks in the same starchy uniform scurrying between each handle, each implement, enacting the aromatic dance of morning. Jonathan is offered a cup of coffee; he thanks the man, spits out his gum, sits down out of the way. The coffee is hot and strong and the second of the day. He sips and squints, nodding to the workers as they brush past him.

Soon Jonathan is ready, standing on a ladder between tables and chairs, joining wire to wire, his arms strained, held above his head. His fingers are busy, warm with the work. There are voices around him: gossiping staff, demanding managers; the occasional crash of a pan from the kitchen, the clattering of utensils. The sun shines through the windows, softening the work, calming the staff. In their rush between tables, they are glad of the light, the heat through the glass, the empty sky.

Jonathan pauses, almost finished, as the first patrons begin taking seats around the restaurant, gravitating toward the windows. They open briefcases, drink cups of coffee; orders are taken for croissants and muffins and kettles of tea. Cell phones start ringing, the sound of laptops booting up, chimes and chords. They are young and old, black and brown, yellow and white, immaculately dressed and manicured. The staff smile, stiff and erect as they stand and serve the men and women of wealth, magicians and aristocrats, oracles of unbelievable fortune.

Jonathan stops working, patting the wires that bulge from his pocket. He leans his arms over the peak of the ladder, rests his chin on his hands. His eyes sweep out over the horizon, aglow. The buildings and the streets and the tiny cars. The clear blue sky, which shows him nothing. He thinks of flying, feeling the wind carrying him in its arms, floating on currents, of aimless wandering in the air. The sun pours down through the glass, like something thick and golden and runny, honey or syrup, marmalade. He is happy, leaning his weight against the ladder, the noises fading out around him as he traces a car, a truck, as it disappears around a street, somewhere miles and miles away.

I don't know ya'll. Ya'll don't know me. We never know each other, ever. All those works, those buildings, those lives. All things are full a'labour. I can't say it: I can't say: it breaks my heart, oh God. It breaks my heart that there ain't no remembering, no remembering day. That you won't know me, I won't know you; no one'll know us, one day, cause we'll be gone. No one'll know who built this building, made these tables. No one'll know I strung up the cables in this here room. The more I know this the more it breaks my heart, oh God. I ain't never thinkin like this, not like this for so long. Why not that peace in the car? Why not that peace that made me cry? Big ol baby, you is. Thinkin of Dad, how's he say? The sun also a'rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to his place where he rose. He say so much.

Jonathan closes his eyes to the pleasure of the warmth. His thoughts drift homeward to Mount Vernon, twenty miles back, to Hillary and Gwendolyn and his bed, to Alex coming by to say hello, borrow a tool, take the kids in his car to the grocery store. Someone taps him on the leg, asks him if he's finished. Jonathan opens his eyes, smiles, climbs down the ladder and starts packing up.

There ain't no rememberin day, oh lord, that ain't in you.