

The Details of Time
Word Count: 3,366

I.

When Jennifer bent to her left to catch the falling leaf, her wool navy blue plaid skirt touched the ground, black Madden flats sliding on the wet sidewalk blanketed with autumn's glory. The first freeze of the season had yet to arrive, expected by nightfall, so flesh from her feet to her knees dared to show; newly purchased tights were stuffed in her bag, ready to slide on before leaving work. Jennifer snapped the leaf between thumb and forefinger, and slid on her heels over the fallen leaves. The flats were somewhat new, the gold heels untarnished, but beginning to wear at the edges. The skirt Jennifer had for decades, and pulled it out of a plastic bag last Saturday and took it to the dry cleaners.

She wore it when younger, different time and all that, and put it away between after college and only, failed marriage. Wrapped in plastic, zipped up with other clothes she decided to retain or forgot to bring to Goodwill. It seemed serendipity when she pulled down the bag and went through them, finding the skirt between Pavement and Helmet t-shirts. As she rubbed her fingers over the dark fabric, Jennifer felt comforting warmth. There were happy memories associated with this skirt; again, different times, and mistakes yet unmade. Not necessarily an innocent time but, for Jennifer Taurillon, those days were in an age of hopefulness. When you were young, yes, this was generally so for those who came to the world in a bubble, and remained so. Good times all until 9/11, it seemed, and with that the threads began to unravel.

When Jennifer spread out the skirt on her bed, she remembered those times. Days of living in bubbles on isolated archipelagoes, a double layer of protective denial, and false

triumphalism regarding the outside world. She knew better, of course, she was not stupid, but she followed along with the flow, wanting to believe reality was otherwise.

One Tuesday, now long ago, she looked to the sky and saw that otherwise come to her in a billowing cloud of flame. She ran, escaped. Those behind her did not, those smoking bodies on the sidewalk and on the pavement of Vesey Street. Jennifer turned to see them as metal clanged and crashed around her. Yes, this real world had finally invited itself in and the bubble burst, forever. Papers fluttered. Instinctively, Jennifer grabbed one and ran with it in her hand. When she finally looked at the paper upon reaching the corner by St. Peter's Church, she saw it was a mechanical for a wedding invitation. Jennifer folded the paper into her purse, before turning to watch the fire in the upper floors of the North Tower with the gathering crowd of onlookers, before she could see no more. She had made it halfway up the block toward Broadway when the second plane sliced through the South Tower. More than a decade later, Jennifer still could not recall the sound, other than when the first plane struck, it sounded like a truck running over heavy metal plates. Then she looked up.

II.

The anguish of living: Jennifer remembered the words while reading a Wikipedia entry on an obscure Columbian magic realist author who committed suicide at 26. Reading Wikipedia entries while sleepless at night was among a myriad of hobbies she practiced as she aged to this autumn November afternoon. The wind swirled around her as she held the fallen oak leaf to her breast, clutching the shoulder strap of her bag tightly as she walked, head down, toward the corner across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After 9/11, art became her refuge, and over the years Jennifer spent a lot of time in museums, mainly at the Met, but also at MoMA, the Guggenheim, The Jewish Museum, Brooklyn and, after it opened, the New Museum. Yet, during the weekdays, and especially after work on Fridays when the museum closed in the evening, Jennifer chose the Metropolitan. Even at lunch, for 20 precious minutes, she had enough time to wait in line, present her card, and pass up the grand staircase to look at a few galleries before running back down and the three blocks to return to her job. It was not a daily routine—many times Jennifer lacked the inclination, but she made an effort to go to the Met at least once a week, sometimes more, depending on the amount of work back at the office.

Jennifer quickly crossed the street, passed the construction, and made her way up the stairs to the entrance. The wind blew through her shoulder-length brunette hair—Jennifer had been coloring it to hold back the gray for nearly 15 years now—and she pushed up her retro horn-rimmed glasses, Sol Moscot brand, before they slipped off her nose. She skipped up the steps, Madden flats smacking against the marble, and she grasped the hem of her skirt as she made it to the top and through the entrance doors. She opened her bag for the taciturn guards, who glanced indifferently inside before the perfunctory wave through into the lobby.

The line at the entrance toward the grand staircase was only three deep, and after she presented her membership card, she went up the stairs, turning right past the gift shop, and went into the first gallery.

There was a particular painting she wanted to study today. Jennifer, in these brief visits, knew it was counterintuitive to rush through galleries in 20 minutes, choosing instead to focus on one particular work. Today, it was de la Tour's *The Penitent Magdalen*. The lights and shadows always attracted Jennifer to this work and, luckily, today she had the time to study it more

closely. Even though she had been going to the Met for years, this painting was one she never tired of seeing. It wasn't as if she found anything new in her visitations to The Penitent Magdalen, it was—instead—for Jennifer a means of attempting to subsume herself into the burning flame of the candle, the unseen reflection shadowed in the mirror, the wish for Magdalen to turn her head so as to show her face to the viewer; the skull resting on her lap, delicate courtesan fingers folded carefully, lovingly over the skullcap. This motif Jennifer identified with, a reminder of her eventual mortality. Since her escape on 9/11, Jennifer thought of death, and despite years of therapy, and understanding, the consideration of entering the Eternal or Oblivion was never too far away from grasping as a random or passing thought. It was once an obsession, a worry, a concern, but as she shed her 30s, opening the curtains into her middle age, Jennifer became more at peace with the notion of an ending.

The Magdalen would help her to understand more today. Standing two feet away in front of the painting, Jennifer dropped her hands to her sides, staring into the flame to lose herself for the time she needed.

III.

I could see the hole. I knew it was a plane. I also wasn't surprised. Planes fly over the City all the time. I remember my mother's story of the WWII bomber crashing into the Empire State. Still, it was weird, and I was apprehensive since it was my turf. Watched, like every other knucklehead in the street, at the fire. Stood around chatting with speculation, stunned. Nervous. Mainly in denial, coldly going over the "it's like the time the bomber flew into the Empire State," "heard it's a commuter plane," "I saw it go in. I think it was bigger than that."

The man on my left was an older African-American with a cane. The one on my right was a blond kid trying to get his cell phone to work. The main cell tower was then on Tower One.

I heard the second explosion, and the screams. I was awestruck by what I saw. The flames were intense, and it was obvious already that the building wasn't going to last long. When the wind blew away the smoke at times, you could discern the interior glowing orange. I think it was around then that I realized the "glass" wasn't that, but people jumping from the North Tower.

The man on my left dropped his cane and went to his knees, and started a Rosary. Ran to the payphone, called my job, and screamed at them to get out. In the aftermath, it turned out I was one of only two people who got through to the office during the entire time. Either that, or they were all too freaked out to pick up the telephone. Weird aside about that call: the guy I spoke to saw the second plane go in on television from the conference room, his back to the window. Little odd, no?

The timeline gets iffy. I stayed too long, rather planted at that spot and unable to move. While there I heard about the Pentagon. Then I turned to watch the South Tower drop. Those watching on television really weren't aware of this, but people there told me it was the top floors that bent to my left and dropped to Church Street first. That section impacted just as the remainder of the building pancaked into dust. The smoke from my angle was such that I could clearly see the section go. That sound I do remember, breaking glass. I know people were gasping and screaming from where I was, but that was the sound I remember.

I cut across toward the East River, walking through Chinatown up Lafayette Street toward Union Square, heading home, along with a couple million in near total silence. Some

covered in debris, dusted. Some injured. I helped a limping man who mumbled about being the sole survivor of his office. Had a person I knew slightly from one of our downtown vendors flag an ambulance down.

When I arrived at Union Square, I ran into some WTC maintenance workers who had fled the South Tower as it collapsed. They ran all the way up—two, two and a half miles. They were exhausted. Watched Fox News later and spotted one of them in the footage of the first tower dropping. He wore a distinctive dark blue t-shirt. Ran like a bastard all the way to 14th Street. Amazing.

The aftermath? Simple. The weather was gorgeous. I went to Coney Island that Thursday. Returned to work the following Monday and had to jump two security fences. My workplace was on the northern borderline of Ground Zero and had a 12-foot high fence across the street for weeks. I took a later shift because everyone was too freaked to work then. I spent several months working late, in the darkness, the smell of burnt electrical wiring and dead people. The fires burned until December. The smell lingered until about then.

One of my former roommates' grandmothers was on the second plane. Two of my neighbors lost parents at WTC. One brother-in-law lost his best friend from high school. One of the sales guys at my job lost three people he knew at E-Speed. Friend of ours lost her brother, a broker. Manhattan became a small town after that. Everyone knew somebody who died, or knew somebody who knew somebody. Of course, we all had our stories—or heard them. I know a few. All of them are bad. Heartbreaking.

I live on the route where the ambulances brought in injured clean-up workers from the site. Every night for weeks, you could hear the sirens. Lot of guys got hurt. People from

outside know little about that. Since I worked down there, I was in contact with many of the workers. The image forever burned is that of the ten thousand yard stare. That expression.

The company I worked for lost all its financial work. The legal end got screwed up because the courts had to reschedule trial dates. Our main vendor lost its space. The sales staff quit en masse the following May, the President was fired two weeks later, and half the paralegal staff left in the course of the summer. After saving a few contracts, I decided I had to leave. In January, I started my new job, in Midtown.

So I have stayed there ever since.

I tell this to you, Magdalen. Pray for me, pray for us.

IV.

The boundaries of the day job of Jennifer Taurillon were demarcated by an extension cable covered discernibly by a rise in the carpet, two sides of prefabricated pressed wood paneling measuring 12 by 16 feet, rising to end a little more than one foot from the plasterboard tiled ceiling, and the fourth side a window which extended across the entire space, staring directly to the roof of the building across the street, which offered a view of the avenue leading toward downtown Manhattan. At the base of the window was a covered radiator, where she kept several cacti and aloe vera buttressed with pink and blue plastic file boxes on top.

Her desk, organized neatly to the point of obsessive compulsiveness, was moved against the wall, where she had placed a fabric bulletin board with the production schedules for multiple magazines color coded by priority. Production coordinator for a magazine group had gotten easier over the years; everything was through networks, though Jennifer kept her old paper schedules going out of necessity—it was faster for answering telephone questions from her ditz

of a managing editor, who forgot everything from the moment informed. Also, the hours were now nine-to-five, with less to do during the often-staggered production weeks. In the past, they were hell weeks; then it was several days straight of staying in the office until four, five in the morning before taking the car service home to sleep for two hours and taking it back to work another sixteen hours straight. The crisis in 2008 cut back on page counts and the publishers killed several lagging and redundant titles, but seniority and competence kept her in the job. There was just less work for Jennifer to do, and since then she worked normal business hours, nine-to-five, with regularity.

There was nothing that showed she had a life outside of work other than the plants. They were gifts from a friend she had lost touch with last year, and she kept all her photos in the cloud. She liked separation, compartmentalization, nothing to offer a clue to others when they went into her office cubical, because Jennifer didn't like answering personal questions. She did, however, have a couple of Edward Gorey New Yorker magazine covers framed as posters. Those prompted an occasional question, to which she answered she liked him, and they're signed because she met him at the old Gotham Book Mart, and yes, he wore his raccoon coat. The questioner would respond with a "who's Edward Gorey?" embarrassed without saying expression, with the exception of her boss, who knew who Edward Gorey was, but did not like him.

Sometimes, after moments like that, Jennifer entertained the notion of emigrating, but Australia and New Zealand wouldn't give her more than a tourist visa. Publishing wasn't a very big industry for potential American immigrants, and the EU would never be interested in crazy cat ladies from the USA. She was stuck with the stupid, got nowhere to go, and at three months

after turning 48, the 401(k) and the pension buyout deadlines were almost at the stage of looming. It also meant that she was closer to dying than to being 15, unless she defied genetics.

She would defy these odds, somehow, as long as she wasn't useless and not in someone's way. This was why she divorced. A preventative measure after Jennifer picked up on the indifference and distance after a near drowning at Rockaway, three years before 9/11. She remembered going out into the surf; it was the Sunday of Labor Day weekend and fortunately the final weekend the city lifeguards were on duty. The water was so warm, and suddenly she realized the undertow had pulled her out too far. She remembered the waves crashing over her, and a hand grasping her tight about the wrist. Six guys, one with a float, pulled her to shore. Fortunately, she had swallowed hardly any water, and didn't need further assistance.

When the lifeguards brought Jennifer to her husband, he was in his beach chair, reading. Sure, he reacted, said all the right things, hugged, held her, and was attentive and solicitous that day and the remainder of the weekend. Then Monday morning came around, and all was back to normal. However, Jennifer was not feeling normal.

A year after the divorce, he moved to California. He did call on 9/11, leaving a message on her answering machine. Beyond a few brief conversations shortly afterward, they made their distance, again. Jennifer hadn't heard from him in years, nor did she care to, evermore.

Finally, witching hour struck. No calls in hours. Jennifer kicked off her flats and pulled on her black tights. One last trip to the can, after business and makeup she pulled the hood tight of her black Antarctica coat, grabbed her bag, and was out into the rising wind and cold.

V.

This wasn't the end, but should have been, Jennifer thought, as she ignored the book in her lap on the subway train, staring ahead, unfocused, at the faces across from her. She took the local, not wanting to be on the crowded express, though at the Grand Central stop the car became packed. She leaned forward to stare at words without paying much attention, picking out consonants and imagining them to be in a tomato alphabet soup, purposefully uncomprehending. Jennifer had spent enough time today on words; she closed the book and got up to push her way through the crowd out the door.

After Jennifer ascended the subway stairs, it was already night. The frigid air was winter-like and, even with tights on, her legs felt cold after a block, and the soles of her shoes too thin for the sidewalk. At the corner, she stopped to stare into her reflection in the window. The fake autumn brown painted smile could not ever hide the laugh lines or how aged she felt. It was downhill from here, she murmured, accepting she talked to herself at times, especially in the evenings coming home from work.

She put her gloved hands to her forehead, adjusted her glasses. In the dark, she still looked in her 20s, *well, maybe*—she thought—*actually, really imagining that in this reflection I look a little in my 20s, but I long ago knew better. Change isn't evolution, neither is personal growth. I do not feel smarter now, or filled with wisdom to dispense to others, any more than I did then. My existence is predicated on the fact that I just went through—certain things. Burning paper. People, buildings falling. Being pulled under water. That's what has happened to me. Nothing all that different than most, I see. I am not special, unique, or singular—only me. Could be worse. Wasn't. Again, just me.*

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the leaf, tossing it over her head, caring not to see where it landed.

Jennifer Taurillon walked home to her third floor apartment, put a dinner in the microwave and, once done, took a long bath. Afterward, she put the plaid skirt on a hanger. She might be too old to wear it at almost 50, yet maybe, Jennifer thought, she could wear it again next week, depending on the weather. She still had the body. Morning gym and Pilates did not craft perfect or younger, but at least she kept a figure.

Later that night, while curled on her sofa in her pajamas, Jennifer Taurillon looked through her growing collection of art and photography books, listening to Paul Bley as she wordlessly told stories to the Magdalen and to all her friends. Into the night Jennifer related her life to the pictures, and she grew tired, she felt better and eventually ready for sleep.