

It is the early morning of a day in the first half of September in the year of 2001, a full year nearly passed since the frantic terror of the Y2K disaster which never quite came to pass. As the computer clocks ticked over with all the mute indifference of a staring cow, and a few weeks later President George W. Bush was inaugurated there was a distinct let-down, a terrible sigh and acceptance of a continuing path of mediocrity. I was far too young to vote, though I urged my mother to look into the platform of the Democratic runner, an impressive intellectual named Al Gore—who, perhaps now I think, probably had a face too ringing with honesty and goodwill towards his constituents to win this race.

So, our nation continued a path we had acquired decades ago, which to one of very little living memory, like myself, seemed to be one of mediocrity, by mediocrity, and forever towards a mediocre progress. A stagnant nation, a tomb's air but in a still way, with no fresh blood nor fresh ideas. If the year 1948 had been widely taught in my history classes, then perhaps I would have come to realize what our path was really to be (I would have sniffed that whiff of karma through my instinctual knowledge of good and evil—for the reality of our own role in the “random” tragedy and what I had been made to understand so far were as night and day.)

I am aged only ten years and understandably I'm difficult to rouse out of bed at 6:00 a.m. Under the blue haze of dawnlight through the clouds settled on Little and Waits and Johnston's Mountains I brush teeth, dress in my “tomboyishiest” of clothes, discover my lunchbox is already filled by my mother, and awaken myself with a dose of early morning television. By 7:45 I have packed my necessary books for 5th grade—Mathematics, Science, Reading, Social Studies (this was back when a school day was eons long, where jittery and distractible children are shackled in rooms and water-boarded with information until slack with weariness and a sackful of home-busy-work to complete). And I am standing at the end of the gravel driveway, poking out in the grayness and waiting for the yellow mechanical drudge to collect me.

There are only five minutes after arriving at the glass gates of the new construction of Mountain View Elementary to wander the halls, find any social interaction, accrue materials from lockers, possibly purchase breakfast (if that could not be had at home), and make ready for Homeroom's announcements and daily

roll-taking. Since I am already culinarily proficient at home and have few friends, the breakfast and social options can be omitted to give more time. I sit in homeroom and draw on the blank backside of an old graded assignment—I mark out the long swan’s neck and sheep’s head of a young dragon. In the background the rectangular trunks of trees and shrubs appear. A stone’s arc, and the arc of a dark den’s opening are made for the beast, and soon after legs like those of a cat and baboon’s child follow upon him. Do I crave these surroundings? Am I this wholesome yet hodge-podge creature?

Now the torment of peers’ noises are upon me. The squabbles, the squickering, the grunting, the illiterate social messes—I block and try to do without. Perhaps I’m simply waiting for them to catch up. Perhaps I’m waiting for a meeting with one who has already caught up.

To me it appeared at first a miracle image—an illusion of shock and awe—something powerful enough to quiet and distill the emotions of every child-mind and clique-or-fashion-or-sport-attached in the room.

Perhaps for some it was the only suffering—the only true suffering—they had encountered in their short lives.

Suddenly social life, sport, cliques and clans and the whole mess mattered not.

The homeroom televisions were grainy and poor. As we all sat staring into the hypnotic horror of the first tower, billowing with a dark, almost volcanic-looking cloud, we were filled with a gummy confusion. The volume was muted and none of us in the room had context. I strongly doubt now that many of the kids in that homeroom class were even aware that those buildings were a real place. I doubt they knew of the Twin Towers, or that they were a short plane flight away from our own little town.

The ground-mounted camera soaking in the silent tragedy jolted as its operator noticed the second plane. Its flight was smooth and painfully un-doctored; As it burrowed itself into the second tower and was incinerated into a backwards flower of pain and fire I knew it was no trick. There was no CGI here. Some of the kids in the back had begun to laugh and ignore the television again. They must have thought it was just a TV program. Yes, just a program or a game. That must have been it for them; the alternative explanation for their behavior doesn’t bear thinking about.

We 5th graders are given only a six-minute dose of reality before a flustered

teacher darts into the room, realizes what is being broadcasted on the homeroom TV, and rushes to turn the device off. This elicits an indignant response—from me, from many other children. Those of us who were sat staring into the madness of the burning skyscrapers are livid, and we demand to know what’s going on. I hear a shout of “Turn the volume up, *please!*”, and another student agrees with a shout of their own. The teacher refuses, forehead almost a radish shade of red and glistening with stress.

The kids in the back demand to have the TV back on, and on a different channel. That, of course, would have been the norm: After morning announcements, a static-filled version of a local channel of cartoons would be put on for two or three minutes to quiet the howlers of the class. The screen was a morose, blank, smoky black now. Out of the doldrums and not of the norm. Mediocrity had taken a nose-dive into chaos, and the demanded their easy innocence and mediocre lives back.

Or perhaps they really couldn’t care, and were simply whining for “better programming” than that fake scene of planes, buildings, and fleeing people.

The teacher still refused to turn the TV back on. She ran down the hall; I could hear the distant voices of multiple adults speaking at once in hushed tones. Urgent tones. I knew it had been real—and this was only further proof. The entire day, once the teachers and administration had sucked in their emotions and pretended all was well, was spent craving an answer—or answers—and receiving none. No answer until I got home and a repeat of the horrible scene could be seen with the volume up. Twin Towers, hijacked flights, a potential death count of 2,500 and climbing. Firefighters, volunteer EMTs, and even random citizens from every precinct within a 50-mile radius combing through debris, seeking survivors (but mostly finding bodies).

Rage came next, its flavor xenophobic. Not from me—from the TV, and from the kids in the back. From some of the teachers. From other children’s parents. Everyone acted like it was justified. Because of course the “towel-heads” had attacked us on our own soil. “Those Afghani bastards will pay” became a common sentiment. Never mind that, of the perpetrators that were known, one was French, another two Moroccan, and all were acting from a faction of a terrorist organization. Not a culture, not a region, and most certainly not from a country. Afghanistan least of all.

But of course, I never really found out the full story of the attack until college courses. The *complete* United States history courses—the ones that went into detail on

the decades and years and events that elementary, middle, and high school classes seemed to think were worth ignoring. I found out about things that happened in 1948. An aftershock of World War II. A bunch of Europeans and Americans, slicing up countries recently freed of Nazi forces as if they were free pies. Cutting them up regardless of the original regional borders. Putting former rivals together as neighbors, breeding discontent and petty violence. No amount of spiritualism or religious faith could reign in thousands of years of ancient history—and no amount of smug white people who swept in and slurped up oil resources for themselves as if it were unclaimed lands helped that.

History, in its full length and detail, is often like that. We sit like confused, startled 5th graders in a classroom, only privy to a few minutes of flashing images sans volume or context. If we had known more, earlier, would we have known we were not on a path of mediocrity, but one of war and destruction? I don't know if it would have helped.

We've been in the dark a long time, and I don't know if we'll ever be able to overcome it. We may end up peering at the truth through oily smoke forever, unaware we can crane our necks to the side and see. But then we must decide what to do next.