

CLEAR WATER

by

Suzanne McConnell



Each September it is a shock to return to New York after a summer on Slough Pond in Wellfleet, Cape Cod, though my husband Gary and I have done so for twenty years. To ease that adjustment, after a couple weeks we go back for a long week-end. This year we planned to leave after I taught my last class on the 13th.

On Sept. 11, our son-in-law Robert phones about 8:55. He, my stepdaughter Nanette, and 3-year-old grandson, Conrad, live in what was once my apartment, about 7 blocks north of the World Trade Center. Robert has seen a plane ram into the tower. He will see it over and over in his mind in the following days.

Gary and I pedal over on West 24th, our street, to the bike path by the West Side Highway along the Hudson River. Looking south on that path as far as the eye can see are people walking north, towards us, dressed in suits, with briefcases, sometimes a woman pushing a stroller; above them, following the same line of the eye, but vertical, are the towers, billowing smoke, gashed, on fire. And the people are in shock.

I feel my own body gashed. "Who are these *people*?" I say to Gary. He says, "from there. From down there." As I am watching, the tower further behind slips down out of sight. I begin sobbing. Gary asks "What happened?" I say, "It's gone." He had looked away for a moment, just a moment.

People pause now, look, tell their stories. After awhile, we continue to wend our way south, pushed to the side of the path, as the exodus thickens to five and six abreast, coming north.

Then the remaining tower sinks. Huge roils of smoke boil up. I stop. I am holding my face, my bike between my legs, bawling and bawling, Gary is weeping. Some people gasp and turn back to look; many simply keep walking. Something appears within the ghost-smoke, seems to leap out: two erector-set-like things, like charred spines, like cathedral spires. Ghoul-spirit, skeleton-spirit, cathedral-spirit, of the World Trade Towers. And then they are gone.

Gary asks "Do you want to go home?" No. I want to go downtown to Nettie and Robert and Conrad.

We ride to Tribeca, first to friends where we can leave our bikes because we've forgotten locks. They inform us the Pentagon was hit. We all watch television. Our friend takes the dog out, returns in tears. At the fire station across the street, a fireman

with whom he'd had words over politics the previous week is covered in papier mache, sobbing. I try calling my former Tribeca roommate (and summer Cape resident) Karen. That roiling force of smoke and pulverized dust of all the matter animate and inanimate that had been the World Trade Towers an hour before now blew in a massive single plume over all of Wall Street, where she and her husband Julian live, towards Brooklyn. The phone does not go through. We go to Nanette and Robert's. They have closed the curtains, shut off the TV, trying to protect their son, our grandson. I reach Karen. Julian witnessed the tower's disintegration from nearby Broadway and has run for his life from that smoke.

On our way home, I go to St. Vincent's Hospital to donate blood. There is a huge crowd. St. Vincent's doesn't need more blood. By 6 o'clock, Nettie and Robert have packed up Conrad and found their way over a bridge to the New Jersey countryside.

All night there are sirens. All night long.

Wednesday, Sept. 12

Television, phone calls. In the afternoon we bike to Chelsea Piers, the sports complex at the end of W. 23rd Street by the West Side Highway, to donate socks and gator aide for workers, and clothing for survivors.

We head south on the bike path again. Hundreds of people line the West Side Highway. Ambulances are parked all along it. Heavy equipment trucks, police, and firemen head down to the WTC site, returning covered in grey-white dust, the trucks carrying huge chunks of burned steel, unrecognizable automobiles. Every time a vehicle rolls by, the crowd claps. People hold signs: "Thank You," "God Bless You," "Our Heroes." How marvelous this is! Our hearts burst open. The cops and firemen, so many of their crew dead, lift a hand or nod. In two hours, only two ambulances pass. A young heavy-set black guy walks along in front of the crowd with a big American flag and a rousing grin. "We's here! We is *still here!*"

That night we go for pizza. On the deserted streets someone rushing past announces a bomb threat at the Empire State Building. Three guys behind us passing a Chinese restaurant tell the Chinese men sweeping the street to "speak English, this is America, God damn it." The hostess at the pizza parlor, who has an accent, says panic after a terrorist attack is common. Back home, Deborah, another summer Cape friend, calls from New Jersey. She can't reach her daughter, evacuated from her apartment near the Empire State Building, and she is terrified.

We had planned to go to the Cape the next day. But neither of us wants to leave New York. We don't know yet if we know anybody missing in the towers although it seems unlikely. Stories are flying about: spooky near-miss and should-have-missed stories. I phone Karen. She tells me the white dust is thick on her windowsills. "Do you know what's in that dust, Suzanne?" I reply "Asbestos." "No," she says. "People." We are breathing in the dead, the desks, the computers, the asbestos, the steel, the airplanes.

Strangers are kind. Eyes connect. Instead of five degrees of separation, we are separated by only one.

Thursday, Sept. 13:

The wind shifts. It blows north. The air is acrid. It fills the lungs, the throat. It burns.

At Hunter College, half my students are absent. There has been a bomb scare in the subway. In my fiction workshop class, I dispense with fiction. We write for an hour, telling our stories. We read them. What they write is eloquent. In my Literature of the Sixties class, suddenly my students comprehend the 60's. We are currently reading James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. We sit in a semi-circle. We tell our stories. We remark on the synchronicity of what we have been reading with what is happening.

We cry. Outside are the sounds of an anti-war group rallying to march. Inside we differ in our opinions.

That evening Gary and I bike again down the west side. Instead of ambulances, refrigeration trucks line the highway, waiting for bodies. Again a crowd applauds the trucks, cops, firefighters. Bleery-eyed, chalk-covered young men pass on foot, wearing hardhats.

Peter and Gloria phone from Wellfleet. They tell us their friend and neighbor, Barry Perkins, was on American Airlines #11 to L.A. The plane Robert saw. So we do know of somebody, after all. We are acquainted. We heard the terrible car crash from our place on Slough Pond that she missed by a carlength several years ago. She turned off Route 6; her friend Tracy, following her, was struck twice, from a car behind and one oncoming. How astonishing that Barry had escaped that fate, that Tracy emerged from her coma and lived, and now, Barry has died. She was going to see her sons, Peter said. She was only going for a few days. I am boggled, horrified, I cannot refrain from imagining her last moments, from wondering if she knew she would be used as an instrument of destruction, as well as being destroyed herself along with everyone else on the plane.

We eat badly. The air is awful. We quarrel. It rains that night. I dream the rain and sirens together. Something about the rain melting the World Trade Towers together with smoke and fire.

Friday, Sept. 14:

More television. Burning air. Suddenly the fierceness with which we wanted to stay in the city transforms into the self-protective need to flee. There was to be a candlelight vigil at Union Square that night. I am sorry to miss that. We grab our cats, and take off.

It is weird to be on Cape Cod. To inhabit this other universe. We stop at Shop and Stop for groceries. Some people wear little flags. But what do they know? Can they feel "We's still here! We is *still here!*" in their bodies ?

At Slough Pond, the cats leap out of their boxes, run up trees. The air is sweet. Gary decides we should close up the house this week-end, that we will not return this fall. We dismantle the screen tent where we eat our meals all summer. We take down the canopy over the area where Gary makes sculpture. It gets cold. Inside, Gary builds a fire.

I phone Cape friends. I suggest to those also New Yorkers that we have some kind of get together the next night. It begins to rain. We sleep that night as always in that house on Slough Pond, in the deepest quiet. But I dream I am high up in a square classroom shaped like the World Trade Towers (I taught there once, on the 34th floor). There's a break in it, somehow, in the middle. Cafe booths line the perimeter. My sister and mother are in a booth. I want them there as witnessess. I'm trying to teach, to know what to say. I dream that doctor friends who summer on the Cape, with orderly, productive lives, are sleeping outside their house, their lives in disarray, stray people walk through, there's confusion about cell phones, lost numbers, a boat leaving...

Saturday, Sept.15:

After breakfast we take a long walk through the woods, along the ocean, and back. The waves roll in. The seagulls fly. The dunes ribboned with iron appear brilliant as always in the bright morning. But there is a glaze over my eyes.

I write, for the first time this week, in my journal. We pack our remaining clothes, equipment, the kitchen. I vacuum. I scrub. One room is completed. Then another.

That night we share potlock dinner at Vivien and Larry's with about twelve other New-York-Cape-Coddors. Most were at the Cape on Sept. 11, not New York. I regret

again not being at that Friday night candlelight vigil in Union Square. I miss the shared deep sense of shock, an animal visceral sense that is about on the streets among strangers in New York. Or maybe I am allowing myself to feel removed. Maybe that's part of the shock.

Sunday, Sept. 16:

I wake with a sense of despair. My dreams again were about chaos. My grandson Conrad was in them. I couldn't take care of him properly.

At the Wellfleet flea market, a table is set up as a memorial to Barry. I spot John and Noa. I'm so glad to see them. They're from Boston, they're safe. I am looking for a tablecloth as a wedding present for a friend. Homer, a friend of Barry's, sells antique linens. He tells me how wonderful Barry was, that she came over once when he had no heat, brought blankets, offered him her place, that she was always doing things like that for people. His eyes fill. I find a beautiful round tablecloth, perfect for my friend but too expensive. Homer lowers the price, I increase what I'll spend, and buy it.

We stop by Peter and Gloria's. All day on Sept. 11, they and other friends of Barry's gathered in her garden, they tell us. Gloria has taken care of Barry's electricity and other household details. Edie, another friend, is going to the Boston airport to retrieve Barry's car. Gloria cannot bring herself to clean out the refrigerator. She knows, as winter comes and the trees between them become bare, that they will have to look at this empty house. My heart goes out. We in New York will lift our gaze reflexively towards the downtown skyline, and see only absence.

We buy *The New York Times*. An article in the business section quotes from Lamentations: "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary!"

We are packed up now. We have cleaned, nailed windows shut, pulled down shades, locked doors. We have put this house in order.

Now I descend the wooden stairs to the pond to take a swim. The first this weekend, the last this season. Cape Cod's glacier-made kettle ponds have the sweetest, silkiest water of any on earth. I have appreciated that every day, all summer long, for the last 20 years. At this moment the pond seems like clarity itself. A blue wholeness, and above it, the pot of blue sky. It is clear, cold, defined. It is incredibly inviting. For the first time since Sept. 11, and for what will be the only time for weeks and weeks, I feel comforted. To swim into it, to cut through its water, clearly. To be held in its cool silk. It has never seemed so pure.