

# New Fiction from Thomas Mixon: “Strong Feelings of Sympathy and Horror”

☒ A little stoned, on the screen porch facing the invisible grunts of New Hampshire spring peepers. Something night, something woods, something long sleeve. Lou looks down into mostly darkness. They can barely see the plaid pattern. One of Alex's, figures. You can swear off a person, but still wake in the middle of the night wearing her damn shirt you swear you didn't go to bed in. You can be a person, listening to thawed frogs, little creatures literally frozen the month before, and only hear her voice, though it's been two months since she's been gone, only taking half her clothes.

The two of them made it through the pandemic, the election, Lou's own thaw, cracked egg, the fucking whirlwind of body and mind and for once in their fucking life not having to deal with it alone, coming out stronger on the other side, all those cliches. Alex going back to school, Lou moving north for her, buying a house neither could afford separately, making fun of the debt, together, making fun of work, leaving work, making fun of the Olympics, fuck you Intel, fuck you AI, fuck you 2032, working off a little laptop in the forest, tall trees on all sides swaying in the wind like they're bound to fall, but they don't, or, OK they do sometimes, but not on the house, far away. The turbulence of the 2020s transitioning to perpetual hurricunt of the new decade, tyfool, all puns but no groan, Alex gone.

Gone over such a stupid thing, compared to everything before. Lou gives the finger to complacency, somewhere in the nearby vernal pools, with one hand, undoes the buttons on Alex's flannel with the other. They open the door and throw the shirt into the yard. Half-dressed and shivering, they root around in

the dark for the rest of their ex's wardrobe, tossing pants and hats out the windows. Living up here, can't even have a proper blowup scene, end of a dirt road, no chance of anyone driving by and wondering why the mess. Had they broken up in Mass, they could have given the suburbs the expected show. But no, they were fucking bulletproof, made it through everything, only to lose it after all the hard things. Now it's all soft things, mud, rain, hurt by flannel, hurt by others' smiles, smiling back, pretending to everyone at their new job that they are this quirky and fun kid who happens to be in their mid-thirties. It's cool. Yeah, I love New Hampshire. No, not born here. Why'd I come? You all have the best maple syrup. Change the subject. Hey, look at my new piercing!

#

The unicopters paused over the New Hampshire State House, longer than planned. There were just under 200 in the sky, hovering quietly above the gathered, applauding, crowd. They had left from Hanover that morning; another crowd, a set of speeches, the procession of the chosen students, standing before the doors of each aircraft as they opened automatically. June, the semester had just ended, the passengers mostly undergrads heading home. These models could make it safely to Michigan, to the west, the Carolinas, down south; all autonomous, all single occupancy, electric, and irritatingly plastered with Live Free or Die, on the sides.

That they had to pass over the State House first, before scattering to their destinations, was ridiculous, political, unnecessary. The design had come from two Dartmouth grads; for years they had tried to get the state to invest, no luck. New Hampshire only kicked in a little bit, at the end, once it was clear these things were special, were getting buzz. The state stamped their motto at the last minute, so the football field still reeked of paint, as everyone waved the unicopters off.

Downtown Concord was a mess of closed streets and temporary

grandstands, so Lou drove in from the east, parked in a strip mall lot across the Merrimack River, and walked along the Route 9 bridge toward the ceremonies. They wished they had a hat, even one of Alex's, lost to the forest; it was hot and stupidly muggy. They wished their camera worked; their phone was cracked and stupidly old. Mostly they wished they could have thought of a good reason not to attend. They were not, and had no desire to be, a real journalist. But, they had forty pages of magazine to fill by end of summer, and this little show was sadly the biggest thing in New Hampshire.

At least since the legislature passed the latest round of abortion restrictions, at the end of their spring session. A month ago, GOP clowns barely containing their glee, emboldened by the new governor, leaning in to the fucking circus mentality of the campaign, egging on the protestors, begging for a pie in the face, wearing chunks of banana cream on their foreheads for days, defiance kink, ringmaster high. The opposition did their best, showed up, filed lawsuits. But it wasn't looking good.

Lou passed a small band of them, protestors holding signs, snakes in the shapes of uteri, Margaret Atwood-inspired bonnets, homemade everything. The demonstration was being kept far back from the festivities; even most of them stopped chanting, when they saw the first of the copters take its place downtown, waiting with the clouds, for the others.

A small square past Storrs Street. Eagle something? Atrium? Umbrellas, brick, a good enough view of the sky without Lou needing to push further on, close enough to the action.

Of course, in retrospect, it was still too close. The swarm of machines dipped in unison. Just a little bit; the cheering turned to one collective gasp. Then faint clapping again, as they all ascended back to their original altitude. Hmm, didn't think that was part of the program. Lou tried to check their phone; stupid thing, too slow. Then the things dipped again,

but seemingly at random. The little vessels jerked groundward, then back up. Something wasn't right. No one was clapping anymore.

The Republican Speaker of the House found a microphone, started asking people to remain calm and – wasn't able to finish his sentence. The unicopters started plummeting, on the crowd, on the State House, on the street. There were explosions, fragments of bone and tar, screams. Lou was knocked down some steps as the crowd ran. They dragged themselves as far as they could to the side, under the lone umbrella that hadn't yet been overturned. They covered their head and heard the parade of impacts, all down North Main, panicked footfalls of those separated in the confusion, survivors moaning and circling tragedy in real time. They stayed down until someone (a medic? not in uniform) shook their arm. Lou swatted the hand away, limped past people running in all directions, until they reached the highway, crossed the median in a daze, stupidly, and sat with their back against the guardrail, facing away from the disaster, toward the river.

#

By the time their leg feels good enough to cross the bridge back, they've forgotten which lot they've parked in. To Lou, it seems at least an hour must have passed since the mayhem, yet firetrucks are still streaming in, the echoes from shouts and glass breaking still bouncing off, one can see even from the river, an unrecognizable downtown.

It may as well be a different country, the other side of the Merrimack, though. Plenty of cars in all the lots, people walking into stores. Lou's got the vague sense they should call someone, but no names pop into their head, let alone a string of digits. They follow a family into Books A Million, hypnotized by the group's normal gait, the unfazed parents, the unpretentious children.

When they see a photo of the newest iPhone on one of the magazines, amongst the periodicals, they get the bright idea to look at their own phone. Still unsure who to dial, Lou tries someone named Mary it looks like they tried to call fourteen times this morning. Line disconnected, odd. They then pick a name at random from their contacts, Lionel. No luck either, but wow the guy's timbre is soothing, on his voicemail. Lou's lucky it's one of those long ones, where the person must be wonderfully eminent, conscientious, and leaves a ton of info, who else to reach out to in case of something urgent. Considerate, beautiful. They are murmuring into the device, mindless appreciations, without hearing the beep, not realizing they are leaving a message.

They see someone wearing a "Tamra" name badge, in a Books a Million polo, watching them with concern over the racks.

"Excuse me, where is Lionel."

"Lionel? Are you lost?"

"It's just, he's got a, very sonorous."

"There's no Lionel working here."

"Tamra though, that's a pretty name..."

And then they pass out.

#

Smell of burnt coffee, Bates Motel cushioning. Must be in the cafe section.

Lou shifts from slumped to sitting, unnecessarily dusts themselves off. Tamra is holding a phone.

"There's no need, I'm fine."

"Er, you fainted."

"I haven't eaten." Lou blinks, scans the cafe menu without taking in the words.

"I wouldn't," Tamra warns. "But, water."

She's back in second, somehow, with a glass of mostly cubes, and a little piece of paper.

"What's that?" Lou asks, chewing the ice.

"From the community board." Tamra hands them a card. "If you need it."

Lou reads aloud. "Crisis Center of Central New Hampshire."

"You can use my phone if you're in trouble."

"I was, it was." They look around for a TV. It's a cafe, not a sports bar, so. "Are we, under attack?"

"OK I'm definitely calling the police."

Lou scoffs. "I think they're busy."

Tamra hesitates, puts the phone away, looks out the front window. "It's awful."

"Yeah, I slept bad before, so, this will be fun."

"Wait, you were there?"

"Barely, I was lucky."

"Um you look like shit."

"Um yeah it was a fucking horror show."

"Sorry, I mean, sorry. You just, I wasn't sure."

"If I looked like shit?"

"No, you do."

"Thanks."

"You kept saying something about Lionel."

Nice voice, Massachusetts, Cultural Council. Ah, all coming back now. "Someone I used to work with."

"Yeah. I thought like, abusive boyfriend, and..." Tamra trails off.

"Not quite, or, never."

"You're not in trouble?"

"I think I just strained, pulled something."

"Or, you know, PTSD."

"Time will tell, Tamra. I'm Lou."

"I already know. I'm crazy."

"Crazy like clairvoyant crazy?"

"Almost. I remembered your septum piercing."

Lou lifts their hand to their nose. Barbell still there, no tearing.

"Where?"

"Aren't you, working at *NOM* now?"

"Interesting, it's, not that big a publication..."

"I flip through every page of every magazine we get."

"Is that your department or something?"

"Nope, just control freak type thing."

Lou tries standing. Nope. "Do you still have a copy?"

"Blah, it was last month, so no," Tamra says, sitting down. Finally.

This is nice. "That's OK," Lou says, instead.

"You don't have one?"

"I do, plenty. I was just going to tear my photo out."

"What! You looked cute."

"It's insane, that they'd do a profile on me."

"I think sweet, you looked cute."

"I was just *supposed* to be the tech grunt, website content."

"K, you already get a promotion then?"

"Sort of. The Editor, she just, up and left."

"For real, forever?"

"Absconded to Massachusetts."

"Smart lady."

"Mary, yeah, that's who Mary is."

"You're doing that mumbling thing, again."

"You said I was cute, two times."

"You were, are."

"Sorry. I'm mad with power." Lou stands, stable enough.

"I like it."

"I don't. I think I'm the new Editor."

When Lou leaves, they're still holding the Crisis Center card, Tamra's number penned on the back.

#

The details on the malfunction are released within days. It may not be a malfunction. A young postdoc fellow at Dartmouth, Cindy, is being held in federal custody. Suspicious syntax in her code, an unusual amount of commented sections. She says it's poetry. But officials are wary. They have avoided releasing anything thus far, but today a few sections were leaked to the press.

*nh failure / experiment that only ends / with everyone  
pretending / autonomy means just for men*

*sycophants pull down / their pants to check who's hardest /  
whose dick swells most for hurting girls / who's the best bad  
bill / filer the granite state / has yet to spawn*

*i wish the adamantine beasts / below the flying blades / meet  
some sunny day / and crushed concrete / is indistinguishable /  
from their meat*

Oof. That last one. Sounds damning, but, what does Lou know about verse?

They are looking up the word "adamantine," when the first submission comes in. It arrives from the contact us link on NOM's website. Lou still doesn't have access to all Mary's folders, inboxes, and has been dreading getting a complaint via the generic comment box, or a question they have no idea how to or if to respond to.

The submission's not a complaint. It's, more poetry. From someone "South of Manchester but with a White Mountains ethos."

*They say calamities insist*

*The weakest parts of us*

*Fall from our souls*

*And leave remaining*

*Only our best*

*To wrest the metal*

*Back in place.*

*This time, we rest*

*Only when our roads*

*Sparkle with a diamond*

*Shine, and we remember*

*Them, the blessed,*

*Who gave their lives*

*Without knowing why,*

*So we could attest*

*To undivided spirit,*

*Present, stressed,*

*Yes, but unbroken.*

Lou is thinking, that was, sincere? Then they get another submission. And another. Some with real names attached, others anonymous. Lou wants to write each back, make sure they know they're writing to a quarterly mostly food magazine. But, they make a new folder on the desktop, arrange them by time received, start playing with the layout, for a few, just in case.

By the end of the week, they have more than enough to go cover to cover. It would be a departure, but Mary's run a few pages of poems before, when no new restaurants were opening, when the magazine couldn't feasibly do another feature on the same

corn maze or apple orchard it had already covered extensively, multiple times during previous seasons.

The question still remains, is sincerity enough? There are some obvious bad ones, but the majority seem, just fine, maybe a little trite, but how original can you be about a bloodbath that's captured the entire country's attention? Lou could get away with this, devoting an entire issue to these remembrances, these little poignancies, in honor of everyone injured or dead. Lou needs to get away with this, they've got literally nothing else. Accounts locked, Mary missing; shit, this is really how it is.

They send an email to the lawyer representing Cindy, why the hell not. Maybe she'll elaborate on her leaked lines. Certainly not expecting an exclusive, her freshest criminal justice metaphors, not to *NOM*, at least. But, Lou's thinking of a front cover. If they could get permission to use something from the villain (plaintiff...) herself, that would definitely get some attention, sell some ad space for the fall.

They make a call. Tamra answers.

"I was wondering how long you'd take."

"Tell me everything you know about poetry."

#

Turns out, not much. But, Tamra suggests an outing. Flyer she's seen tacked to the Books a Million community board, picture of a peace sign, open mic night in Warner, thirty minutes north or so, at a cafe called Warless, local poets promised.

Warner, interesting. Lou may not be a reporter, but some easy searches show that's where Cindy grew up, graduated high school from, a decade ago. If she wasn't being held in federal

prison, who knows, maybe the kind of place she'd hang out, congregate with rural creatives, farm type beatniks.

While Lou's driving up there, Lionel calls.

"Please tell me you are not still in New Hampshire."

"I am still in New Hampshire."

"Come back to civilization, Lou!"

"Don't you know I'm very important now."

"How bad was it?"

"Twisted ankle. Lots of smoke. Things I can never unsee."

"Jesus, Lou. I really thought, when Alex left."

"I'd rather not say, the mortgage, a lot."

"Mass real estate is insane."

"Yeah I'm stuck here. Got a date, though."

"Hot damn! Go get em, tiger."

"Tyger, tyger, burning bright..."

"Impressive. All the readings I invited you to."

"I know. I'm late to the game."

"Poetry is very serious, Lou, not a game."

"I'm headed to an open mic night, right now."

"For your date?"

"Yeah, work maybe, too."

"Good luck, have fun."

"If I need some like, line break, advice..."

"You call me. You call me if you need to escape south, also."

"I did call you, your voicemail saved me, I think."

"I'm not kidding. Your state is devolving."

"They just copy Texas, Alabama, we'll get a heads-up."

"Do you think that kid fucked with the code?"

"Fuck if I know, Lionel. I wouldn't blame her, though. Is that OK?"

"Suffering aside, in a vacuum, lots of people would agree."

"New Hampshire's worse than devolving."

"Seriously I know some well-off jerks, love to have you, however long Lou."

"New Hampshire's a fucking hole, a black hole, it for real sucks in all the loonies nearby, your state, the Berkshires aren't all Tanglewood and roses."

"I know, there's a new gun shop, down the road from the Norman Rockwell museum."

"Idiots in Vermont, idiots in western Maine, pent up rage from worse people in better states than mine, who come here, to fulfill their worseness."

"I pray for women, every day."

"Gonna take more than prayers, Lionel."

"Amen. Have a fun time tonight."

#

Warless Cafe is attached to the back of the town's Unitarian Universalist church. Lou meets Tamra outside, little hug, both squeeze onto a bench near the order counter. Inside, the place

is packed, mostly because it's small, probably thirty people or so. Lou's steadying their coffee as the barista keeps walking past, delivering drinks. Tamra's balancing a BLT on a plate, on her lap, it falls, she lets out a big sigh and eye roll.

They talk briefly between poets reading elegies very similar to the ones Lou's received since the tragedy. Maybe it's the setting, this unsubtle conscientious objector vibe in here, lots of protest photos on the wall, that makes each recitation feel tired. Like, how terrible how terrible the wounds, but also how strong how strong we must be, we must not meet violence with violence, we must acknowledge the pain, but seek counsel with our better angels.

You know. No details of the shards of glass and human flesh bouncing past the bystanders' faces. Where's the poem like that? For sure, it would kill the mood in here, but Tamra already seems bored. Maybe Lou's paying too much attention to the acts? They try to ask Tamra about the bookstore, or her life, or anything. Is she still mad about the BLT? Wasn't this her idea, what else did she expect from a small town? Lionel wouldn't be caught dead in here. It's nothing great, but again, it never promised to be, the cafe name is a bad pun, should be a warning, right off.

Lou's about to suggest maybe they go out for drinks, real drinks, somewhere else, instead. But then the barista passes them again, delivering nothing but himself to the microphone stand. He's about to speak, puts a finger up, behind the counter briefly, dims the lights, giddily reappears. A ham, yeah, so Lou's expecting something very melodramatic. But the guy starts performing a, poem? Something, from memory, or he's making it up on the spot. It sounds, a lot like Cindy. Bits about the hopelessness of men, how they're the dregs, some strange metaphors involving sediment, gathering up useless matter, setting it ablaze. It doesn't make a ton of sense, it contradicts itself. It has hushed the crowd. Even the what-

seems-to-be regular knitting club clique near the back, stop their work, listen.

The barista excoriates the state. Begs for annexation from Canada, Mass, New York, anyone. He speaks of his hometown and the shame, the shame of still being here, and strangely the people here, in this very hometown, are nodding their heads. At the end, he references Cindy's last name, in a long list of names, of those working towards disMENbering the status quo, misquotes her leaked code:

*anyone defending / autonomy for men / is good as dead / already*

When he's done, the lights go back up, it's intermission, Joan Baez on the speakers. He thanks the other barista, is about to make someone a latte, does a double take. He walks right up to Lou, bends down, peers close at their face, rummages through the book rack near the entrance, comes back to the bench holding the previous month's pages of *NOM*.

"Please don't do a feature on us."

"Jesus, if I knew a nose ring would, do this."

"I beg you. The food is terrible."

"Wouldn't know, you knocked my date's sandwich over."

He appears to notice Tamra for the first time. Gives her the once over.

"I may have saved you from diarrhea, for real."

"Refund, apology?"

Tamra is standing up, is adjusting her bag as she gives a weird wave.

"Soooo I should be heading back."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'll call."

"Um OK."

She leaves. The barista sits down next to Lou, who is still processing the goodbye.

"That's some shitty customer service."

"I'm not kidding, the bread's stale."

"I kind of do now, wanna write something."

"This is me, imploring you."

"We're technically a lifestyle publication..."

"The owner, he's delusional, cheap."

"...with merely a heavy focus on food."

"So *NOM*, like Not Only Meals?"

"North of Manchester."

"That's classist as fuck."

"You're rude as fuck."

"I'm Zeke, I'm sorry, where's your friend?"

"My date, probably blocking my number."

"Could be worse, in federal prison."

"You know Cindy?"

"Know her? We were practically the same person."

"So you should be locked up, too?"

"Maybe, if anyone would publish me."

"That why you never left home?"

"Low blow. I did move out, last year."

"You stayed here, though, in town."

"Yeah. Cindy was always way smarter."

"She's on trial for conspiracy."

"Wait here."

Lou shouldn't. Zeke seems like a tool, Tamra's stormed off, they already have enough material for the fall issue, last thing they need are angry musings from a semi-eloquent hick.

What Zeke brings back to the bench, though, aren't poems. They're pictures. The first ones he pulls out he says aren't the best; it's Cindy being presented with medals, trophies, in various auditoriums, in her teen years.

"She was, is, a genius. Math bowl, debate, spelling bees."

He shows Lou more. The good ones. Photos of Cindy writing in the hallway of some school building, head down, in a notebook. Apart from the awards photos, and a few with her laughing next to an awkward looking younger Zeke, she is alone. She is jotting down something furiously, or gazing off into a distant space. She is walking her dog in the dark, lost in thought. She is in her car, arms straight out, but chin thrust to the roof, exasperated. She is someone New Hampshire was bound to lose, one way or another. She is presented first place ribbons, pinned to her by quote reasonable men, who denounce very obvious evils, like the Confederate flag, but who then, since they are so quote reasonable, take their self-assessed moderate cred, and come up with quote sensible voting restrictions, laws for female bodies, lower taxes to make the schools quote earn their place in the community. They were going to lose Cindy. They have her in custody, but they've lost her.

#

The state loses Lou, too, shortly after Zeke gives them the albums.

They accepted the photos, the good ones, decided to scrap the poem content, publish a whole issue with portraits of Cindy inside. They left Warless, Warner, tried to call Tamra, had no luck, emailed Cindy's lawyer again. Zeke swore he had permission, owned the copyright, everything was taken with his camera, but Lou wanted to make sure.

A week went by, nothing from the lawyer, simplistic texts from Tamra, she saying no no all is good, just busy, maybe in a couple weeks? The New Hampshire Legislature, in a special session held in honor of their fallen colleagues, doubled down on the abortion law, no exemptions for incest, rape. Then, they passed a real Rumpelstiltskin of a state terrorism bill, everyone who read it said it couldn't pass federal muster, everyone who didn't read it chanted its talking points, loved it, considered it law already.

The lawmakers must have directed the state troopers to their positions, as well, comprehensive strategy, scary version of safety. Lou hadn't been keeping up with the local news. They were stressed, they were picturing overturned cars as they showered, as they slept. They were out of weed.

Down to Massachusetts, since it *still* wasn't legal in New Hampshire. As they crossed from Nashua to Tyngsboro, they noticed the brown and yellow Dodge Charger, not hiding at all, parked right behind the *Bienvenue!* Lou assumed they were being paranoid, pulled into the gas station instead, but sure enough the state trooper pulled out, as soon as the first NH plate to leave the dispensary did, crossed over the border, lights on. Oh fuck that. They tried Methuen, same thing, even goddamn Salisbury, little beachbum Salisbury had a cop on the north side of Lafayette, ready to pounce.

They couldn't go more east, the ocean, didn't feel like going more south, so headed back towards Concord only to collect their things and call Lionel, to ask for his wealthy friends' numbers.

#

A little stoned, in the basement of a retired college president's harborfront villa, Boston, board member of the Humanities something. Lou gets an email from Cindy's lawyer. No, the defendant does not authorize any use of her writing or likeness, for any popular culture publication. Furthermore, the defendant has no idea who any person named Zeke is, strongly advises that any purportedly consensual images be immediately destroyed. Anything less than full cooperation will result in...

Lou zooms in on the photos, the ones with Zeke and Cindy together. Shit, of course those are photoshopped. Of course they almost went to press with the collected works of a stalker as their total content. Of course they try Mary again, line still disconnected, decide to leave a rabid voicemail on a completely rando person's number.

They could reinsert all the mediocre poems, still make the printer's deadline, but they draft something for *NOM's* website, instead.

The resignation is not necessary, will not be read by many. Lou types up their account of the devastation. It lacks sentiment, dwells on the lone umbrella left to them to shield their body, their head, from debris. They work themselves into a sweat, remembering. They take off their shirt, it gets stuck on their septum piercing. They yank the cotton and accidentally rip the ring out. It bleeds, it hurts, Lou curses, Lou cries. Lou takes a picture of their own, uploads the wound underneath their homepage statement. They google "great disaster" and find this, from a 1912 *New York Times* op-

ed:

"...the hundreds and hundreds of people who have sent us verses about the loss of the Titanic...may be moved to share our own wonderment at the audacity they showed in attempting to deal with such a subject. For very few of those hundreds and hundreds of people had any other excuse for trying to write, other than the fact that the great disaster had excited in them strong feelings of sympathy and horror. They all took it for granted that, being thus moved, their verses would give poetical expression to their emotions."

And then, below the picture of their inflamed nostrils, they list the names, actual and fake, of every person who sent the magazine some stanzas. Just the names, no comments about or excerpts from their work. They close their laptop, dial Alex.

"Why are you calling me." No pleasantries, icy. She left in winter and forever wrapped the season around her.

"We're both on the mortgage," Lou says, throwing up in their mouth a little.

"We had an agreement."

So did we, Lou wants to say. "I left, I'm never setting foot in New Hampshire again."

"Good, don't blame you."

"You must know someone in real estate."

"I'll get on it, this weekend, Lou."

"Handle it, everything."

"That's fair, thanks."

"Just take care of it Alex." Also, I still love you, but better to be all business, aloud, and romantic on all the silent frequencies, where it doesn't count for shit.

“Fine, Lou, but I’m not splitting –”

“And don’t ever call me again.”

“What? You called me –”

They hang up. Another edible. They ruin the retired college president’s towels. They make good on their word; in the future, they don’t so much as cross the Ipswich River. Cindy is found guilty. Zeke moves back in with his parents. Tamra takes off for Burlington. Lionel passes away, respected and loved. There’s another attack, another draft. Warless in Warner goes up for sale, is turned into a tanning salon. Unicopters become ubiquitous, but are called something else, and look different. Amateurs write banal but mostly harmless rhyming couplets. A few idiots are prosecuted for incitement. Many idiots are not prosecuted for upholding the “law,” denying human rights because a bunch of doofs wrote down their discrimination and got some other doofs to sign it. The UN is ignored. The Supreme Court’s expanded, but it doesn’t go well, it gets worse. A lot is ricocheted, lobbed through the air without much force, returns stronger than anticipated. A lot of people don’t like this, a lot do.

On the next major anniversary of the sinking of the ship, the *New York Times* reprints the op-ed Lou found. With every tragedy, more and more of us investigate our mood, as if that mattered. We pencil our enthusiasm, wonder how a thing could happen, wonder at the pieces put together, afterward, as if our words were stone, and supported anything, except their own created tension.

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# Fiction from Sara Nović: After the Attack

Well, nothing at first, not right after. In those initial moments panic is still optional.

At the grocery store, the one across from your building on Frederick Douglass, or farther up on Ft. Washington near your boyfriend's place, depending—a shrill, unfamiliar tone piercing the Muzak. It startles awake a sudden bond between you and other shoppers, people with whom you'd so far avoided eye contact, mumbling a continuous apology for bumping into one another. Now there is camaraderie in the unison groping of pockets, the rifling for phones among purses and reusable totes.

Across the river on Atlantic Avenue, in the urgent care waiting room, you and the receptionist both jump. The emergency alert system, this is not only a test.

Or on your couch at home, your phone dead from the night before, you receive no alert. You won't see the special report ticker tape because you are watching Netflix. At the moment, it doesn't much matter. At first, there are only unconfirmed reports.

It can, as it has before, happen at any time, and therein is the bulk of its power. But city mornings offer certain opportunities—more people on the street, on subways, concentrated in office buildings. People running late, or still bleary-eyed, unseeing, unsaying. See 9/11, 8:46 AM; see Oklahoma City, 9:02 AM.

The West Fourth Street station is bombed in the morning. In your Columbus Circle office tower, a splay of technological gadgets laid out before you on the conference table sound unanimous alarms. The first alert does not contain the word

“attack”; it only says “explosion.” So you and your colleagues ignore it. Because the meeting is about to start.



Because New York is a big city, and old, and badly-kempt. Because, though you have watched your share of terror unfold live and on screens, it is still possible that this is not that. Possible is all you need, and in New York possibilities are myriad—gas line break, signal malfunction, flood, or trash fire. You’ve read the posters; the MTA boasts hundreds every year.

Nothing more will happen for a while. You get in line to pay for your groceries.

The receptionist will turn on the television just as you are ushered to the exam room, and you’ll scroll through Twitter in your paper gown, seeking a hashtag.

Or you’ll lie on your couch with your feet atop the armrest and let your eyes glaze hard against the electro-glow, allowing one episode to flow into the next. It is, after all, your day off.

When, that morning, about halfway through the meeting you remember it is a Tuesday, you pull your phone beneath the table and text your wife. She would’ve passed through West Fourth on her way to class. *U ok? Saw the alert*, you write, then put the phone back on the table, designating half an eye to the task of monitoring the indicator light that might signal her response. A moment later you see the graphic designer making a similar move. The meeting facilitator, who flew in from LA, does not notice.

The second alert changes things. It goes off mid-walk-up, echoing through the stairwell, and you abandon your grocery bags on the kitchen floor and turn on the television. There has been another explosion; cops are in pursuit of a suspect;

there is speculation about his race and religion.

You shiver in your paper gown while your doctor, a Pakistani man from Jackson Heights, wishes for the attacker's whiteness, laments the hate crimes his neighborhood will be in for otherwise. Why, when there is an attack, must they always suffer twice? As he talks you reach for your phone to text your roommate.

Or you fall asleep there on the couch before the computer, waking only when Netflix stops its auto-play, seeking validation that you are, in fact, still here.

After the second alert, you step out of the meeting to call her. She doesn't answer. It doesn't even ring. Maybe, you think, she has made it to class and is mid-lecture. Maybe she is stuck underground, train traffic bottled up beneath you. Maybe, you think, New York should get its shit together and get some goddamn phone service in the subway like every other city in the goddamn world. Some Russian oligarch is probably dragging his feet, trying to figure out how to wring more money from it first. Fuckers, you think, aware that in your glass skyscraper on the Circle, many have thought the same of you. You call her again—no dice. You see Adrian—your partner on the project—in the hallway. He is on the phone, and you nod at each other as you pass.

An inactive group text once made to plan a reunion dinner (failed due to irreconcilable schedules), is reanimated as friends check-in. Quickly, most everyone says they are fine—stay safe—and you wait for the stragglers to respond.

You ball up the paper gown and jab at your phone with one hand, pull your clothes on in brusque, awkward bursts with the other. You hop on one leg as you yank at the backs of your shoes. You hear from your roommate, or you still haven't heard from your roommate.

You finally plug in your phone and the missed calls from your

mother, seven in total, are how you find out something is wrong. You try to piece together the story from her news jumble. No, you rarely go to the place where it happened, but this is cold comfort, and you do not attempt to detail the reality of city living for her. You wake up your computer while you listen to her relief set in. Of course you take the subway, everyone does, but you're home now. You remember a guy you'd had a crush on at your last job and wonder if he is okay, then if it is creepy to seek him out online and ask. You refresh Facebook to see if he surfaces.

The attacker's manifesto has surfaced, though what it says doesn't matter much. Whatever the angle it serves as fuel for someone else's vitriol. Already the feeds have been coopted by trolls of diverse hatreds, practically gleeful in how the dead people are indisputable proof of their political stances, casualty numbers collected and laid out as evidence like a good hand of poker. As if in defiance, the body count fluctuates all afternoon. NBC volleys between 30 and 33 while CNN holds steady at "dozens." A reporter reads snippets from the document, lines they have also turned into an infographic, to be shared and repeated in and out of context in the weeks to come.

Around the table, you and your colleagues are each engaged in your own ceaseless scroll, searching for a live newsfeed online. But the streams are jammed, or they are an erratic, pixelated froth-frozen in one moment, blurred and jerky the next, altogether unwatchable. Adrian drags a TV cart into the conference room, the kind the gym teacher used to pull out of the closet when it was time for the Sex Ed videos. Aptly, someone has drawn a penis in the dust on the screen. Once the TV is on you can no longer see it, but while the news flashes grainy Chopper 7 footage of fire belching up the subway stairwell, you still wish someone had wiped it off. You send another text as you watch the FDNY charge the flames. The hose water does not look like water; it looks solid, a length of

rope lowered into the chasm, its impact on the flames inconsequential.

You want to go home, but with the subway down and traffic gridlocked, you are told to remain in a safe place as the police sweep the city for IEDs. Despite being forced to stay in the office, you are wholly unproductive. The guy from LA, trying to be kind, passes in and out of the room intermittently. At a borrowed desk he calls his home office, where the day is still new and unmarred.

The feeling when her message comes through: relief pushing up your chest with such force it is almost nauseating. Like eating something so sweet it burns your tongue, makes your stomach jump.

*I'm good. stuck on train for a while. class canceled so headed home. love u.*

You yelp when you read it, a weird, strangled sound, and you aren't even embarrassed. "She's okay," you announce. And they are happy for you.

Politicians from all over the country call in to news shows to offer thoughts&prayers, having less to do with either endeavor than with being on record as having said the phrase.

You are out of the way and grateful to be so, way uptown in a place no one has yet thought to blow up.

You leave the doctor's office and try to decipher the map of bus routes that might get you back to your place.

Or, when you hang up with your mother, you remember you were supposed to meet a date tonight. You text him to ask whether you are still on.

You cut out at 4:30, a rarity for you, but you weren't getting anything done anyway, and you want to see your wife. You try to call, but it goes to voicemail. You're grateful you had

some contact, you feel lucky. On your way, you notice the receptionist has been crying, but you don't stop to ask. Outside it is Sesame Street weather, such sharp contrast to the smoke screened footage of downtown, it feels as if it had all happened much farther away. Your phone rings but you don't recognize the number, so you ignore it and contemplate the nerve of telemarketers these days. You walk home, thirty blocks, and think it really is a nice commute on foot, that you should do it more often.

The doorman greets you, searches your face and, finding no distress, looks reassured.

"Good to see you, sir."

"You, too. All okay in your family?"

"Yes sir. And the missus?"

"She's fine. She's upstairs, actually."

He gives you a look that suggests he is trying figure out what he might say next. You register the question in your arched eyebrows.

"It's just—I've been here all day, sir. The other doorman couldn't make it in, because of the trains."

And you remember him bidding you goodbye early that morning. You excuse yourself and get in the lift and rush to your door, though you know before you open it—she isn't there. You call and call on the landline but it goes straight to voicemail like the battery is dead. A while passes before you remember the unknown caller.

You never hear the whole message. You hang up as soon as you realize it is the police, call the number back. They are uncharacteristically polite as they cast you around the circuit board.

Finally, an officer says your name, your wife's. Apologizes. Asks if you could come down to make an ID.

"There must be a mistake," you say. "I heard from her after the attack. She said she was okay."

"You spoke with her?"

"She texted."

"Sir, we'd still appreciate if you came down." He gives you directions to Washington Square Park as if you are an alien, and in that moment you feel like one.

You call your boyfriend and tell him to come over for dinner, you have been grocery shopping today and can make a nice stir fry; you can catch up on that show you've DVR'd.

You get a phone call from your roommate sounding groggy, saying yes, he is fine, but they're taking him to the hospital—somewhere nearby, maybe Brooklyn Heights. Or you hear nothing and lament your morning quarrel over toast crumbs, or hear nothing and invent grand schematics for his escape from peril—perhaps he is still deep underground, inching along the wall of the tunnel, making his way home.

Or you flat iron your hair and put on extra mascara and things go back to normal. You feel guilty about it or you don't. You take a cab in a wide arc around the affected blocks and look away when you see caution tape. You arrive at the restaurant right on time.

You take a cab, get out after ten minutes, feeling sick, remind yourself that nothing is for certain. You run twenty blocks buoyed by that hope, hail another cab. At the scene it is not yet night, the NYPD's neatly ordered mobile generator streetlamps muted by a fuchsia sunset so striking it makes you want to punch something. The police have cordoned off the park, one corner swathed with tarps where the EMTs swarm. You

know this is where you are supposed to go before anyone tells you; the policeman at the gate who checks your ID confirms.

In the makeshift tent: ferric scent of blood and antiseptic-as-cologne. A policewoman leads you down the row to a stretcher tagged with your last name. On the ground beneath it is your wife's purse.

"I don't understand. She messaged," you say when the cop pulls back the sheet.

"It's possible the message was sent with a delay, after extraction," she says. "As they're brought above ground and reconnect to the grid—the phones—it's been causing some confusion."

You stare at the cop as if she is speaking another language. She expresses her condolences, tells you to take your time and then return to the front table for the paperwork.

Beneath the sheet you take her hand, except she doesn't feel like your wife anymore—fingers cool and taut—so you settle for stroking her hair, soot and shrapnel flecked through like glitter. You cry until you think your ribs might crack; you sign your forms and push your way out of the tent into the twilight. You stand there on the grass, holding your wife's purse and wondering what the point of that goddamn arch is anyway, wondering what the hell you are supposed to do next. Once, when you were fourteen, you and your best friend skipped school and got high in this park, but you have never been as dazed as you are now, generator stars boring through your eyes and into your skull, no hope of an exit wound.

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