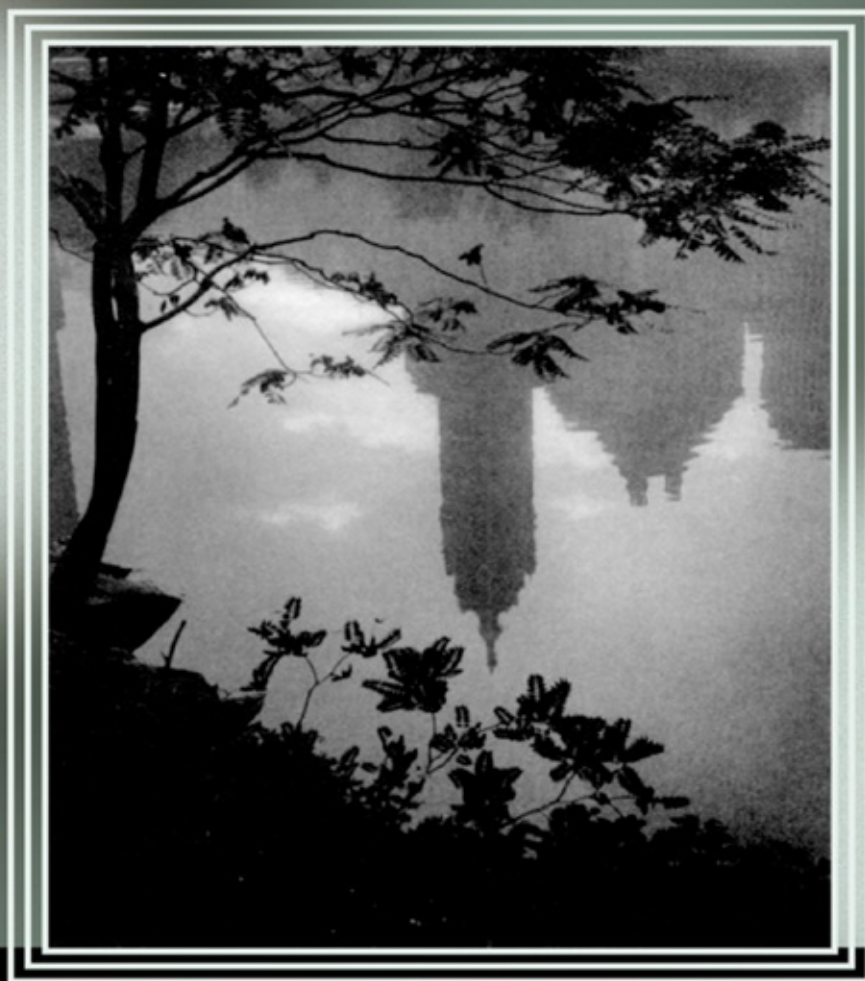


# *In The City*

COLETTE BROOKS



*R a n d o m* ACTS *o f* AWARENESS

"[A] silken meditation. . . Brooks' carefully etched and wistful prose echoes that of such master necromancers of the city as Borges, Calvino, or Auster." —*Booklist*

*Winner of the PEN / Gerard Fund Award*

# In the City

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Random Acts of Awareness

*Colette Brooks*

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY  
NEW YORK LONDON



*To Charlene and Billy who always hoped to see the city for themselves*

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Author's Note

In the City

Acknowledgments

The publication of the paperback edition of *In the City* enables me to clear up a question that many readers of the hardcover edition have wondered about. Though *In the City* contains intermittent references to cities under siege, undercurrents of danger, and the threat of terrorism, it was complete before September 11, 2001, and is presented here without alteration. At that moment it was already in production. As I thought about the manuscript in the aftermath of the attack on New York City, I felt a growing sense that anything I might say about 9/11 was, fundamentally, already there. The book is infused with my belief that cities, and those who live in them and love them, are masters of survival and regeneration. Those sections in the book that deal with what I term “mischance and cataclysm” simply affirm that conviction; the complex threads of connection that sometimes seem so fragile are nonetheless, enduring. The city, whether New York or Washington or Sao Paulo or any of a thousand others, has always been an irresistible emblem of the future. It embodies something precious that many of us in disparate countries and cultures wish to protect, and nothing that happened on that day in September can deter us.

We have had more than a year now to absorb the attack and try to make sense of it. What I recall most clearly about that day—when I strip away a year’s worth of conjecture—is the utter confusion of those early hours, the raw experience unfolding without any explanation. We hardly knew what was happening, much less why. This sense of disorientation is also something I explored in my book, believing that we never have the whole story, as it were, that we always work from fragments knitted together as needed. It’s a special skill of city dwellers, who have learned how to live in that limbo between question and answer.

I first got the news that morning on an Internet site; a moment later someone called from across the country and urged me to turn on the TV. I watched the inexplicable images on the screen for a while, then finally looked out my window, where I saw for myself that black cloud obliterating the blue. In other parts of the city—farther uptown, or farther out in the boroughs—one wouldn’t have seen signs of anything amiss. Those of us who were just miles away, downwind, couldn’t avoid the spiraling, acrid smoke.

I spent much of that day looking out the window.

In those early hours reports were circulating that eight planes had been commandeered, so that for others were possibly still out there, somewhere. I scanned the sky for telltale traces throughout the afternoon, but saw only the tiny streaks of F-16s circling far above us.

The subways had been shut down almost immediately, so no one could have gone anywhere else, even had they wanted to. No one I knew wanted to.

Like many others, I rushed out the next morning to give blood that would never be needed, though we didn’t know that then. Some were walking the streets in surgical masks. I remember thinking: *How*

*odd that anyone could possibly be so prepared.*

Later that week I took my first trip into the “frozen zone,” on foot, with all of downtown cordoned off and closed to traffic. Scattered pedestrians were standing in the middle of the deserted street, just looking up at the lingering smoke and the empty spot in the sky.

We had never seen the city so still.

The building where I taught was turned into a triage center for the families, a place to seek information and put up missing posters. The questions and the posters accumulated steadily as the days wore on; wall space was soon in short supply, so people took to taping messages on the railings along the walkways.

It was impossible to take in all the faces, but whenever I walked by I tried to look closely at a few of them at a time.

Invariably, time passed. I was struck, again and again, by the strength of ordinary people, the steady composure and resolve. I felt safer among all these strangers. *If something else happens, I found myself thinking, I want these folks with me.*

I feel the same way today.

In January I got a letter from someone in Cairo who had read *In the City* by chance, after someone else had left it on a bookshelf in a hotel lobby. It had given him, he said, *another look into the rest of the world*, and he wondered if that was a random act of awareness or part of a plan.

He didn't know, and neither do I. But I'm thankful that someone left my book in that part of the world. Those of us who care about bridging cultures need to communicate with each other.

I have since traveled to European cities that are (to an American) unimaginably ancient and still thriving. In Florence, I walked over the fabled medieval Ponte Vecchio, *the only bridge that the Germans didn't destroy in WWII*, as the guidebooks tell us, and thought about that act of restraint. In Rome, in the ruins of the Forum, I took pictures of pieces of marble and tried to imagine them whole.

I think often now of something the Swedish journalist Stig Dagerman wrote in 1946 after touring devastated German cities at the end of the war. He was walking in the rubble and realized, he says, that the people were the real ruins, caught up in history, bearing its scars, but to his eyes strangely beautiful.

To which I would only add: and still standing, still here.

Colette Brooker  
New York City  
January 21, 2000



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**Who is telling the story? Where does the story take place? How does the story begin? How else could the story have ended?**  
—*Guidelines for Writers*  
author unknown

**The only resource that remains to us is to collect as many facts as we can.**  
—D'Alembert  
*Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia, 1751*

*How does the story begin?*

*One possibility: a young girl dreams about a place she's only heard of in books, in movies, on TV. It's much bigger than the town in which she's grown up. People in that distant place are busy, happy, never bored. They wear long dresses that billow as they walk, or tailored suits and hats. They have jobs; some even have careers. They fall in and out of love, which is natural, considering how many other people are always around.*

*Maybe, the girl thinks, there's room for one more.*

*She takes the heavy encyclopedia off the shelf and looks the city up, traces its streets, its neighborhoods, its odd unpronounceable names. She wonders, ever so hesitantly, what it might be like to live there. And so the mysterious process has begun: the city is reeling her in.*

*That's one way the story might start.*

**What kind of person is a *city person*?**

*One possibility: the kind of person who doesn't feel the need to finish a jigsaw puzzle, who relishes jagged edges and orphaned curves, stray bits of data, pieces of stories parsed from sentences heard overheard on the street.*

*A person who picks up crumpled sections of newspaper in the streetcar or subway and reads haphazardly until the next stop.*

*According to recent reports, 7.4 percent of this city's population has declared itself *agnostic*. For them, the essential nature of the world is unknowable; no matter of talk about first causes or high powers can explain the shape and drift of experience. The remaining 92.6 percent of the population either knows what's going on, which is unlikely, or cannot bring itself to admit that it's flying in the dark.*

*It's those others who interest me.*

*They're the ones who buy the newspaper and try to read it straight through.*

**What sort of person is drawn to the city?**

*One possibility: someone beset by the urge to jump off a cliff, or drive into oncoming traffic, or plunge into claustrophobic proximity to legions of similarly antic beings. If you're bold enough you don't think about it, you just do it, and for the duration of the ride the experience is exhilarating.*



Some health professionals characterize such thinking as distorted cognition, even suicidal ideation. But it might be simpler to term it *the urban mind-set*.

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One gets dizzy just thinking about it.

Who else is drawn to the city?

One possibility: someone who isn't quite sure how he or she got there, doesn't know how it will all come out, but hopes to make the best of it, whatever it ultimately is.

Like the castaway who found himself clinging to a piece of wood, washed up onto shore, having suffered what some would call a *life's shipwreck*, thinking at first that rescue was imminent, not sure some twenty years later.

He would have been very much at home here.

According to one futurist, science would be better served by studying the dwindling reserves of hunter-gatherers in the world than the residents of cities; urban enclaves are only ten thousand or so years old, much too recent to tell us much about the genetic bearing of human beings.

The urban psyche, in other words, may be of little evolutionary value.

But that's still up in the air, and those of us who wonder have only a few thousand years to sort it all out. Soon, experts predict, a majority of the world's population will have gravitated to urban centers. Rural life as we know it will more or less disappear. A major city will form every three minutes, as metastasizing, while the planet's natural resources wither away.

What will it take to survive in the city?

With any luck, at least a few of us may find out.

Fact: from a distance, she seems adrift in the harbor, her diminutive figure almost fragile, hardly distinguishable from the derricks and spires that crowd the horizon around her. I have seen her countless times, of course, up close in books; there she commands one's attention as if by entitlement. But the living city is less respectful of its residents, and one can ride the train to the city's outskirts reaches without even noticing her through the window.

I search her out.

I have come to believe that she is not standing in watchful repose but waving, hoping to catch someone's eye, as if she were weary of her solitude and wished ardently to join us. I watch for her upraised arm; I seem to be the only one who sees her. Before the train rounds out of sight, however, I find myself turning away, for such naked expression of need is somehow unseemly.

Each of the streets in the city, they say, has a story. Some of the buildings lining its routes were erected in another century; at times, when I hardly expect it, I turn a corner and the old world rises up, as if from a vision into view. On one block I see the windows through which scores of young women once leapt to their deaths, fire driving them from factory floor to the cool of the open air, their hair held in place with ribbons of flame as they fell. I know their names: *Jennie, Rose, Rachel, Essie, Ann* . . .

How quiet this place seems now, the screams of that hour followed by years of silence. College students run by without thinking. Sometimes, someone else who remembers places white roses on the

sidewalk.

I've heard that one worker, on that long-ago day, lifted some of the women clear of the stone ledge so that they might drop more easily to the hard ground below. After he had done all he could to ease their way he joined them. He seems to have loved one of the girls; in the end, in an act of intimacy beyond his imagining, he found himself bound, forever, to all of them.

As if in recognition of that fact, fourteen engagement rings were later found on the ashen floor.

I would like to have met that young fellow. Sometimes, when the wind picks up, I think of him walking these streets with me, even as a ghost ever watchful.

Fact: in 1851, a woman was struck and killed by an ice cart while crossing a city street. It was surely not the first calamity of its kind here, but it was the first to be noted in the inaugural issue of what has since become our newspaper of record.

Losing her life, I imagine, was the last thing on the woman's mind as she awoke on that mid-nineteenth century morning. She might have felt even worse had she known that news of her misfortune would be proclaimed in such a public fashion. But what is oddest: that one should be in the wrong place at the wrong time, a victim of cruel mischance, or that a stranger should still shake his head at such a fate some 150 years later?

No one here worries much about ice carts any longer. Our newspaper now recounts other oddities—*Human Foot Found in River, Passers-by Lift Car off Woman Pinned Against Wall, Additional Bombs Found in Apartment of Dead Man*—that some of us read as portents, signs of the worst that may come to pass if we're not careful, or maybe even if we are.

It's the kind of reflection that no thoughtful observer need dwell upon. What can you say, once the ominous possibilities have been entertained, except that anything can happen? That one day, given the odds, something of ours might be found floating waywardly in a river?

It's not surprising that those who fear the unexpected take their own superstitious precautions against it. One young cop on the beat keeps objects tucked, like talismans, in the plastic liner of his cap—a memorial card that reads *in loving memory*, a child's tiny drawing splashed with orange, yellow, and red. He holds them close, as if the thin pieces of paper might shield him from harm.

But apprehension weaves its own symbiotic circles in the city, so that those the cops are afraid of fear them, in turn, even more.

The rest of us work to stay alert. It's possible, of course, to lose perspective. After all, no one takes note of the multiple near misses or close calls that must undoubtedly add up in the course of a given day.

But maybe such lack of awareness is a mercy the city extends, like balm from an unknown benefactor, never expecting thanks.

The young, it seems, have long been considered at special risk in the city. Years ago, those who were more experienced attempted to shield children from the melancholia of city life.

*Handwritten charms to stop children from crying were sometimes taped to lampposts*, our official encyclopedia tells us. We don't have such able remedies today, just an increasing collection of anxieties.

From a recent edition of the newspaper: *Boy, 4, Found Alone on Street*.

Which is scarier: to be sad surrounded by others, or to be sad all by yourself?

Years ago, when I first came upon this place, it seemed to me nothing but noise, an unremitting roar. Now, especially at night, I can distinguish the varying pitch of the city's sounds: the mechanic alarms that wail, stricken, crying out to one another in contagion; the low intermittent rumbles of subterranean cavities; the dull pops on the street that seem to come in clusters. Sometimes, it really sounds like a car that's backfiring.

Occasionally, in the morning, the delicate sounds of small birds cut through the aural clutter. For a moment the city becomes the country. It's unsettling, a confusion of contexts.

But invariably the birds begin to work themselves up, as if they too are disoriented, on the edge of agitation. They seem to quiet down once the traffic picks up, sirens sound, and the city reasserts itself.

Or maybe I just can't hear them anymore.

Have I spoken yet of solitude? If so, I was mistaken, for almost no one is truly alone here. As I move from one district to another, for example, I encounter a succession of former selves. Some of them seem almost like strangers.

As the years pass, I find myself more easily spooked than ever.

It's the same with the city. Look at the old photographs: women in long skirts and parasols, men in bowler hats, horses loping along streets with familiar names that seem almost unrecognizable.

Or the drawings, even older: scattered wooden buildings surrounded by wilderness, space almost aching in its emptiness and expectation.

Some people think this place has no memory, is always starting over. But I don't see it that way.

The city has always been burdened, even haunted, by its history. The city has never been new.

Does the city read anything besides newspapers?

One young man, too little to read on his own, is listening to a story being recited aloud by his mother. They're both standing in a crowded subway car at rush hour. The story revolves around a little house that finds itself in a city, bullied by the tall buildings that have sprouted up all around it. The woman is having some trouble balancing the book in her free hand, but she pushes on, telling her son about the Good Samaritan who wants to tow the little house back to the open land where it belongs. At the close of the story, in its last picture, the house is seen smiling as it ambles down a country road.

*Never again would she be curious about the city. Never again would she want to live there.*

The two arrive at their stop; the woman closes the book and rushes the boy out the door. As I watch them leave, I wonder: was that a happy ending?

Fact: one city woman, a cook by trade, lent her name long ago to the most fearsome disease of her day. It seems that she served the illness up with each meal she prepared for others but didn't seem to suffer from the malady herself.

The first few times they tracked her down she refused to be treated. But she wanted to be left alone, so she pledged to find some other way to support herself.

How could they know she would adopt a false name and keep on with her lethal work?

It seems she never thought to leave the city. The outbreaks continued. She became famous, after a fashion. Children sang songs in the streets about her; newspapers featured her deadly countenance in cartoons.

One day, after some time, they found her once again. She was forcibly confined to an island in the

harbor for the remaining twenty-some years of her life. Though she was considered a guest of the city, she was said to be ungrateful, even surly.

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Maybe she just hadn't envisioned things working out that way.

I have a theory: I believe that this story can actually be considered a case study of the city, of its power, of how it can hold you, seize on something inside you, draw you into its orbit even when you have a thousand chances to get away.

Call it *the epidemiology of the urban condition*.

Most of the time, you feel fine. You work, play, appear willingly in public, talk to strangers, make idle plans for the future. You're used to the rush, the edge, you may even think you need it. Your blind resolve is infectious.

But one day you begin to suspect that there might be another way of living, another kind of life. But then, however, it is often too late to start yet another story.

*Besides, it can't hurt to stick around just a little while longer.*

That's when you know the city has hooked you. Eventually, over time, you come to realize that you're even more ill than you thought, for you simply cannot conceive of your life having worked out in any other way.

What else is the city reading?

One young Latino in a bookstore, arms tight in a T-shirt, riffs through *Self-Destructive Behavior*, oblivious to the ongoing commotion around him. Other readers: a man on the subway, where most of the city's reading is done, carefully working his way through a xeroxed pamphlet entitled *Safe Training*; two young women, one parsing *Good and Evil*, the other *Vocabulary Building for the College-Bound*; an older woman reading and rereading a single page of *HTML for Dummies*; the middle-aged Indian whose eyes never leave the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, no matter how the train pitches and rolls as it thunders on; a young Spanish woman gripping an oversized book with large print and colorful pictures, underlining passages with pen and ruler, highlighting the words *Mialgro* and *Jesus* with a yellow marker; a Hasid reading the Talmud, its tiny black and white figures unfolding in intricate patterns across the page.

Some aren't reading at all, like the young woman who holds tightly on to *Help for Shy People*, her eyes darting from face to face as if she's afraid that someone might speak. Or the disheveled woman who struts up and down the car, her voice breaking off into growls and barks, who falls silent as she spies the torn copy of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* on the floor and gives it several violent kicks, sending it into a series of spirals, the book's spine finally splitting so that it breaks apart, at which point she turns away.

Each of these city dwellers is studying for something. But the one who may learn the most, I suspect, is a young woman who has recently decided, on a whim, to read only the books that she sees others reading at random. Though she is working her way through a degree-granting institution, the course in the arbitrary that she pursues in her spare time may be the most valuable of all. For what better way to live in the city than to surrender, unresisting, to its rhythms?

If nothing else, she is preparing herself for a lifetime of learning.

At any given moment, much of the city is lost or missing, or so it seems from the signs that appear

its citizens appeal for attention. This is how the city speaks to itself—strangers post homemade fliers on telephone poles, bulletin boards, sides of buildings, storefronts, or the slapdash wooden fences that flank construction sites. Sometimes, the signs are done in careful block letters, sometimes in cursive script that reveals, in its wild loops and curls, unmistakable signs of distress.

*Lost, found, lost, found*, the mournful pattern repeats itself.

For every instance of exhilaration (*Young Miniature Poodle Found—Encontramos un Poodle Pequeno*) a new sorrow erupts for someone else (*Lost Bird—grey and white cockatiel last seen on Waverly & 6th!*).

Sometimes, it's the less tangible pieces of one's life that one loses:

MISSING ART WORK

Reward, no questions asked

It means so much to me as an artist!

Occasionally, a single shoe is marooned in the city, like the blue plastic beach sandal, adult-size that lies on a much-traveled summer sidewalk, the crowd making a careful circuit around it. Or the woman's dress pump that lands, askew, not far from something covered by a sheet next to a fire hydrant. The shoe seems to be posing, if reluctantly, for the picture that appears the next day in the paper. It is captioned *A Lonely Ending*.

Sometimes, one sees the moment of severance itself play out before one's eyes. A woman leaves the subway in a state of distraction. She realizes, as if awakening, that she has left her package behind. She turns back. Passengers attempt to pass it to her as she reaches out, but it's too late, the doors close.

The package, orphaned, hurtles on without her.

Sometimes, of course, it's people who are lost.

*Missing: Girl, age 16, height 5'7", 135 lbs., eyes & hair dark brown.*

Sometimes there are names, sometimes pictures on the posters. The subject is usually smiling, as if nothing like this could ever happen, as if no life could be thrown so inexplicably off course.

Every day there are more signs of the missing: another sixteen-year-old girl, a twenty-one-year-old boy *last seen on March 11*.

Meanwhile the city, as always, remains alert, ever on the lookout for these lost parts of itself.

In one old book I have read of a land where texts would appear, letter by letter, in the dialect most familiar to the reader, so that the same book could be understood by a multitude of strangers who lacked a common language.

What an odd thought: *no translation necessary*.

Merchants in this foreign place traded not in gold, silk, or silver but in the more ethereal commodity we have come to call *information*.

They likened such knowledge to light.

It's appealing, this idea, the unknown stripped, layer by layer, to a state of complete transparency. It offers an antidote to all that is dark, clouded, and difficult to decipher, to the natural state of the city.

That ancient mode of exchange is in some ways familiar to us, for here we also value information. For instance, ~~there's money to be had for information leading to the arrest and indictment~~ of the responsible for the explosion that occurred outside a deserted office building at 5:50 A.M. on late November 9.

The known facts have been laid out on a flier: *Call this number, you don't have to give your name*. It's posted haphazardly, as if it won't be up there very long.

Many city people know a little, a few lucky ones know a lot.

*I know because I've been there*, a man on the street declaims to the world at large, his arm chopping the air.

*I knew it right away from his face*, a woman whispers to a companion.

*I see where it's at, I see what's happening*, yet another seer mutters, mostly to himself.

But some are fated to remain befuddled, like the middle-aged man who's speaking to a friend. He's been telling a story, but it isn't going well.

*I said, "What do you mean?"*

*And he said, "You know what I mean."*

At that the speaker pauses, searching his friend's face. Then he falls silent, as if even now he cannot understand just where he went wrong.

For those who have lost their way entirely in the city there are consolations, like those conveyed in the words *Christo Salva* that are emblazoned, as if for solace, on a yellow neon cross that shines out from a city rooftop. Like most such signs it dims in the daylight, when darkness doesn't seem quite so overwhelming.

Fact: someone has stolen almost six hundred books from a celebrated university library.

There are still four million other volumes in the prestigious stacks, an ample supply of reading material, but the theft of accumulated thought on such a scale has proven especially disturbing.

The university librarians, experts in such matters, have deemed the works in question *irreplaceable*. We know so little, after all, and the loss of so many books raises the worrisome specter of our knowing even less.

The suspect is a man in his mid-forties, no longer affiliated with the university, but a perennial student even so. It seems he was something of a philosopher. The three purloined titles named in the newspaper indicate an interest in arcane thinking of the sixteenth century.

But we know nothing of the 567 or so other titles that he took.

Who can say what he was really ruminating upon in his dark apartment?

Someone else, it seems, has used a razor to cut old maps out of an ancient atlas stored in yet another university repository, leaving a series of holes in its painstakingly rendered pages.

Apparently there's a market for such antiquities, for these fragile sheets of paper upon which someone long ago inked in the limits of the known world.

In this case, the felon has been apprehended but the maps have disappeared. The presiding judge, at the sentencing, talks of the *loss to history* that the theft represents.

Someone has to speak for the missing parts of the puzzle.

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Fact: this is the city that produced the country's first master showman, a name now synonymous with con artistry and, to a lesser extent, the circus. He was an early proponent of the freak show, a mode of presentation that he almost single-handedly brought into being.

He collected unnatural specimens of all sorts in his museum. Strange dogs, mutant livestock, mustachioed women, tiny men, and other improbable creatures were displayed in curious clumps.

In this collection of *living curiosities* he placed scale models of nineteenth century world cities—Paris, Dublin, Jerusalem—as if to suggest that the city itself would be the sideshow of the future, the place where the truly odd ones would one day convene of their own accord.

We have a miniature version of our own city on permanent display in the slightly seedy remains of what was once a grand exhibition. But few people now visit the 895,000 tiny structures built to scale the city within a city that mirrors in its angles and curves the exact topography of its parent.

One can see little bridges, little blocklike buildings, tiny cylindrical water towers, a child-sized city laid out in wood and plastic.

It's the world's largest such simulacrum.

The setup is eerily similar to what one sees from the observation deck of what was once the world's tallest building and still reigns as its eighth wonder. From that height, on the ribbon of street below, tiny yellow cabs disgorge little stick people who turn into teeny pedestrians, bent upon itsy-bit errands and encounters.

From this perspective multiple scenarios suggest themselves for each move and feint on the ground.

Is the ant-sized person who's running across the street late for an appointment, or is she being pursued? Will the oncoming toy cars slow down or will they accelerate when they finally see her?

The city has always been half imagined.

Early in another century, when settlers still confined themselves to the tip of the island and rarely ventured into the wilderness beyond, the streets to come were laid out in hypothetical rows of rectangular boxes, the island subdivided into blocks, cross streets, and avenues. It was a vision of order set out in a grand design. Three streets a year were settled in that era as the city slowly grew in itself, and fantasy became fact.

Today one artist, a city employee, also works in miniature, rendering models of crime scenes for the authorities, painstakingly constructing tiny subway platforms, stores with toy cash registers and counters, short streets on which midget police cars are parked at crazy angles, stubby street lamps providing just a little light. The sites are reconstructed with a jeweler's care and precision. Both criminal and victim are missing in these models.

Some things, it seems, can't be imagined at all.

In a disaster movie I once watched that landmark building tilt sideways until it toppled, great clouds of dust rising from the simulated crush of stone. The real thing took seven million man-hours to build; the movie version came down in less than a minute.

It's all a question of scale.

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to walk around in our tiny model city, one foot hovering over a whole city block. I would, of course, be careful, lest I crush something that could not easily be recreated.

One day, on the street, I hear a partial description of a suspect coming in over a policeman's radio as he passes: *White T-shirt, blue pants*. At least I presume it's a suspect. And, for that matter, a description of a suspect. The cops begin to swivel around, eyeing the crowds, and I start looking too, looking for someone who might be young, might be male, wearing an outfit that has suddenly become suspect itself. But there are more white T-shirts and blue pants here than I can keep track of. Several possibles walk by brazenly; they seem almost to saunter as they undergo the inspection of the two in the blue shirts, blue pants, black shoes.

I am suddenly reminded of the time I needed to find a particular clerk in a store. I wasn't getting anywhere with a general approach. I decided to refine my description: *The one with the bad rug*. The obstinate salesman nodded. *That's Bob*. And off he went to get Bob.

The city is teeming with white T-shirts, blue pants, black shoes, bad rugs. Also blue shirts, gray slacks, short skirts. Most of the time that's all we see of the myriad strangers we pass, and most of the time that's enough.

Recently, in a neighborhood I had once lived in, I saw a face staring at me from a poster attached to a light pole. Or rather staring past me, in the oddly impersonal manner of such sketches. *Wanted for murder: Male, white, 38-42, 5' 9" to 6', sandy blond hair thinning on top*. He is wearing glasses in the simple line drawing, this man who is losing his hair, who stands accused of a crime I can only intermittently conceive of committing, whose likeness has now become the latest addition to our growing urban portrait gallery.

I probably never saw him while I lived in this area. But now I have one more face on the street to watch out for.

Fact: someone in an apartment high on an upper floor is looking out at the city from a window, idly, in the dead of winter. Her gaze moves from the view to the book she is lazily skimming and back again. Sudden movement from the apartments across the way catches her eye, she looks out, and before she can even cry out she sees a neighbor she will never know rush through her open balcony door and leap right over the railing.

It happens so suddenly, the witness thinks she almost imagined it.

For a year or so to come, she'll tell a few others about that moment, the one she simply can't shake. In this way she will pass the picture on to other people, who will nod their heads as they imagine it, wondering, solemnly, *just what are the odds of that?*

Sometimes now I too see the woman as she leaps into her inadvertent arabesque, her white nightgown melting into the soft light snow on the street. Soon enough a crowd will gather, strangers will gape from a distance, cars with sharp piercing sirens will assemble, the city will respond to and absorb yet another injury to its very being.

But in that moment before she's identified in official jargon as a *jumper*, or declared *dead* by the medical examiner, she lies in limbo.

And those of us who never knew her watch the spectacular fall, over and over again.



Occasionally, people get pushed into action, the decision is made for them, as with the young woman who lived just three years in the city before a man described as deranged shoved her into the path of a subway train.

She was killed instantly.

The city itself is subsequently depicted as *on edge* in a wire story that makes its way around the country. For a time, fear of chance seems to snake through the streets.

The young woman's dreams and aspirations are documented at length in press coverage over succeeding days, as the shock of the story spreads.

*She loved the city*, her stricken family reminds itself.

In thousands of homes, bars, and hotels the odds against calamity are cautiously recalculated. Most agree: *it's a million to one*.

Eventually, the shaken city recovers its composure and the woman's hopes are passed on, without ceremony, to somebody else.

*So who is telling the story?*

*I suppose it makes sense to say that I am telling the story, reflecting on my limited experience and willing it into something larger, working assiduously from one small piece of the puzzle.*

*But wait. That doesn't really seem right. I can hardly hope to speak for millions I've never met; I can sometimes hardly speak for myself.*

*Here's a thought: maybe it's the city that's telling the story. Why not? It's been around a lot longer than I have, you might say it's seen it all, what better qualification than such intimate acquaintance?*

*And yet that's not quite right either. The city is pridefully dark, cryptic, it seems almost to have a vested interest in its own opacity. What would remain of its power if its mystique were so easily explained away?*

*No, the answer must lie elsewhere. What's left, once the city and its subjects fall silent? Which voice persists, like an ancient, faltering life-form, unwilling to expire?*

*Who is telling the story?*

*Maybe the story is telling itself.*

Fact: Almost forty million phone calls are made each day in the city, more and more of them conducted (it would seem) on the street. Lately, the city seems to be overrun with people speaking to unseen others, their conversations cast like invisible threads across the brick and concrete chasms.

It seems as if only the truly marginal are still tethered to a phone booth.

On one afternoon, at least three of the forty million calls are made simultaneously by young men in suits scurrying along an east-side street, juggling cell phones and briefcases in their free arms. At that moment, far above them, on an upper floor of a renowned building of burnished bronze designed by Mies van der Rohe, an older man, jacket tossed aside, stands loosely cradling a phone as he looks out at the scene below, his lean body framed by the thin bronze bands of the elegant full-length window.

He seems relaxed, as if unconcerned about the anxious scramble beneath him.

But not everyone has arrived, as it happens, and many still only aspire to windows and upper floors.

*I wasn't able to schmooze my way into it*, a young man farther downtown explains insistently into his cell phone, as if talking to a toddler.

*I don't know. That's the scary part, I don't know*, yet another whispers as he paces, cigarette in hand, across the cramped width of the sidewalk.

Chances are the schmoozer can take care of himself, but I wonder about the other one; life is hard here for those who confess their fears too freely.

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The city has always had almshouses, shadowy repositories for those considered strikingly unsuccessful. In the early years, the impoverished were categorized as *paupers*, *prostitutes*, *criminals*, or *mental patients*, and then put into workhouses, if they were potentially productive, or poorhouses, if all such hope had been lost.

Today, we divide ourselves into *haves* and *have-nots*, a more matter-of-fact reckoning that has lately become fashionable. Such stark distinctions are easier to gauge. There are some who have power, wealth, and security, and there are others who simply don't. Even in this rough reckoning, however, the boundaries sometimes blur: those who have more than they ever hoped for never feel that they have quite enough, and some who have very little feel lucky to have that even so.

But nothing is certain in this new world city, save that some of the oldest truths still seem to hold. *Only the little people pay taxes*, one of the haves has told us; *the poor will always be with us*, other experts have explained. Meanwhile, the notion of a widening gap grows ever more pervasive, and frightens even the stoutest members of the vanishing middle class.

*You're going to put me in the poorhouse*, the especially anxious proclaim. It is the age-old dream come back to haunt us, the darker aspect of all that we desire.

Lately, it seems as if much of the city is up for sale. Those who hope for some return on their investment display unwanted possessions on stoops (*Tag sale—misc. treasures & chatchkas*). Though shown to its best advantage, most of the merchandise seems forlorn, as if it has always been old.

Some have decided to leave (*Moving Sale—our loss, your gain*) and offer as expiation an assortment of lamps, end tables, small appliances, and clothes, *all in excellent condition*.

On the corporate level, leases trade hands in accelerated cycles (*EVERYTHING MUST GO!*), though some seem caught in a lingering last-chance limbo. Others have found a more secure market to trade—*We Export to the West Indies*—and do a modest but steady business.

Of course, these are the small companies, the rustic ones still built of bricks and mortar, the visible spectrum of the urban economy. As a general rule, the truly powerful concerns can't be seen by the unaided eye.

Meanwhile, on a downtown street, commerce is incarnated in a young Russian immigrant who hawked posters of Lenin, \$20, translation free of charge (*Power to Soviets, Peace to People, Land to Peasants, Factories to Workers*). He does a brisk business; even the buttons from now-ancient military uniforms have been successfully recast as *chatchkas*.

Another vendor chants softly in the heat as he makes a desultory attempt to catch the eye of those who briskly pass by. His lilting island voice can hardly be heard above the traffic.

Years ago, the cries of street peddlers were banned, but today so much noise wells up from the city itself that no one would bother to suppress a single errant song.

Meanwhile, on side streets, the insinuating tune of an icecream truck plays on and on and on. And so the market sings of itself to anyone who will listen.

We have a new term for time: 24/7.

~~*I'm working like a maniac right now*~~, a professional woman declares to a friend who no longer knowingly, their paths having crossed during a rash of weekend errands. The speaker seems almost boastful as she rushes about; it might be said that frenzy suits her.

A man on the run expounds his philosophy to an acolyte: *Winning's a habit, just like losing's a habit*. The younger man, craning his head to hear, lags two full steps behind.

But there are those for whom old habits die hard, like the fellow who peddles a paper in the subway—*AM working, this IS a job*—as he plays to a crowd of unresponsive commuters. He hasn't varied his pitch in years, and no one pays him much attention.

Another underground performer squeezes the life out of a love song, a tattered sign held up for all to see (*My mother has multiple sclerosis and I am blind in one eye*). I'm more familiar with his rendition of the pop tune than I am with the original. Lately, though, he seems to be rushing the song as if some deadline were looming, as if he, too, were working like a maniac.

It wasn't always that way. On a hot day in the 1940s, during the kind of week where one sees the word *sizzles* over and over in newspaper headlines, almost half the city went to the beach—three million people in shorts and bathing suits declaring a holiday from daily life.

No one would dare to take such liberties now.

It used to be that strangers would declare *Thank God It's Friday* on streets and in bars, but I haven't heard that communal benediction in quite a while. Life in this twenty-first century city has been proclaimed a meritocracy, and no one seems to relax much anymore.

Even those who have time on their hands don't feel easy about it.

*This ain't no fuckin' movie*, a woman shouts into the air one morning as she walks up and down the subway platform. No one pays her much attention. Minutes later, in midtown, a well-known Hollywood star waits for a light as he stands at a corner on Sixth Avenue; at the same moment, a young kid not fifty feet away attempts to ride off with a bike he's just cut free of its lock. But something goes wrong—the bike's owner rushes out of the coffeeshop, wiping his hands on his shirt, screaming at the kid who thought he might escape unobserved but who knows better now, as all eyes turn toward his thin, trembling body and he begins to let go of the bike.

The star, huddled into himself, is the only one who isn't watching the spectacle as it unfolds.

Both celebrity and would-be criminal, it seems, wish to disappear. *This ain't no fuckin' movie*. But the street is no place for the shy. The rest of us, who now constitute a crowd, are free of inhibition and expect to be entertained.

The city as movie set: I happen upon one such scene, in a celebrated train terminal, while just passing through one day. A few dozen actor/commuters stand on their marks, in midstride, waiting for the director to call *Action!* Then briefcases and overcoats swing in effortless synchronicity.

They perform this banal sequence repeatedly while those of us in the crowd watch, as if enraptured. It's quite a sight, no doubt, city rubes gawking at faux sophisticates.

I stumble upon another shoot in a downtown neighborhood while on an otherwise unmemorable errand. Most of the passersby have been herded behind barriers and are to be held until the camera stops rolling, but I am allowed, magisterially, to move on through.

*Keep walking and don't look into the camera*, an attendant in headset hisses.

~~I keep walking. I've been studying for this all my life.~~

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What kind of story have I become part of? I may wonder, in idle moments, but I will likely never know.

Fact: the city is so vast that it dwarfs local disturbances. Neighborhoods can be convulsed and yet the city itself remains calm, unconcerned. It must be frustrating for those trying to get someone's attention, like the forty thousand construction workers, greatly aggrieved, who shut down seven square miles of midtown one afternoon. Plasterers, electricians, and pipefitters, all waving signs and shouting.

It must have been something to see.

Of course, most of us didn't see it.

On another occasion a bomb exploded in one of the most recognizable buildings in the world. The responsible had tried to topple the structure, but apparently little had proceeded according to plan.

I only learned of the incident that evening when I looked out my window and realized that the building itself was missing, its usual place in the skyline nothing but inky darkness.

I was disoriented enough to turn on the television for news. I learned then that the rest of the world already knew all about it.

Throughout the night I watched helicopters, lights pulsing, circle the blinded building like birds of prey. They'd already missed most of the excitement, but weren't about to let anything else slip by them.

Soon enough, it was back to regular programming for the rest of us.

On certain days it seems as if this aging city is crumbling all around us. Bits of bridge buckle, underground pipes, long buried, crack and burst, the streets turn into wild, unnavigable rivers; facades of buildings fall away, so that chunks of brick splatter onto those below like drops of red, muddy rain. Fires flare up and smoke darkens the sky.

The cautious walk the streets with care, knowing that the apocalypse, these days, comes in many guises.

Even the experts seem to concur. *Who knows what's going to happen?* a highly placed FBI official remarks, for the record. *It would be foolish for us not to prepare.*

But we have always prepared. After the last great war had ended, and peace seemed at hand, the vigilant began to look ahead to the next conflagration. Plans were made to convert buses into ambulances, children were taught to dive under desks, dehydrated foodstuffs and candles were stockpiled in shelters. But over time, even the anxious wearied of such rehearsals and began, inevitably, to relax. Eventually, someone suggested that the city sell off its air raid sirens.

But recent analyses have indicated that the city is woefully unprepared for even the mildest modern catastrophes. Microbes and other invisible agents of doom pose the new threat, we are told, more lethal than we can imagine. *The spores of anthrax can live for centuries*, our newspaper informs us. Mock attacks and defense drills are once again in fashion, and volunteer actors agree to collapse on cue so that emergency workers, costumed in cumbersome white survival suits, can pick them up on stretchers and carry them off to shelters.

And officials in neighboring localities have made plans to block off their borders so that the city will be sealed and left to itself, should the worst occur, whatever the worst should prove to be.

Meanwhile, during the most recent crisis, one could for months monitor the *Millennium Clock*: a large billboard-sized display that counted down the days, hours, minutes, and seconds to the advent of the year 2000.

Our computers weren't programmed to handle the sudden onrush of zeros, the experts told us, not one thought ahead years ago when the future seemed still so far away.

But soon enough, they warned, everything that depends upon computers would simply shut down: the electrical grids would fail, the banking system would collapse. No traffic lights, no gas pumps, no ATMs, no cash registers. Chaos would envelop us.

And planes would fall from the sky, some of them surely landing on the city.

Each of us was encouraged to put aside stores: three hundred pounds of grain, sixty pounds of sugar, five pounds of salt, twenty pounds of fat or oil for the first year. And keep hard copies of all business records. And learn to use hand tools.

Meanwhile, while waiting, I would wonder: will it be a long, graceful glide through the air or will the planes drop, like a rock, straight down? In stores that autumn, one could buy a book of transcripts from the flight data recorders found at the site of several recent crashes. A number of the terse exchanges ended in a colloquialism that most of us have uttered at some time ourselves:

*Shit.*

Maybe that's all we need to know, and maybe we've always known it.

Though I have seen rock-sized hailstones pelt the streets in late spring, and traces of toxic materials rise up from the bubbling asphalt in the steaming summer, it isn't weather that I worry about. We seem to be safe from the tornadoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis that threaten other places. We will not become Pompeii, or lost Atlantis, or one of those infamous towns leveled by the wayward hand of an angry deity.

Even if intercontinental missiles from hostile powers are aimed directly at us, and we obligingly offer world-class terrorists an easy target, we will probably fall, in the end, from within, on that day when all the worn buildings and bridges and tunnels collapse together, in one last paroxysm of ruin. Only then will the aging city be allowed to rest.

Who else has been lost?

The laborer buried in concrete at a construction site, his absence noted only after work has broken off for the day, his shaken coworkers left to relive each moment of the shift in their minds. The authorities declare the site a crime scene, just in case.

The judge who jumped into a cab after dinner in midtown decades ago and was never seen again.

And, possibly, the female aviator who hoped to land on a tiny island in the South Pacific but veered off course and just may have ended up here. Why not? *One ocean led naturally to another*, she once wrote about her early travels, and it would not be so fanciful to think that she might have acted on impulse once again. The city, after all, seems always to have attracted the adventurous.

Of course, this is sheer speculation.

One day, no doubt, someone will find the wreckage, the slivers of aluminum coiled around the

remains of the antique radio, or the bits of leather jacket pinned down by bone. It's only been six years or so, after all, not as long as the average lifetime, and we have the tools now to detect even the most elusive traces of ambition.

If the plane is in the South Pacific, its discovery may take a very long while. But if the plane is somewhere in the city, sooner or later someone is bound to find it.

It's difficult for anything to remain hidden here forever.

Among the city's notable innovations: the country's first roller coaster and its first artificial respirator. One could be forgiven for imagining that the two devices had been designed by the same person.

Wouldn't the same kind of mind conceive of poison and antidote, shock and sedation?

Those who have lived here long enough are used to the swings. It might even be said that only the extremes register, that nothing in the more even middle can command much attention.

The city invention I cherish the most, however, is the simple Yule Log, a crackling simulation of holiday warmth that apartment dwellers could experience just by turning on the television.

It was conceived in the 1950s and was wildly popular from the outset. People would watch the orange glow for hours and fantasize a suburban fireplace.

But times change.

Amusement parks have become dangerous; simulated fright has turned to real as riders, lately, have been thrown from coasters across the country with unsettling regularity.

And last year someone took the Yule Log off the air. That kind of shock might be dangerous as well, in ways we cannot yet fathom.

I sometimes walk past the place where the country's first world's fair was held, over a hundred years ago.

You wouldn't know it now, but someone erected an iron and glass structure here that was hailed as the essence of modernity, the building of the future. And from all accounts it was astonishing: elegant and delicate, flooded with light. People took to calling it a Crystal Palace.

Who would have thought it would burn to the ground in a mere fifteen minutes?

And is it coincidence that the city's first amusement park also burned down, while a million people watched?

*But that's what happens to wood, some might say. Aren't glass and metal supposed to be stronger?*

Well, all we can say for sure is that the future isn't fireproof. And maybe it won't be much fun.

Still, in our dreams we design the city of the next millennium, with sleek glass and steel towers that rise like needles into the air. At this very moment, visionaries in five countries around the globe are racing to construct the world's tallest building. Our city of the here-and-now is littered with structures that once claimed that crown, each supplanted by something taller, each reclaimed, in turn, by the entangling hold of the terrestrial.

Meanwhile, in parts of the city today one can find all sorts of short, squat buildings gutted, the blackened windows looking out onto the street like dark empty eyes.

They never had a chance at the title, and they have always known it.

Halfway around the world, in a tiny country that has recently undergone a revolution, the ruling

authorities have set out to smash the country's televisions—not those secreted in caves or villages but the thousands of sets hidden away in the cities.

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The crusaders aim to *kill urban communication*, a Western expert states.

Well, it would never work here.

Say you could confiscate the televisions, radios, cell phones, computers, and CB sets that abound the city; shut down the networks and cable channels; board up the subways, airports, and bus stations and close off the streets.

Say you could force people to stay away from their windows, so that no one could speak to or sign anyone else, and then separate members of families or households, even at that your work would have just begun.

People will always talk, if only to themselves.

Even if you could reduce the sound of the city to a single voice, it would still be a veritable Tower of Babel.

But even conventional communication isn't always necessary.

This is, after all, the place to which the most famous deaf, dumb, and blind woman of her time would rush when she felt a little lonely. She sometimes thought of herself as a shadow, moving about in a dream, but she knew that on her trips to the city she would awaken again to the world.

It was a kind of resurrection.

She especially liked riding the subway. No need to dream there, not in a place where eight thousand people can spill out of a single train in less than sixty seconds. No need for speech or sight, such partial capacities, in that circumstance; one needs only a willingness to merge into a single being, more than merely human.

She was a natural. She became, in a sense, the quintessential city person.

Sometimes, I attempt to practice random acts of awareness, if only to dispel, for a time, my abiding sense of unknowing.

But just as often I miss things.

If I had been alert one day not long ago, I might have taken notice of the thief who pilfered 14,000 quarters collected from the 65,000 parking meters that line the city streets. He was caught with 295 of those quarters in his pockets. They must have weighed him down, made it difficult to walk; an observant witness surely would have noticed his labored shuffle or heard the loud jangling that marked his every movement.

But no one, it seems, saw or heard anything at all.

The fellow was caught, finally, by a surveillance camera in a grocery store. I'd been in another part of the city altogether, watching something else, like the slow-witted mark on the street who never sees the pea as it's switched from shell to shell.

Some time before that, the Dow fell 512 points in one day, the dollar thirteen percent in one week. Much of the city went into mourning for the market. I hadn't seen that one coming either, though financial convulsions are increasingly common, and currencies—the yen, the deutsche mark, the ruble, the dollar—are said to plunge, slide, and crash as if almost animate. Some follow the ups and downs of these elements as if they were auguries.

Others are not certain they really want to know.

Fact: *Customer Shoots 3 in Crowded Restaurant*, the newspaper announces one day. One minute

cocktail conversation, idle fiddling with swizzle sticks, plates of bread or salad passed around; the next minute loud pops, screams, the sharp tinkle of shattered china. Liquids seep from glasses and cups, while ice cubes spin in manic fashion across the floor.

Those customers who are unharmed hardly dare to move, as if trying to stay with a story that's been interrupted, ever so rudely, in midsentence.

There's no way to prepare for surprise, per se. It's not as if one could know ahead of time (*why fu about what to order? I won't be able to finish it*). But once the unlikely has occurred, it seems inevitable, as if the whole of one's day has been heading straight for that one moment.

It's nature's way of sustaining the narrative.

Fact: Six thousand bolts of lightning per minute strike somewhere on the planet's surface. One day one of them happened to land near me. I hadn't been on water, or under a tree, or in any of the usual places, but the bolt sought me out even so, 1.5 million volts of electricity, more or less, directed at my little room on the top floor of a building indistinguishable from all the others on the block.

It was hard to avoid a sense of being singled out.

One minute silence, the next the loudest crack I have ever heard, the kind of sound conveyed in the large cartoonish letters that spell out *WHAM!* or *ZAP!* in comic books. Then a bluish glow that sizzles along the baseboards.

For a moment I thought about calling someone, but the phone line had been knocked out.

I went down to the street. A few others were looking up at the place where the bolt had struck just above my window. I looked up too. There wasn't much to say.

Much later, I came across a headline in the paper: *When Lightning Strikes, Lives are Changed*.

But how, I wonder. How?

One night, on my way home, I happen upon something that has just begun to burn in the middle of the street. It flares up like a bonfire, there's something beautiful about it, the yelloworange spikes of flame piercing the midnight sky. *What is it*, I wonder. A stranger who's come out of his apartment in his pajamas approaches me.

*What is it?* he asks, as if I have the answer.

I peer more intently at the fireball. Anything made of fabric or flesh has already been burnt away but I think I can see, through the flames, the metallic outline of what could once have been a windshield.

*Maybe it's a car.*

If so, it's impossible to tell whether anyone is in it.

The fire trucks arrive. Once the water hits the flames we're driven back by noxious clouds of smoke. After a few minutes the bystanders begin to drift away, as does the smoke itself. Even the firefighters are ready to move on. I'm the only one left who's still looking at the now-sodden lump of something.

The next day I return to the scene. Nothing's left of the night before except a dark stain on the street and a blackened bit of rubber. The carcass itself has long since been hauled away. In another day or so a good spring rain will wash the street clean.

Just weeks later, a neighbor two doors down is killed in a midday fire that takes seven fire trucks



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