

An excerpt from

CLOSING THE BOOK

Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature



by
JOELLE RENSTROM

AN EXCERPT FROM THE
ESSAY “MAKING LUCK”

from

CLOSING
THE BOOK

TRAVELS IN LIFE, LOSS,
AND LITERATURE

JOELLE RENSTROM



Making Luck

“Luck arranged things so that a baby named Malachi Constant was born the richest child on Earth. On the same day, luck arranged things so that a blind grandmother stepped on a roller skate at the head of a flight of cement stairs, a policeman’s horse stepped on an organ grinder’s monkey, and a paroled bank robber found a postage stamp worth nine hundred dollars in the bottom of a trunk in his attic.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*

Three days after I moved to New York City, ready to conquer adulthood and more confident than ever that I was truly the ruler of my own destiny, the sound of an airplane flying into the World Trade Center woke me up. I turned on the television and, for a while, forgot I was actually there, that this was happening outside my door. I didn’t know which way the avenues ran or where to go when bad things happened. I didn’t know anyone except for my cat, who ventured out from wherever she’d been hiding from the city noise, sniffing the new silence.

From my roof I watched traffic backing up across

bridges, towers smoking like unfiltered cigarettes, the stunned and stilted peeling away from the carnage. After the first tower fell, I decided to head north. A cab already carrying four passengers stopped for me. They all knew people who might be dead; they all also had families and friends to be with. I haunted the line between lucky and unlucky.

During the next dusty stretch of days, I walked the eerily empty streets wearing a surgical mask pressed into my hand by a Red Cross volunteer, watched by the hundreds of faces on missing posters. Everyone was exceedingly polite—there was no honking at busy intersections, no birds being flipped, no expletives. Most of us were shell-shocked, but staying numb took work. The bars were packed; when we were drunk, everything made equally little sense.

The economic repercussions of September 11 landed like a suckerpunch—we all saw it coming just in time to realize there was no avoiding it. Hiring freezes and layoffs swept the city. The nonprofit organization I was supposed to work for withdrew their offer. My bank account hemorrhaged. The owner of the apartment I was subletting sold the building, and I needed a new place to live.

A few days after 9/11, I sat on my bedroom floor, overwhelmed by the mess around me. If you've ever

put off cleaning your room for months, you know what this is like. You look around, disaster everywhere, and can't figure out how or where to start. I called my best friend, Mark, for consolation.

What he said was, "well, we do make our own luck."

As the words registered, I felt accused and insulted and shamed. What could I possibly have done to cause the apartment problem, the job retraction, the flying of planes into buildings? He wasn't blaming me for September 11, but he was suggesting that I fit into it somehow, or that it fit into me. I argued that I had no control over the events happening around me. Yet what he said disconcerted me; it presupposed that I was a powerful force—an unbelievable and terrifying proposition. And I had to wonder: if we make our own luck, what does that say about the people who were on the airplanes or trapped in the towers?

This is the same question I ask myself whenever something horrible happens to someone, especially someone I know. Especially me.

* * *

I had no job and no friends, which left too much time to think, and transformed 9/11 into a diving board for endless ruminations. This tragedy wasn't

about my personal philosophies or attempts to square myself with the ways of the world, but I didn't know what else to do with it. By the time it occurred to me to donate blood, all the blood banks in the city were full. Mayor Giuliani told residents that there were too many volunteers at Ground Zero and asked us to check back in a couple weeks. Even when I wandered the streets, my mind moved more than my feet. I couldn't clean up the mess and I couldn't stop thinking about what it all meant.

When marathon sessions in front of the television grew overwhelming and tiresome, I moved to the bookshelf to seek comfort in the familiar wear of spines and the smell of old paper. Certain books had morphed in meaning in the past week, such as *Skinny Legs and All*, *White Noise*, and most of my science fiction; the cover of *Underworld* had become uncanny and foreboding. In my head, I posed questions to my library as though consulting an oracle. My thumb grazed the purple cover of Kurt Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan* and stopped. The idea that the foibles of luck render obsessing about one's purpose in life a waste of time and energy resonated deeply. A couple hundred pages in, the protagonist, Malachi Constant, finally realizes that he has no control over the trajectory of his life:

“‘What happened to you?’ said the congregation...

‘I was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all,’ he said.

The cheering and dancing began again.”

As I skimmed through, Vonnegut seemed to pat my knee and tell me that nothing was my fault. Like Malachi Constant, my present circumstance was created by a series of accidents, dice rolls, short straws. Bad luck. Initially, I found the idea comforting—what was Mark’s flippant psychobabble next to the infinite wisdom of Kurt Vonnegut?

If luck is the force that moves the world, not everything is about me, or you, or anyone—perhaps not much is. As I stood, my hand pressed to the book as though it were a Bible, I realized that accepting my luck, or the sheer arbitrariness of my situation, was tantamount to admitting that there was nothing I do, now and ever. While there’s a certain comfort in powerlessness and in the idea that all we can do is keep going, I found it problematically passive.

If we embrace blind luck, we cede our agency and disconnect ourselves from cause and effect. Luck removes us from personal fault and responsibility, but it feels like an empty explanation, a cop out. 9/11 was a consequence of years of logistical planning, as

well as hatred toward the U.S. and its policies. The towers fell because planes flew into them; that part wasn't luck. The haziness comes in when I consider the people involved in 9/11 through no choice of their own—the people on the planes, in the towers, on the sidewalk. Even people like me, outsiders suddenly thrust into a crumbling labyrinth to discover that the path people had used to find their way before didn't exist anymore. All of us who felt disoriented, like we'd been strapped half-conscious into a seat on the Tilt-A-Whirl, unable to get off.

In *Sirens of Titan*, Malachi Constant fumbles his way through a life that, unbeknownst to him, has been laid out. He commits the folly of believing in his own agency, and then we simultaneously wince and laugh as we realize that he's a pawn in a ridiculously specific and poignantly absurd grand scheme. Vonnegut chides us for becoming so consumed with the search for meaning that our purpose in life becomes finding out our purpose in life. However, Vonnegut was a humanist, which means that he believed in people's ability to learn, to change, and to determine the course of their lives. He didn't believe that life is just a series of accidents, and neither do I.

CLOSING THE BOOK: Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature
by Joelle Renstrom

ISBN: 978-1-938349-24-9

eISBN: 978-1-938349-26-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015936091

Copyright © 2015 Joelle Renstrom

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.

“A Sort of Homecoming” was published in *Barely South Review* (Sept 2012)

“Letters to Ray Bradbury” was published in *Konundrum Magazine* (2009)

“Making Luck” was published in the *Paradigm Journal* (Sept 2010)

“Fighting the Sunday Blues with Albert Camus” was published in *Briarpatch* (Sept 2009) under the name “Freedom and Absurdity in the Classroom.”

“How I Spent My Free Will” was published in the *Minnetonka Review* (Winter 2011)

“Finding Fathers” was published in *Ducts Magazine* (Dec 2010)

Layout and Book Design by Mark Givens

First Pelekinesis Printing 2015

For information:

Pelekinesis, 112 Harvard Ave #65, Claremont, CA 91711 USA



Excerpt(s) from WHITE NOISE by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1984, 1985 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of the Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

Excerpt(s) from ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING by Ray Bradbury
Reprinted by permission of Don Congdon Associates, Inc.
© 1990 by Ray Bradbury Enterprises

Excerpt(s) from SIRENS OF TITAN by Kurt Vonnegut, copyright © 1988 by Kurt Vonnegut. Used by permission of Dell Publishing, an imprint of Random House, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from THE STRANGER by Albert Camus, copyright © 1988 by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from NEVER LET ME GO by Kazuo Ishiguro, copyright © 2005 by Kazuo Ishiguro. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, translation copyright © 1988 by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from CHILDHOOD'S END by Arthur C. Clarke
© 1953, 1981, 1990, 2001 by Arthur C. Clarke
Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scovil Galen Ghosh Literary Agency, Inc.