Nine One One

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Woke up at four forty a.m. Used bathroom. Returned to bed. Pressed switch to activate heating pad to further treat muscle pulled when lifting dog from backseat at vet's three days before. Cat came, as she does most mornings, to sit on my chest and rub her nose on my hands. She whirled around, her backside inches from my face, and whapped my head with her tail. I lay there without covers, thought about cat's left front paw and how close it was to my groin, imagined the little talon that seems to magically emerge from her foot, how it seems to come out of nowhere, flexing ominously, then wondered how many penises the world over had been accidentally or purposefully cat scratched or worse — cat bit. Wife got up, and cat followed or maybe led the way to the kitchen, where she no doubt unleashed a relentless series of *meows* that would end only once a scoop of food hit her bowl. I remembered how, on this very day, seventeen years ago, I was sitting at a cheap desk in the living room of a duplex my wife and I shared with a woman who had no teeth and worked as a house cleaner and spent her evenings, as far as we could tell, watching TV or smoking Mistys or tending the plastic flowers in the bed of gravel that orbited our duplex. That morning I was writing a story in the form of a will & testament that had been composed by the story's main character, who planned to commit suicide and donate his body to science and his skeleton to a classroom, when my wife, who had just gotten out of the shower, answered the landline — this was before we had smartphones, before we accidentally got pregnant, before we had a son, before we had a dog or cat, and before we tried and failed to have more children, before we heard each of those heartbeats, and then didn't hear them. When my wife hung up the phone, she walked into the living room to tell me that her sister had called to inform us that terrorists had flown planes into a skyscraper in New York. I probably said something like, "No way," or "Huh-uh," as it has historically been my nature to deny, at least initially, each and every tragic report I've ever received. Because I couldn't wrap my head around the idea and because we didn't have a TV — or because the one TV we had wasn't hooked up to anything but a DVD player — I drove across town to the house of a couple we knew who had cable — a couple

from Kansas whose house smelled like somebody's grandparents, possibly because their furniture looked like it had come straight out of the 1940s. It was there that I watched the buildings fall: that astonishing, cascading avalanche of debris that turned into a roiling, apocalyptic cloud. What, exactly, I did after that I can't remember, except that at some point, I found myself back at the duplex, in the front lawn, sitting in the green green grass, looking up at an impossibly bright blue sky, noted the incongruity, and thought to myself, as surely as millions of others did: *nothing will ever be the same*. And it wasn't. Seventeen years later, it's the publication day for my next book, the majority of which I wrote in the latter half of 2016 — a year of police brutality and a brutal election season, during which I attempted, as a quiet act of rebellion, to notice everyday miracles. After the cat followed my wife into the kitchen, I turned on my phone and checked Twitter for mentions or notifications — there were none — and checked Facebook for the same — someone had invited me to like a literary magazine I'd never heard of, and a person I don't know had commented on my sister's repost of a status update from four years before, when my nephew said his heart was in love with his sister's heart. I opened Instagram to see that Sarah Silverman had taken a photo of her "insane fresh out of the shower eyebrows" and noted the white rectangle of her iPhone reflected in her iris or retina or whatever it is, and that I had two measly new likes, both from an aunt who uses the name her grandchildren call her as her username. On multiple platforms, people seemed concerned, as they no doubt should have been, about a hurricane named Florence, which threatened to be the first Category 5 storm in recorded history to hit the Carolinas. I worried about Britts Donuts, which has lived for nearly 80 years on the Carolina Beach boardwalk, and which sells exactly three things: milk, coffee, and donuts that are so melt-in-your-mouth-good I ate three in under ten minutes the last time I visited. My wife had expressed concern, as usual, about the wind that might result from Florence's landfall and that one of the ten evergreens that divide our property from our neighbor's — I don't know the name of these trees, but they're quite stately, with these expressive, drooping limbs — will be toppled by the wind, and subsequently fall onto our house, and kill us. I doubted this, as I tend to do many of my wife's fears, much to her chagrin, so she assured me that people died "all the time" from falling trees during storms. I imagined, to assure *myself*, that those trees must be the

owners of vast and significant root systems, all of which were tangled up deep underground, thereby anchoring them firmly to earth, and that because of this they would survive whatever it was that Florence aimed to bring. I thought of the name Florence, and of the actress Florence Henderson, who played the mom in *The Brady Bunch*, but who I primarily remembered from those Wesson cooking oil commercials that ran in the 1980s, and how she'd praise the oil for its "Wessonality," then lift a crusty drumstick from a platter of golden fried chicken and take a bite. I thought too of Florence, Italy, a city I visited in 1998, with my parents and then-girlfriend, and how we had all flown to Paris together and then traveled through the French countryside to visit my sister, who was going to school in Collognes, and how we drove over the snow-capped Alps, past lonely stone churches in vast snowfields and down into the dusty Italian plains, and how my parents and sister and girlfriend made fun of me for keeping my nose in a book rather than gazing admiringly, as they all were, at the passing countryside; I was wearing headphones to drown out their voices because I was neck deep inside Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, a very long book I now remember very little about, aside from the part about the baseball game; never mind, I don't even remember that, except that the book's plot had something to do with a famous baseball and how it traveled from person to person during the Cold War, maybe. A friend of mine, who used to be kind of a dick and who worshiped and seemed to want to write exactly in the same self-effacing but showoffy voice as David Foster Wallace, but who later became a devoted husband to his wife and sweet, kindhearted father to their three girls, once presented to me, as a thank you gift, with a copy of *Underworld* that he'd sent to Don DeLillo for a signature. Surprisingly, DeLillo complied with this request and had actually scrawled his name inside, adding an inscription that read, "Before the towers fell." Reading this prompted me to reexamine the book's dust jacket — I'd always focused on the chunky black church with the cross for a steeple — and noticed for the first time that, yes, you could see those iconic skyscrapers, which was weird, since I'd carried that book with me all over France and Italy and hadn't once noticed them, despite the fact that they ran down the very center of the book's cover, looming massively and forebodingly in background. I tried to remember a single conversation I had with anybody on that trip to Europe and couldn't, though I found I could easily recall that spaghetti in Italy

is significantly less-sauced than in the States and that soda was served not only iceless but warm and that the streets were made of cobblestone and that there were beautiful, stylishly dressed men and women everywhere, long-sleeved and jacketed and scarfed, buttoned-up and booted. I remembered the mopeds that swarmed our van the minute we reached Florentine traffic and how a few days later we were walking through Rome on Christmas day, and that we could hear the joyful ringing of utensils as they scraped plates during family dinners in the homes above the shops we passed, every one of which was closed. I remember wanting and not getting "alone time" with my then-girlfriend, who is no longer alive, who in fact was killed sixteen years ago last July when, after her older sister pleaded with her not to leave the summer camp where she'd been working, because it was too late to drive, but this once-upon-a-time girlfriend told her older sister not to worry and climbed into her car with her brother, to drive back to Raleigh, where she was looking forward to a job interview the next morning, except she never made it, because when they were forced to stop at a construction site, an eighteen-wheeler, whose driver had apparently been oblivious to the preceding warning signs, plowed into them and killed them — supposedly instantly. I reminded myself to pick up the dog poop in the backyard before the upcoming storms turned them to mush and how that would likely be the last time I picked up dog poop in my yard, and that it would undoubtedly be the last time I would pick up this *specific* dog's poop, after eleven years of serving as the family's primary walker of said dog, and by default the collector, using a plastic bag as a protective mitten, of its feces, having performed this task roughly 71.3% of the time, though it wasn't like I kept an actual record or logbook, which, now that I think of it, would have been exactly the right word for documenting the bowel movements of said dog: *logbook*. I confess I sometimes resented this job, and often let myself think of the dog as a kind of "fur tube" we owned whose ultimate job was to produce excrement, which, I'll admit, is an unkind reduction of what was an otherwise mind-bogglingly sweet, long-suffering, human-adoring creature who couldn't have been said to have had a mean bone in her body — an assessment that has always applied to my son as well, and which was once used, in fact, by his kindergarten teacher to describe him. I think of how the dog couldn't stand up on the last day of her life, which was such a distinct contrast to the younger

version of herself, the one we had once referred to, due to the blistering speed at which she ran circles in the field across from our old house, as "rocket dog," and how, when we arrived at the vet and I lifted her out of the backseat, she frantically dog-paddled the air, like she always did, and how heavy she was, because we'd been feeding her more and more in an attempt to keep her blood sugar up, and how I set her on the ground, and she was able to stand, perhaps because the peanut butter sandwich and hot dog my wife had fed her had kicked in, and how she wagged her nub all the way to the room in which the doctor's administered the Propofol — which will always make me think of Michael Jackson, who went 60 days without REM. sleep before he died, thanks to infusions of this same drug, which was given to him by his doctor — and how she sort of whimper-yelped and slowly collapsed and how I had my hand on her neck to let her know we were there and how the vet held a stethoscope to her chest and then came whatever serum they used as euthanasia and then the vet said she'd passed and we all cried. And how the next morning my son took an Adidas shoebox out of his closet containing his old blanket and Two Shoe the stuffed baby lamb and the toy teapot from Disney's *Beauty & the Beast* that I used many times as a little puppet to admonish him for doing something he shouldn't have, using a voice that represented my best attempt at imitating the voice an uppity British nanny, and how my almost-sixteen-year-old son had set this box on the floor of his room at the foot of his bed where the dog used to lie on those smelly beds of her own, and how he'd placed the dog's leash inside the box, and then set the dog's collar on top, like a little monument intended not only to commemorate the dog's life, but his own departed childhood, during which he loved nothing more than to lie under the dog while she licked his face, despite the fact we had repeatedly instructed him not to, in part because the dog was known to gobble up cat turds and cigarette butts, not to mention she used that tongue to clean her undercarriage, but he did it anyway, hundreds of times, probably, because it tickled and because he loved the dog, who he cuddled and kissed and comforted when we scolded her, on the rare occasions when she chewed up something, even if what she had chomped into oblivion had been one of his own action figures. I had scrolled past a significant number of images and words during my early morning perusal of news on various social media platforms, which included a photograph of giraffes in snow, recipes for

a number of 5-ingredient slow cooker meals, a story about a man in Saudi Arabia who was arrested after an "offensive" video showed him sharing a meal with a woman, Ken Starr's "explosive revelation" about Hillary Clinton, the 10 best "Fall Adventures" in National Parks, and how to get the Avengers Infinity Wars suit in the new Spider-Man video game, but nowhere at all had I seen anything about the planes that had slammed into the towers on this same day, seventeen years before; even the headline for an 9/11-themed op-ed seemed to have been buried on the *New York Times* website. But no matter how prominent the coverage of that long-ago day might have been, I imagine that I'd still be thinking, as I am now, about the picture posted by a friend in West Virginia of a red-tailed hawk sitting on a telephone wire, looking stately and very alert, despite the fact that its breast has been pierced by and was still carrying what appeared to be a completely intact arrow. I don't marvel as much about the cruelty of whatever dipshit shot that arrow at such a glorious bird of prey or how the arrow managed, I have to assume, to avoid ripping through the bird's vital organs, and how its heart might — even now — be knock-knock-knocking against the wood; instead, I find myself wondering what it would feel like to take off with a stick jammed through my chest, to fly through the air with the very instrument that was meant to take me down still lodged firmly inside my body, and how much strength I would need — considering the pain bursts radiating in time with each beat of my wings — to stay aloft.