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THE LIGHT WE LOST

Written by Jill Santopolo

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THE LIGHT WE LOST

JILL SANTOPOLO



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For New York City

prologue

We've known each other for almost half our lives.

I've seen you smiling, confident, blissfully happy.

I've seen you broken, wounded, lost.

But I've never seen you like this.

You taught me to look for beauty. In darkness, in destruction, you always found light.

I don't know what beauty I'll find here, what light. But I'll try. I'll do it for you. Because I know you would do it for me.

There was so much beauty in our life together.

Maybe that's where I should start.

i

Sometimes objects seem like they've witnessed history. I used to imagine that the wooden table we sat around during Kramer's Shakespeare seminar our senior year was as old as Columbia—that it had been in that room since 1754, edges worn smooth by centuries of students like us, which of course couldn't be true. But that's how I pictured it. Students sitting there through the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf.

It's funny, if you asked me who else was with us that day, I don't think I could tell you. I used to be able to see all their faces so clearly, but thirteen years later I remember only you and Professor Kramer. I can't even recall the name of the TA who came running, late, into the classroom. Later, even, than you.

Kramer had just finished calling roll when you pushed open the door. You smiled at me, your dimple making a brief appearance as you slipped off your Diamondbacks cap and stuck it into your back pocket. Your eyes landed quickly on the empty seat next to mine, and then you did too.

"And you are?" Kramer asked, as you reached into your backpack for a notebook and a pen.

"Gabe," you said. "Gabriel Samson."

Kramer checked the paper in front of him. "Let's aim for 'on time' for the rest of the semester, Mr. Samson," he said. "Class starts at nine. In fact, let's aim for 'early.'"

You nodded, and Kramer started talking about themes in *Julius Caesar*.

"'We at the height are ready to decline,'" he read. "'There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries. / On such a full sea are we now afloat, / And we must take the current when it serves, / Or lose our ventures.' I trust you all did the reading. Who can tell me what Brutus is saying about fate and free will here?"

I'll always remember that passage because I've wondered so many times since that day whether you and I were fated to meet in Kramer's Shakespeare seminar. Whether it's destiny or decision that has kept us connected all these years. Or a combination of both, taking the current when it serves.

After Kramer spoke, a few people flipped through the text in front of them. You ran your fingers through your curls, and they sprang back into place.

"Well," you said, and the rest of the class joined me in looking at you.

But you didn't get to finish.

The TA whose name I can't remember came racing into the room. "Sorry I'm late," she said. "A plane hit one of the twin towers. It came on TV just as I was leaving for class."

No one knew the significance of her words; not even she did.

"Was the pilot drunk?" Kramer asked.

"I don't know," the TA said, taking a seat at the table. "I waited, but the newscasters had no idea what was going on. They said it was some kind of prop plane."

If it had happened now, all of our phones would've been blowing up with news. Pings from Twitter and Facebook and push notifications from the *New York Times*. But communication then wasn't yet instant and Shakespeare wouldn't be interrupted. We all shrugged it off and Kramer kept talking about *Caesar*. As I took notes, I watched the fingers of your right hand unconsciously rub against the wood grain of the table. I doodled an image of your thumb with its ragged nail and torn cuticle. I still have the notebook somewhere—in a box filled with Lit Hum and Contemporary Civilizations. I'm sure it's there.

ii

I'll never forget what we said when we left Philosophy Hall; even though the words were nothing special, the conversation is burned into my memory as part of that day. We'd started down the steps together. Not exactly together, but next to each other. The air was clear, the sky was blue—and everything had changed. We just didn't know it yet.

People all around us were talking over one another:

"The twin towers collapsed!"

"School's canceled!"

"I want to donate blood. Do you know where I can donate blood?"

I turned to you. "What's going on?"

"I live in East Campus," you said, pointing toward the dorm. "Let's go find out. You're Lucy, right? Where do you live?"

"Hogan," I said. "And yeah, Lucy."

"Nice to meet you, Lucy, I'm Gabriel." You held out your hand. Amid everything, I shook it, and looked up at you as I

did. Your dimple came back. Your eyes shone blue. I thought then, for the first time: *He's beautiful.*

We went to your suite and watched TV with your roommates, with Adam and Scott and Justin. On the screen bodies dove out of buildings, blackened mounds of rubble sent smoke signals into the sky, and the towers fell in a loop. The devastation numbed us. We stared at the images, unable to reconcile the stories with our reality. The fact that this was happening in our city, seven miles from where we sat, that those were people—actual human beings—hadn't set in yet. At least not for me. It felt so far away.

Our cell phones didn't work. You used your dorm phone to call your mom in Arizona to tell her you were fine. I called my parents in Connecticut, who wanted me to come home. They knew someone whose daughter worked at the World Trade Center and no one had heard from her yet. Someone else whose cousin had a breakfast meeting at Windows on the World.

"It's safer outside Manhattan," my father said. "What if there's anthrax? Or some other biological warfare. Nerve gas."

I told my dad the subways weren't running. Probably not the trains either.

"I'll come get you," he said. "I'll jump in the car now."

"I'll be okay," I told him. "I'm with some friends. We're fine. I'll call you again later." It still didn't feel real.

"You know," Scott said, after I hung up. "If I were a terrorist organization, I'd drop a bomb on us."

"What the fuck?" Adam said. He was waiting to hear from his uncle, who was part of the NYPD.

"I mean, if you think about it academically . . ." Scott said, but he didn't get any further.

"Shut up," Justin said. "Seriously, Scott. Not the time."

"Maybe I should leave," I said to you then. I didn't really know you. I had just met your friends. "My roommates are probably wondering where I am."

"Call them," you said, handing the phone back to me. "And tell them you're going to the roof of the Wien dorm. Tell them they can meet you there if you want."

"I'm going where?"

"With me," you said, and you ran your fingers absently along my braid. It was an intimate gesture, the kind of thing that happens after all barriers of personal space have been breached. Like eating off someone else's plate without asking. And all of a sudden, I felt connected to you, like your hand on my hair meant something more than idle, nervous fingers.

I thought of that moment, years later, when I decided to donate my hair and the stylist handed me my braid, wrapped in plastic, looking even darker brown than usual. Even though you were a world away then, I felt like I was betraying you, like I was cutting our tie.

But then, that day, right after you touched my hair you realized what you'd done and let your hand drop into your lap. You smiled at me again, but it didn't go to your eyes this time.

I shrugged. "Okay," I said.

The world felt like it was cracking in pieces, like we'd gone through a shattered mirror into the fractured place inside, where nothing made sense, where our shields were down, our walls broken. In that place, there wasn't any reason to say no.

iii

We took the elevator up to Wien 11, and then you pulled open a window at the end of the hallway. "Someone showed me this sophomore year," you said. "It's the most incredible view of New York City you'll ever see."

We climbed out the window, onto the roof, and I gasped. Smoke billowed up from the southern tip of Manhattan. The whole sky was turning gray, the city shrouded in ash.

"Oh my God," I said. Tears filled my eyes. I pictured what used to be there. Saw the negative space where the towers had stood. It finally hit me. "There were people in those buildings."

Your hand found mine and held it.

We stood there, staring at the aftermath of destruction, tears dripping down both our cheeks, for how long I don't know. There must have been other people up there with us, but I can't recall them. Just you. And the image of that smoke. It's seared into my brain.

"What happens now?" I finally whispered. Seeing it made me understand the magnitude of the attack. "What's next?"

You looked at me, and our eyes, still wet with tears, locked with the kind of magnetism that ignores the world around it. Your hand slid to my waist, and I rose up onto my toes to meet your lips halfway. We pressed our bodies together, as if that would protect us from whatever came after. As if the only way to stay safe was to keep my lips on yours. The moment your body enveloped mine, that's how I felt—safe, enfolded in the strength and warmth of your arms. Your muscles fluttered against my hands and I buried my fingers in your hair. You wrapped my braid around your palm, tugging it and tipping my head back. And I forgot the world. In that moment, there was only you.

For years I felt guilty about it. Guilty that we kissed for the first time while the city burned, guilty that I was able to lose myself in you in that moment. But later I learned that we weren't alone. People told me in whispers that they'd had sex that day. That they'd conceived a child. They'd gotten engaged. Said *I love you* for the first time. There's something about death that makes people want to live. We wanted to live that day, and I don't blame us for it. Not anymore.

When we broke for breath, I leaned my head against your chest. I listened to your heart and was comforted by its steady beating.

Did my heartbeat comfort you? Does it still?

iv

We went back to your dorm room because you promised me lunch. You wanted to go onto the roof with your camera after we ate, you told me, and take some pictures.

"For the *Spectator*?" I asked.

"The paper?" you said. "Nah. For me."

In the kitchen I got distracted by a stack of your photos—black-and-white prints taken all over campus. They were beautiful, bizarre, bathed in light. Images zoomed so far in that an everyday object looked like modern art.

"Where's this one?" I asked. After looking for a while, I realized it was a close-up of a bird's nest, lined with what looked like newspapers and magazines and someone's essay for a French literature class.

"Oh, that was incredible," you told me. "Jessica Cho—Do you know her? She sings a cappella? David Blum's girlfriend?—she told me about this nest that she could see out her window that someone's homework got worked into. So I went to check it out. I had to hang out the window to get this shot. Jess made

Dave hold my ankles because she was afraid I would fall. But I got it."

After that story I saw you differently. You were daring, brave, committed to capturing art. Looking back, I'm guessing that's what you wanted me to think. You were trying to impress me, but I didn't realize it at the time. I just thought: *Wow.* I thought: *He's wonderful.* But what was true then, and has been true as long as I've known you, is that you find beauty everywhere. You notice things other people don't. It's something I've always admired about you.

"Is this what you want to do?" I asked then, indicating the pictures.

You shook your head. "It's just for fun," you said. "My mom's an artist. You should see what she can do, these gorgeous enormous abstracts, but she makes a living by painting small canvases of Arizona sunsets for tourists. I don't want that kind of life, creating what sells."

I leaned against the counter and looked at the rest of the photographs. Rust leaching into a stone bench, cracked veins of marble, corrosion on a metal railing. Beauty where I'd never imagined it could be. "Is your dad an artist, too?" I asked.

Your face closed. I could see it, like a door shutting behind your eyes. "No," you said. "He's not."

I had stumbled into a fault line I didn't know was there. I filed that away—I was discovering the landscape of you. Already I was hoping it was terrain I'd learn well, one that would become second nature to navigate.

You were quiet. I was quiet. The TV was still blaring in the background, and I heard the newscasters talking about the Pentagon and the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. The horror of

the situation rushed over me again. I put your photographs down. It seemed perverse to focus on beauty then. But looking back, maybe that was exactly the right thing to do.

"Didn't you say we were going to eat lunch?" I asked, even though I wasn't hungry, even though the images flashing across the television screen made my stomach churn.

The door opened behind your eyes. "That I did," you said, with a nod.

All you had the ingredients for were nachos. So, mechanically, I sliced tomatoes and opened a can of beans with a rusty can opener while you arranged tortilla chips in one of those throwaway foil trays and grated cheese into a chipped cereal bowl.

"What about you?" you asked, as if our conversation hadn't gotten derailed.

"Hm?" I pressed the top of the can into the beans so I could lever it off.

"Are you an artist?"

I put the metal disc down on the counter. "Nope," I said. "The most creative thing I do is write stories for my roommates."

"About what?" you asked, your head cocked to one side.

I looked down so you wouldn't see me blush. "This is embarrassing," I said, "but they're about a teacup pig named Hamilton who accidentally got accepted into a college meant for rabbits."

You let out a surprised laugh. "Hamilton. A pig," you said. "I get it. That's funny."

"Thanks," I said, looking up at you again.

"So is that what you want to do after graduation?" You had

reached for the jar of salsa and were tapping its lid against the counter top to loosen it.

I shook my head. "I don't think there's a big market out there for Hamilton the Pig stories. I've been thinking about going into advertising, but saying it now, it sounds silly."

"Why silly?" you asked, twisting the lid off with a pop.

I looked over at the TV. "Does it mean anything? Advertising? If this were my last day on Earth and I'd spent my whole adult life coming up with campaigns to sell people . . . shredded cheese . . . or nacho chips . . . would I feel like my time here was well spent?"

You bit your lip. Your eyes said, *I'm thinking about this*. I learned more of your topography. Perhaps you learned a bit of mine. "What makes a life well spent?" you asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," I told you, my mind turning as I was talking. "I think it might have something to do with making a mark—in a positive way. Leaving the world a little bit better than it was when you found it." I still believe that, Gabe. It's what I've been striving my whole life to do—I think you have too.

I saw something blossom in your face then. I wasn't sure what it meant. I hadn't learned you well enough yet. But now I know that look. It means perspectives are shifting in your mind.

You dipped a chip in the salsa and held it out to me.

"Bite?" you asked.

I crunched it in half, and you popped the rest into your mouth. Your eyes traced the planes of my face and traveled down the length of my body. I could feel you examining me from different angles and vantage points. Then you brushed my cheek with your fingertips and we kissed again; this time you tasted like salt and chili pepper.

When I was five or six, I drew on my bedroom wall with a red crayon. I don't think I ever told you this story. Anyway, as I was drawing hearts and trees and suns and moons and clouds, I knew I was doing something I shouldn't. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. But I couldn't stop myself—I wanted to do it so badly. My room had been decorated in pink and yellow, but my favorite color was red. And I wanted my room to be red. I *needed* my room to be red. Drawing on the wall felt completely right and absolutely wrong at the same time.

That's how I felt the day I met you. Kissing you in the middle of tragedy and death felt completely right and absolutely wrong at the same time. But I concentrated on the part that felt right, the way I always do.

I SLID MY HAND into the back pocket of your jeans, and you slid your hand into mine. We pulled each other closer. The phone in your room rang, but you ignored it. Then the phone in Scott's room rang.

A few seconds later, Scott came into the kitchen and cleared his throat. We broke apart and faced him. "Stephanie's looking for you, Gabe," he said. "I put her on hold."

"Stephanie?" I asked.

"No one," you answered, just as Scott said, "His ex."

"She's crying, dude," Scott told you.

You looked torn, your eyes going from Scott to me and back again. "Would you tell her I'll call her back in a few minutes?" you said to him.

Scott nodded and left, and then you grabbed my hand, weaving your fingers through mine. Our eyes met, like they had on the roof, and I couldn't look away. My heart sped up.

"Lucy," you said, somehow infusing my name with desire. "I know you're here, and I know that makes this strange, but I should see if she's okay. We were together all last school year and only broke up last month. This day—"

"I get it," I said. And weirdly, it made me like you better, that while you weren't dating Stephanie anymore, you still cared about her. "I should head back to my roommates anyway," I said, even though I didn't want to go. "Thank you for . . ." I started the sentence without knowing how to end it, and then found I couldn't.

You squeezed my fingers. "Thank you for making this day about something more," you said. "Lucy. Luce. *Luz* is light in Spanish, right?" You paused. I nodded. "Well, thank you for filling a dark day with light."

You'd put into words the feeling I couldn't express. "You did the same for me," I said. "Thank you."

We kissed again and it was hard to tear myself away from you. It was so hard to leave.

"I'll call you later," you said. "I'll find you in the directory. I'm sorry about the nachos."

"Stay safe," I said. "We can always eat nachos another time."

"That sounds good," you answered.

And I left, wondering if it was possible for one of the most horrific days I'd ever experienced to somehow contain a small nugget of goodness.

You did call me a few hours later, but it wasn't the conversation I'd expected. You said you were sorry, so sorry, but you and Stephanie had gotten back together. Her eldest brother was missing—he worked at One World Trade—and she needed you.

You said you hoped I understood and you thanked me again for bringing light to such a horrible afternoon. You said it meant a lot to have me there. And you apologized once more.

I shouldn't have been crushed, but I was.

I didn't speak to you for the rest of fall semester. Or spring semester either. I changed my seat in Kramer's class so I wouldn't have to sit next to you. But I listened every time you spoke about the way you saw beauty in Shakespeare's language and imagery—even in the ugliest scenes.

"'Alas!'" you read aloud, "'a crimson river of warm blood, / Like to a bubbling fountain stirr'd with wind, / Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips.'" All I could think about was *your* lips and how they felt pressed against mine.

I tried to forget that day, but it was impossible. I couldn't forget what happened to New York, to America, to the people in the towers. And I couldn't forget what happened between us. Even now, whenever anyone asks, "Were you in New York when the towers fell?" or "Where were you that day?" or "What was it like here?" the first thing I think of is you.

There are moments that shift the trajectory of people's lives. For so many of us who lived in New York City then, September 11th was that moment. Anything I did that day would have been important, would have been burned into my mind and branded on my heart. I don't know why I met you that day, but I do know that because I did, you would have been a part of my personal history forever.

V

It was May and we'd just graduated. We'd handed back our caps and gowns, trading them for diplomas written in Latin, emblazoned with our names, first, middle, and last. I walked into Le Monde with my family—my mother, my father, my brother Jason, two grandparents, and an uncle. They seated us next to another family, a much smaller family—yours.

You looked up as we filed by and you reached out, touching my arm. "Lucy!" you said. "Congratulations!"

I shivered. All those months later, feeling your skin against mine did that to me, but I still managed to say, "You too."

"What are you up to?" you asked. "Are you staying in the city?"

I nodded. "I got a job working in program development at a new TV production company—kids' shows." I couldn't help grinning. It was a job I'd been crossing my fingers over for almost two months before I got it. The kind of job that I'd started thinking about soon after the towers fell, after I admitted that I wanted to do something more meaningful than advertising.

A job that could reach the next generation and had the potential to change the future.

"Kids' shows?" you said, a smile playing across your lips. "Like *Alvin and the Chipmunks*? Will they have helium voices?"

"Not quite," I said, laughing a little, wanting to tell you that it was our conversation that led me there, that the moment we shared in your kitchen meant so much. "How about you?"

"McKinsey," you said. "Consulting. No chipmunks for me."

I was surprised. I hadn't expected that, after our talk, after hearing your analyses in Kramer's class.

But what I said was, "That's great. Congratulations on the job. Maybe I'll see you around the city sometime."

"That would be nice," you answered.

And I went to sit down at the table with my family.

"Who was that?" I heard someone ask. I looked up. There was a girl next to you with long wheat-colored hair almost to the middle of her back and her hand on your thigh. She'd barely registered, I was so focused on you.

"Just a girl I know from class, Stephanie," I heard you say. Which, of course, was all I was. But somehow it stung.