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December 2002

Fourteen

September eleventh.

Your wounds have healed by now, yes? That tight, hard skin with all of its bumps and ridges is beginning to feel familiar under your tentative fingers. You are finally starting to own your scars. But I just realized something, and we're going to have to operate.

In my Death and Dying class, we're reading a book called *On Death and Dying*, by a doctor named Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. She writes that Americans are afraid of death now more than ever, and that we often deal with this fear by denying the inevitability of death. Obviously there are many people who actively avoid discussing or thinking about their own deaths, but Kübler-Ross states that we deny death in more subtle ways, as well. An example she uses is the relieved sentiment of "it was the other guy who died, not me." This can help explain the prevalence of violence in the media.

And on September eleventh, 2001, sitting at a desk somewhere in the middle of a building that was silent save for its televisions, my face expressionless, and my teeth relentlessly splitting off the ends of my fingernails, I hoped with all my might for that second tower to collapse.

When it did, I felt sick and numb and relieved. A voice in my head kept saying, "People are dying, you're watching hundreds of people die right now." And I drank up the slow-motion replays of the planes slamming into the buildings, and the tsunami of dust that chased thousands of panicked human beings down the streets of New York.

People kept making jokes about Independence Day, myself very much included. I also made a lot of jokes about how it was like *Die Hard*, because there were people trapped in a building that was being destroyed. These were less well-received, which was probably related to the fact that I was laughing so hard that tears were streaming down my face. We'd be watching the news, and I'd say, "Man, this movie sure doesn't have a whole lot of plot."

Some of my friends were right there laughing with me, and some of them were in disgusted awe of how insensitive I can really be.

This was a confusing day for me, emotionally speaking. People were burning to death and having their ribcages collapse under heaps of rubble and catching shards of glass in their throats, and I felt exhilarated and euphoric, even.

I'd discuss my more predictable reactions, but redundancy is a waste of ink.

But why is euphoric relief such an unpredictable reaction, anyway? Is it, really? Because those plane crashes were pretty goddamn cool. Best special

I was taking journalism at the time of the attacks, so I wrote a piece about students' emotional reactions. I quoted people anonymously in my article, because I wanted to show readers that my sources had no reason to be anything less than completely honest. Unfortunately, my teacher told me that *The Graphic* doesn't use anonymous quotes. My teacher also told me that my article wasn't going to be published unless I rewrote it, because she found some of the sources' feelings to be disturbed, and she was afraid I'd upset people. This same teacher is on the Diversity Leadership Team. They recently distributed a letter to parents (don't know how many) condemning me as racist and disturbed. The letter is addressed to the school, and the bottom is left blank, so that anyone who agrees can sign it. I don't fully understand the motives behind this. My best guess is that they want to put pressure on the administration to break the free speech rule that they have miraculously upheld (for the most part). Here's my concern: I don't know if polling "the people" is such a good idea, guys. You could poll the entire U.S. population and find that most people would vote that you shouldn't be allowed to say that gay people and straight people are equals. If you lobby for my silence, you lobby for the collapse of protection of offensive speech. We're all catching the irony here, right? The journalism teacher who bands together with other teachers to suppress offensive speech?

Again, offensive speech can range from anything between "gay people should be able to get married" and "women shouldn't be able to vote." Both statements offend a lot of people, whether you agree with them or not. And since all productive speech requests change (for example, everything Martin Luther King, Jr. ever said), and since all change is undesirable to some parties, all productive speech is offensive to someone.

I understand why the white males on the Diversity Leadership Team would want to get rid of offensive speech. They don't need it; they have enough power as it is. But some of you are people of color, and some of you are gay.

Are you nuts?

Are you completely out of your mind? What do you think would happen to black people if we got rid of offensive speech? The slaves were emancipated because someone had the guts to get up and say something, and it offended lots of people. And if they hadn't been allowed to do that, then slavery would still exist in the United States. Are you nuts? Is that what you want?

effects I've ever seen. Couldn't watch action movies for weeks, they're so boring by comparison.

And what about the inevitable strengthening of our sense of community that occurs with a tragedy? We were all feeling at least some of the same feelings, right?

But would our sense of community have been threatened if we'd discussed those less savory feelings? I don't know if it would have, because I think people would have felt a much more authentic connection if they'd been given an opportunity to get those awkward feelings off their chests. Then again, they'd have been made to feel guilty about those unexpected feelings, wouldn't they have?

You want to vote on the First Amendment? How do you think the vote would turn out if we asked everyone whether there should be gays teaching at the high school? Why are you attacking the very thing that keeps you alive? Are you so deluded that you actually think you'd stand a chance if you weren't allowed to offend people? Gay people offend someone every time they walk into a room. Should that not be allowed? Do you want them locked up?

Are you nuts?

Three Important Things to Think About

1. A suspension is worth a thousand words.
2. The smartest person in the world still isn't that smart.
3. Why doesn't Coach Hefner take his Playboy bunnies somewhere else and just leave Hannah alone?