

The Sound

Essay

By

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It is an ordinary, insignificant, diminutive sound, the kind of sound that adults with their preoccupations and distractions don't hear. But she heard it. She heard it every Sunday morning as she quietly walked into church. She would turn down the short sidewalk, all those years ago, and its cadence would mesmerize her. An easy, peaceful, elegant sound, it seemed more pronounced on the clear blue-sky New England mornings so common in the fall.

Those were the days of bee hives and gloved hands. Her mother, like all the other Sunday-morning ladies slowly, silently, reverently walking into church, would wear her best dress and matching coat, handbag and heels. It was the heels, the sound of well-kept high heels against the concrete sidewalk that punctuated her Sunday mornings. She, of course, wore appropriate little patent-leather Mary Jane's.

One day, she would grow up and be beautiful. She would drive a nice Buick to church with her adorable family and the sound she would hear would be her own high heels playing a familiar tune along the sidewalk. It was one of those childhood thoughts of a perfect future. The sound became the sound of innocence and hope, faith and family, comfort and security.

She heard it again, years later, on another clear blue-sky New England morning. This time it was accompanied by graduation caps and gowns, hair and makeup neatly done, girls on the verge of womanhood, childhood being tucked neatly away with algebra books and prom corsages. The rhythm now included her

own brand-new sling-backs daintily, excitedly tap-tap tapping along the worn tiled hallway of her high school.

It pulled her away from the giggling and preening, that familiar cadence, a sound that echoed in her memory, etched for eternity, an insignificant, easily missed sound. Her lips curled slightly at the memory of a sound so clearly filled with promise.

But this time the sound swelled, amplified by the friends that surrounded and warmed her as she tapped out her rhythm down the corridor and into her long-anticipated graduation ceremony. The silence that accompanied the anticipation of that morning instilled the sound with even greater importance. It became the sound of accomplishment and pride, uncertainty and confidence, goodbyes and possibilities.

And there it was again, a decade later, in those quiet moments standing next to her father at the back of the church. Outside the open doors of the vestibule, it was another clear blue-sky New England fall day. The smell of roses, the rustle of her dress all slipping into the background as she waited, the familiar echo awaking a memory, a cherished memory of the sound. She heard them more than saw them, her closest friends, her bridesmaids, softly tap-tap tapping along the sidewalk as they made their way into the church. That distinctive yet inconsequential sound of their velvet covered pumps hitting concrete. This time it was the sound of joy and anticipation, faith and family, love and devotion.

Then, it all changed.

It was another clear blue-sky New England fall morning. She had worked for over ten years at a very old, respected financial services company. She loved its mahogany woodwork and long marbled hallways; they were familiar, comfortable and comforting. In the time she had worked for the company, it had grown and expanded, moving from insurance to investments, buying a large mutual fund company in New York. She had grown too from a naive college graduate to a valuable member of the management team. She had come to respect and admire the people she worked with, even counted them among her friends.

She doesn't remember the sound. She's tried, but the memory won't come.

That morning she was in a meeting with good, honorable people; strong and capable. She can picture their faces even now, lions of business looking like five-year-old's' who have lost sight of their mother in a crowd.

She had been multi-tasking and quietly slipped out to deliver some paperwork to one of the investment managers. She made her way down the long, marbled hall and into his small department. There he was, standing silently staring up at the television, his face drained of all understanding, horrified. Like everyone else that day, she will never forget the images she saw. Not just the ones on the television but the faces, faces she had come to know; every wrinkle and blemish but, that day, different, changed.

She knew those people, the ones in the South Tower that September morning. She had been in their offices, sat across from them at their desks. They were people she worked with, laughed with, they were friends. And, they were the friends of the people back in the meeting she had left. Something had to be done, someone had to do something, fix this horrible thing. She had to tell them. She dreaded telling them. Inexplicably, she believed those good, smart people might somehow fix this. She had to go back down the hall to the meeting room. Then the memory fades.

She remembers getting ready for work. Picking out a nice black knit sweater, it had been a little chilly, and a pair of wide-leg trousers. And, a new pair of black high heels.

Years later, she would receive solemn emails and tear-filled phone calls from the people in that meeting room on that fateful September morning. They would tell her what they remember. It's not the images of the planes hitting the Towers, not the rush of activity as they fearfully contacted loved ones, not the inability to comprehend what had happened. She is their September 11 memory.

They remember the sound, her sound, it is an echo etched in their memory. The hurried, frantic, terrible sound of her heels purposefully striking the marble floors, a cadence changed by evil, a tap-tap tapping filled with so much dread they stopped talking in mid-sentence, a rhythm of change that pulled them to it like a magnet pulls metal.

By the time she opened the door, they were all standing, waiting. The sound underscored the message, a harbinger of what was to come. She doesn't remember what she said, neither do they. But they remember the sound, the sound of her high heels demanding answers from marble. It became the sound of horror and fear, of devastation and sorrow, of unimaginable evil and loss.

Like everything else that day, the sound had changed forever.