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## Remembering a Cool September

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## Remembering a Cool September: Pain, Prejudice, and Patriotism<sup>1</sup>

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On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and for weeks thereafter, the nation cries. Waves of anguish wash over me—but not *into* me. Buried alive, I suffocate under a shroud, unable to move or breathe. Clawing through the tangled webs of everyday existence, I wander the liminal neverland between consciousness and sleep.

CNN coma: 3:00 a.m., 4:00 a.m., 5:00 a.m. Planes exploding, towers burning, folding, burning, folding, burning, folding.

“This just in”: new shot, new angle, same angle, North, South, Trade Center, Pentagon, New York, Shanksville, D.C. Workplaces to graves. People to ash.

On the mornings of our nation’s mourning, I am wracked without sobbing, brimming with no tears. I *study* the images: a man with outstretched arms and legs—reaching, falling. I cannot see his face. Are his eyes open? I cannot hear his voice. Does he call out? For whom?

At ground zero, a desperate, candlelit collective—waiting, hoping. “Missing: Paul Ortiz.” “Looking for: Scott Hazelcom.” “Vanessa Kolpak, 5’3””, hair: blonde, eyes: blue/green. Please call with information.” Wall of tears. Portraits of grief. I can only ... gasp.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, and for months thereafter, the nation howls. Act of War. Terrorists. Infinite Justice. Even my usually subdued husband Doug seems perched, ready to “do

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<sup>1</sup> The most updated version of this piece appears in the book *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge 2015). Earlier versions of “Remembering a Cool September” were presented at the 2002 National Communication Association meetings and published in *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies* (Tillmann-Healy 2004; used with permission, Sage Publications: <http://csc.sagepub.com/content/4/2/198.abstract>). Also see the film by this title (Tillmann and Dietz 2014) on the website for *In Solidarity*. Rick Merrifield and Doug Healy shot images in this chapter.

something.”

I do nothing. I write no letters, send no emails, call no one—not even my parents. Aside from my students at Rollins College, I don’t ask if anyone’s okay, if anyone has lost someone. Nobody. Nowhere. I am embalmed yet awake at my own wake.

And then it happens, not with a cataclysmic bang but with a whisper of humanity.

Tim and Rob, two of my closest friends, have been together for five years. One October evening, I visit their new apartment. As I step onto the sidewalk, I see their two trucks parked in tandem. Everything seems normal: Rob’s Isuzu Rodeo, Tim’s Ford Ranger, both aging but holding.

As I move my line of sight toward the door, my peripheral vision catches a glimmer. I turn toward it. The hazy glow of an orange-yellow streetlamp sends silver sparks from the corners of their trucks. At first, I think it a reflection off their taillights. But when I move closer, I see the source of this illumination: the stars and stripes of two matching American flag decals.

I have seen thousands of these in the last month: on billboards, in store windows, on cars speeding down I-4. I have watched the landscape fill with red, white, and blue ribbons, shoes, T-shirts, ball caps, lapel pins, earrings, scarves, pendants, ties, and tie tacks.

But, for the first time, something pierces my skin.

[Insert photo H.1 Tim Rob around next paragraph]

I think of my two friends. Natural athletes with middle-America good looks, both pass easily, offering both a touch of safety and a shove toward the closet.

[Insert photo H.2 Lisa Rob around next paragraph]

Rob is two years older but more boyish looking, an Irish Catholic (like me), the sixth of seven children, a physical therapist by training with a gentle voice and comforting hands.

[Insert photo H.3 Tim Lisa around next paragraph]

Tim comes from a large blended Mormon family. After putting himself through private school, this cost accountant abandoned corporate America because it bled his soul dry.

I recall our travels together: South Beach, Ft. Lauderdale, Atlanta, Paris.

I think of shared milestones: Doug's and my wedding, Tim's graduation, my graduation, their move to Orlando, our move to Orlando, the publication of my book *Between Gay and Straight* (whose cover the four of us grace), birthdays, anniversaries, separations, reconciliations, injuries, illnesses, deaths.

As I move toward the reflection, I think of Jerry bin Falwell, verbal terrorist. Following the attacks on the Trade Center and Pentagon, he said of Tim and Rob (and of all of us who identify as queer and/or feminist), "I point a finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

I consider the many churches in which my friends are not recognized as a couple. Spiritual ties bind Tim and Rob, but not to each other. A fellow Mormon once told Tim that his homosexuality was "a cross to bear," like cancer. Under Catholic doctrine, the pathway out of their relationship's "sin" is paved with celibacy, a practice some priests cannot sustain.

I think of pop culture's normalization of homophobia. On *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Eminem refers to men like Rob and Tim as "fags" or "faggots" 13 times. *Marshall Mathers* debuted at number one, sold millions of copies, and won three Grammys. Eminem got to sing with Sir Elton John.

When I reach Rob's Rodeo, a truck imprinted with 200,000 miles of inside jokes and family outings, I think of the thousand ways, large and small, that our nation tells them, "We don't see you. We wish you didn't exist." Their companies' health insurance and bereavement

leave do not cover domestic partners. Rob and Tim cannot file joint income taxes and are not entitled to survivor benefits.<sup>2</sup> In most states (including Florida, where we live), it is perfectly legal to refuse Tim and Rob service in a shop or restaurant; to deny them a hotel room, house, or apartment; even to fire Tim and Rob for no other reason than being gay.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the attacks, they could be prosecuted in 14 states (including Florida) for having consensual sex in the privacy of their own home;<sup>4</sup> Tim and Rob could not adopt children, even those who were sick, abandoned, unwanted;<sup>5</sup> and Tim and Rob could not serve openly in the military.<sup>6</sup>

But, they could—and can—be targeted, bashed, and left to die. Because sexual orientation was not a protected status on 9/11/2001, this would not have met the federal criteria for a hate crime.<sup>7</sup>

I pause and take in the image of this shimmering flag adorning Rob's truck. When I run my hand across the decal, I feel my lower lip pull away from its twin. Breath leaves my body. I ponder all the philosophical, political, and material reasons for these two men *not* to display these flags—as I consciously have not.

And then I ponder these two men: compassionate, proud, loving. My hand covers my mouth, and my eyes fill with their first tears since that terrible September Tuesday.

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<sup>2</sup> The Obama administration has interpreted the 2013 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Windsor*, which struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), to mean that legally-married same-sex couples are entitled to the same federal rights and benefits as married different-sex couples.

<sup>3</sup> Still true as of this writing.

<sup>4</sup> On June 26, 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas* struck down all state sodomy laws.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the attacks, Florida was one of three states to bar adoption by gay and lesbian individuals and/or couples. On September 22, 2010, the 3<sup>rd</sup> District Court of Appeal struck down Florida's ban, in place since 1977.

<sup>6</sup> On September 20, 2011, President Obama signed the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," ending the military's ban.

<sup>7</sup> President Obama on October 28, 2009 signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, enhancing penalties for crimes motivated by the victim's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity.

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