Making Luck

"Luck arranged things so that a baby named
Malachi Constant was born the richest child
on Earth. On the same day, luck arranged
things so that a blind grandmother stepped on
a roller skate at the head of a flight of cement
stairs, a policeman's horse stepped on an organ
grinder's monkey, and a paroled bank robber
found a postage stamp worth nine hundred
dollars in the bottom of a trunk in his attic."
Kurt Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*

Three days after I moved to New York City, ready to conquer adulthood and more confident than ever that I was truly the ruler of my own destiny, the sound of an airplane flying into the World Trade Center woke me up. I turned on the television and, for a while, forgot I was actually there, that this was happening outside my door. I didn't know which way the avenues ran or where to go when bad things happened. I didn't know anyone except for my cat, who ventured out from wherever she'd been hiding from the city noise, sniffing the new silence.

From my roof I watched traffic backing up across

bridges, towers smoking like unfiltered cigarettes, the stunned and stilted peeling away from the carnage. After the first tower fell, I decided to head north. A cab already carrying four passengers stopped for me. They all knew people who might be dead; they all also had families and friends to be with. I haunted the line between lucky and unlucky.

During the next dusty stretch of days, I walked the eerily empty streets wearing a surgical mask pressed into my hand by a Red Cross volunteer, watched by the hundreds of faces on missing posters. Everyone was exceedingly polite—there was no honking at busy intersections, no birds being flipped, no expletives. Most of us were shell-shocked, but staying numb took work. The bars were packed; when we were drunk, everything made equally little sense.

The economic repercussions of September 11 landed like a suckerpunch—we all saw it coming just in time to realize there was no avoiding it. Hiring freezes and layoffs swept the city. The nonprofit organization I was supposed to work for withdrew their offer. My bank account hemorrhaged. The owner of the apartment I was subletting sold the building, and I needed a new place to live.

A few days after 9/11, I sat on my bedroom floor, overwhelmed by the mess around me. If you've ever

put off cleaning your room for months, you know what this is like. You look around, disaster everywhere, and can't figure out how or where to start. I called my best friend, Mark, for consolation.

What he said was, "well, we do make our own luck."

As the words registered, I felt accused and insulted and shamed. What could I possibly have done to cause the apartment problem, the job retraction, the flying of planes into buildings? He wasn't blaming me for September 11, but he was suggesting that I fit into it somehow, or that it fit into me. I argued that I had no control over the events happening around me. Yet what he said disconcerted me; it presupposed that I was a powerful force—an unbelievable and terrifying proposition. And I had to wonder: if we make our own luck, what does that say about the people who were on the airplanes or trapped in the towers?

This is the same question I ask myself whenever something horrible happens to someone, especially someone I know. Especially me.

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I had no job and no friends, which left too much time to think, and transformed 9/11 into a diving board for endless ruminations. This tragedy wasn't

about my personal philosophies or attempts to square myself with the ways of the world, but I didn't know what else to do with it. By the time it occurred to me to donate blood, all the blood banks in the city were full. Mayor Giuliani told residents that there were too many volunteers at Ground Zero and asked us to check back in a couple weeks. Even when I wandered the streets, my mind moved more than my feet. I couldn't clean up the mess and I couldn't stop thinking about what it all meant.

When marathon sessions in front of the television grew overwhelming and tiresome, I moved to the bookshelf to seek comfort in the familiar wear of spines and the smell of old paper. Certain books had morphed in meaning in the past week, such as *Skinny Legs and All*, *White Noise*, and most of my science fiction; the cover of *Underworld* had become uncanny and foreboding. In my head, I posed questions to my library as though consulting an oracle. My thumb grazed the purple cover of Kurt Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan* and stopped. The idea that the foibles of luck render obsessing about one's purpose in life a waste of time and energy resonated deeply. A couple hundred pages in, the protagonist, Malachi Constant, finally realizes that he has no control over the trajectory of his life:

"'What happened to you?' said the congregation...

'I was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all,' he said.

The cheering and dancing began again."

As I skimmed through, Vonnegut seemed to pat my knee and tell me that nothing was my fault. Like Malachi Constant, my present circumstance was created by a series of accidents, dice rolls, short straws. Bad luck. Initially, I found the idea comforting—what was Mark's flippant psychobabble next to the infinite wisdom of Kurt Vonnegut?

If luck is the force that moves the world, not everything is about me, or you, or anyone—perhaps not much is. As I stood, my hand pressed to the book as though it were a Bible, I realized that accepting my luck, or the sheer arbitrariness of my situation, was tantamount to admitting that there was nothing I could do, now or ever. While there's a certain comfort in powerlessness and in the idea that all we can do is keep going, I found it problematically passive.

If we embrace blind luck, we cede our agency and disconnect ourselves from cause and effect. Luck removes us from personal fault and responsibility, but it feels like an empty explanation, a cop out. 9/11 was a consequence of years of logistical planning, as

well as hatred toward the U.S. and its policies. The towers fell because planes flew into them; that part wasn't luck. The haziness comes in when I consider the people involved in 9/11 through no choice of their own—the people on the planes, in the towers, on the sidewalk. Even people like me, outsiders suddenly thrust into a crumbling labyrinth to discover that the path people had used to find their way before didn't exist anymore. All of us who felt disoriented, like we'd been strapped half-conscious into a seat on the Tilt-A-Whirl, unable to get off.

In *Sirens of Titan*, Malachi Constant fumbles his way through a life that, unbeknownst to him, has been laid out. He commits the folly of believing in his own agency, and then we simultaneously wince and laugh as we realize that he's a pawn in a ridiculously specific and poignantly absurd grand scheme. Vonnegut chides us for becoming so consumed with the search for meaning that our purpose in life becomes finding out our purpose in life. However, Vonnegut was a humanist, which means that he believed in people's ability to learn, to change, and to determine the course of their lives. He didn't believe that life is just a series of accidents, and neither do I.

The tricky part is that just when I think I've got some part of this figured out, something else happens

to make me reconsider. A few years later, when my Dad was diagnosed with stage-four cancer, I wasn't so sure. Mark's words haunted me again, this time taking on an even more personal heft than they had before. My dad hadn't made this luck for himself, had he? He was relatively young, strong, and healthy; he exercised, drank only occasionally, didn't smoke, lacked a genetic disposition for cancer, and had hardly been sick a day in his life. What's more, he was engaged with life, excited and stimulated by his job teaching political science, and by his various hobbies, including golfing, swimming, and collecting buttons. In my mind, he lived exactly the way people *should* live. So what insidious force in the world was to blame for his cancer, and for his death? Or was it simply an accident, a turn of bad luck? And from which of these two possibilities could I glean any understanding or solace?

Buddhists believe that nothing is an accident; that luck (or lack thereof), skills, and even the way someone looks are all results of past actions. What we've done in our previous lives determines the qualities, including luck itself, we possess in our current lives. If something appears to happen by chance, it's because we don't yet understand the relationship. We can make or change our luck over

the course of a few lifetimes, but we're born into our current lives with a finite amount of luck.

The idea of luck being finite raises all sorts of questions. Can we stockpile it by staying away from Vegas and the stock market? Can we use it all up in one glorious burst, or is it meted out? Since luck exists in both quantity and quality, do some people get a heap of better-than-average luck and others a dash of extraordinary luck? 9/11 generated stories of near-misses, people whose alarms failed to go off that morning, thus saving their lives, or the secretary who had just stepped out to make a bagel run. How much luck did these people use by surviving that day? Did the people who didn't survive simply run out of luck?

In the Hindu system of karma, one can actually earn luck, so presumably one needn't run out. Karma also connects luck to cause and effect; beneficial events result from past beneficial actions and harmful events from past harmful actions. Karma accumulates and returns, sometimes unexpectedly, years or decades later, or in one's next life. Good actions build good karma, which generates good luck, suggesting that good luck can be earned and is linked to what one deserves.

Any system that guides us toward earning luck is incompatible with the idea that luck is random, which

is especially confusing in the context of 9/11. After Dad's diagnosis, I would sift through these incompatibilities again and again. As much as I want to believe in a universal system of fairness, under which we ultimately get what we deserve, I would rather believe that bad luck causes bad things happen to good people than to believe that good people did something along the way to deserve what they got.

Sometimes, I feel I've earned good luck when I've suffered a run of bad. This line of thought isn't really about earning anything—it's about the law of averages, the assertion that luck functions like the economy, that a boom follows a depression. During hard times, we can console ourselves with the belief that our luck is bound to change. This also means that good fortune won't or can't go unchallenged for long, so we can either appreciate our good luck while it lasts or wait for the other shoe to drop. Next to the complexities of luck and karma, the tendency toward the mean provides a practical and mathematical explanation for luck's vicissitudes. Then again, as Vonnegut says, "some people are lucky and other people aren't and not even a graduate of Harvard Business School can say why."

On September 11, 26-year-old Hilda Yolanda Mayol, an employee at a restaurant on the ground

floor of the World Trade Center, escaped before the building collapsed. Two months later, American Airlines Flight 587 crashed into a neighborhood in Queens, killing all 260 passengers, including Hilda Yolanda Mayol, who was on her way to the Dominican Republic for a vacation. As dissatisfying as the explanation might be, I prefer thinking that Hilda was a victim of a series of accidents, an unfortunate recipient of a big dose of bad luck, rather than thinking that she earned this outcome. I feel the same way about my dad. However, unlike my dad's situation, Hilda's luck doesn't appear random—though of course it could be a coincidence that she was involved in both tragedies, it's hard to avoiding concluding that her luck seemed geared toward a specific outcome, namely, her untimely death. If luck has an agenda, I'm even more wary of its role in shaping our lives.

Before I moved to New York, I travelled to Morocco. Within a single city such as Fez or Marrakesh, there's an old city and a new city. The new city has McDonald's, alcohol, and women in short skirts, whereas the old city, the Medina, has no electricity or running water. The clay walls of the alleyways are covered with sticks that distill sunlight into the grey of in-betweens, the color of the donkeys that walk by. Kids work at the tannery, pressing skins with their bare feet while

they rub their swollen bellies. School is a room carved out of large rock where students sit on the ground and strain to read stone tablets.

I've never felt so lucky and humbled simply to have been born to my parents in Michigan, to be who I am. These kids weren't so lucky. Neither were the Berbers on the trains who had to handcuff baskets of marketplace goods to their wrists, afraid that someone might steal them should they fall asleep. Had they done something in a previous life to warrant being born into their circumstances or was it luck? I wonder how much luck I've used up just being me. I wonder how it is decided who gets to be born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and who will be born in the Medina where the donkeys and the people drink from the same trough.

Perhaps it's reductive, but I can't shake the notion that someone's behind the curtain. Luck, even if random, is a force with energy and movement. It has to come from somewhere—every force has a genesis. Is luck born like a thunderclap when certain conditions exist? What or who is luck? Karma raises the same question—if karma is a reaction, who or what is reacting? Who or what determines the poetic justice that will extend over multiple lifetimes? Karma is a system, which suggests that it needs to be managed.

Luck seems to be a system too, though I can't discern what rules or ruler governs it. If luck operates on a scale or system, why can't the outcomes be programmed or predicted?

If nothing else, luck is thick with idiosyncrasies; when luck sticks its finger in the pot and stirs things up, it evades understanding. Chewing over luck's inner-workings is like running in a hamster wheel. Even if we can't make sense of luck, we can make sense of the choices we make in its wake, which brings me back to Mark's comment and our power to change things.

The idea that I can release energy into the world that will somehow come back to me seems naive, even hokey. Sometimes I think the world is too complicated for an idea like that. Other times, I think it's so simple and obvious that it must be true; perhaps impossibility is more perception than physics. Of course a person's outlook can change things, but can it actually make luck? It's egocentric to believe that the ripples spreading from my choices can actually change the world. Except, isn't that what we're supposed to believe? The power of one person—each of us—to change the world?

We have the power to transform our surroundings, whether it's by leveling a rainforest, building a house, or planting flowers. Given my transience, I wasn't sure how to use this power beyond packing and unpacking.

Then I met Liz. Her apartment wasn't any bigger or nicer than anyone else's, but you'd walk inside and feel comfortable, lighter, like you're breathing different air. I asked her how she did it and she introduced me to feng shui, an ancient Chinese system of environmental arrangement by which the intentional placement of objects produces energy that changes one's life. Initially, I was skeptical. Feng shui seemed like reason to go overboard with Oriental furnishings—Liz had dragons, coins, bamboo, water foundations, and crepe lanterns. Still, it wasn't what she had—it was how everything was arranged. Harmonious placement, or the successful practice of feng shui, makes spaces *feel* good.

Feng shui is an easy and risk-free way to try and change one's life, and it's fun to move furniture around like an interactive puzzle until the pieces click. The guidelines of feng shui involve being clear in your intentions when placing objects. It makes sense that where we put our stuff affects the energy of a space—if we're haphazard about the objects that surround us, we surrender control of our environment. September 11 proved how little environmental control we sometimes have, but when it comes to our personal space, we don't have to surrender that control. "You wouldn't let someone else dress you every day, would you?" Liz asked.

The proof that feng shui works isn't a specific outcome. If you rearrange the furniture or change the lighting you're already realizing your control over your environment. It works because you're *moving*, which is the only way to change. Even just swapping the coffee table and the couch can help people recapture a feeling of agency and believe in the possibility of other changes. Of course, all the feng shui in the world couldn't cure Dad's cancer, but it would be silly to think that it could. What it did do was to alleviate, at least a little bit, that pervasive feeling of impotence one has when she can't fix something or someone. While engaged in moving objects in the health area of my parents' home, I felt some amount of control, even if it was only temporary. Maybe he was humoring me, but my dad seemed to feel it too as he helped me pick out a new plant for that part of the house, a new mobile to hang, a new color to introduce. We were both engaged in the task of changing our environment, which at least for one afternoon, made us both feel that we were doing something to make the situation better.

Practicing feng shui, especially after 9/11, may be the closest I've come to making luck. A few weeks after I carefully set up the career area of my bedroom, I found a job as a paralegal. My cat and I moved into

a nicer apartment. My life began to feel manageable. Then, during the second night at the new apartment, one of my roommates left the patio window open and in the morning, my cat was gone. The patio led, through a series of narrow openings and curled fencing, to the roof of an adjacent house, then to another, and another. I walked these rooftops, but Zola was nowhere to be found. I waited, hoping she was just hiding, anxious about the new apartment, but by the third day it was clear she was missing. My cat, who had been my constant and sometimes only companion since college, and who had never before been outdoors, was somewhere out there on the mean streets of Manhattan, lost.

I risked my new job by calling in sick. I plastered flyers around the neighborhood and walked streets calling her name. I felt as though the world had collapsed. My cat was gone and my life—and, it seemed, the very future of the universe—hung in the balance. Karma or chance or luck could take jobs and apartment buildings, but taking my cat, especially after all that had happened, was hitting below the belt.

I took another day off work. I sat on the floor with my legs tucked under me, feeling like a lost five-year-old. My tiny room stuffed with moving boxes

suddenly seemed huge, a space I could never inhabit no matter how much unpacking or rearranging I did. The world, which a couple of weeks earlier had wobbled precariously, had simply stopped making sense. I didn't understand the way it worked, but I knew I didn't want to be in a world that worked this way.

Again, I found myself wandering the streets, this time in search of something specific. When I wasn't looking for Zola, my thoughts once again tangled like yarn and found their way back to Vonnegut, whose life demonstrates how the world works, or doesn't. In 1944, on Mother's Day, his mother committed suicide. Later that year, the Germans captured Vonnegut during the Battle of the Bulge. When the Allied forces firebombed Dresden, Vonnegut was one of seven American POWs who survived; in what seems to be a stroke of bizarre luck, he happened to be working in an underground meat locker at the time of the attack.

Vonnegut smoked unfiltered Pall Mall cigarettes from the age of 12 and joked about suing Pall Mall's manufacturer: "I'm eighty-three years old. The lying bastards! On the package Brown & Williamson promised to kill me. Their cigarettes didn't work." In 1984, Vonnegut tried to kill himself with pills and

alcohol. In 2000, he was in bed watching the Super Bowl when his ashtray overturned and started a fire. He didn't die until 2007.

Vonnegut's life exemplifies luck at its most confusing and complex. He tried to die and he couldn't, thereby turning luck on its head—unlucky to live and lucky to die. Then again, if he hadn't lived through so much, he wouldn't have written *Sirens of Titan* or *Slaughterhouse Five*. He wrote *Sirens of Titan* as satire because the innerworkings of life are ridiculous, and our attempts to force them into order only make them more ridiculous. However, Vonnegut does believe in choice—we can choose to be victims, or to smoke three packs a day, or to laugh in the face of life's oddities. We can choose to believe in luck, karma, coincidence, or God. We can choose to believe in our ability to react and to change the world, however much or however little.

I tried to stop grasping at cosmic explanations for the events of that sunny Tuesday morning and for all that followed. While losing Zola was, ironically, even more personally devastating than 9/11, it provided a smaller problem to solve. If I couldn't do anything about 9/11 and its many implications, I *had* to find the cat. There was simply no alternative, especially if I wanted to restore some sense of balance in my life.

On my third day off work, in the backyard of a Nigerian art gallery about a block away, I found Zola crouched, literally scared stiff, behind a woodpile. Back at my apartment, I watched her slowly realize that, somehow, she was home. Saved. The world regained a recognizable shape. That is, until the next time something turned my world upside down, which I'm learning never stops happening. What does change, though, is the meaning we glean from these experiences—or rather, the meaning we give these experiences.

I knew just how improbable it was that I found Zola. Cosmically, I'm not sure I understand why I found her, just as I didn't understand why I'd lost her in the first place. How much was luck and how much was me? Perhaps it didn't matter—at least for the moment, the world spun a bit straighter on its axis and I stood straighter on mine. The mess was still there, but it didn't seem so bad anymore. Just as the cranes downtown moved metal girders one by one, I picked up a piece—at first, it was as small and simple as a sock—and started moving. For the first time, I understood why people sing when they clean.