



I'm very pleased to recommend Julia Lehman's story "Metadata" for an award. I have checked off the graduate category of the Sampson awards, but if another category is more appropriate, please consider moving it. This is a creative story, not a research paper, but it seemed to me that graduate students should be able to submit creative work also.

It's interesting to me that this is one of two stories written last semester in the same class dealing with a 9-11 or a 9-1-1 response. Julia Lehman's is a personal response to 9-11. The story takes place on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> when the attack happened, and the narrator in the story, an involved and dedicated business person reevaluates her life as a result of the attack.

Julia uses fictional techniques, such as characterization, dialogue, flashback, to tell the story, and she does this quite proficiently. I believe the story is close to her own life, but she chose to fictionalize it. As a result of class discussion and comments from me, she rewrote the story, fine-tuning it, creating more of a sense of character, especially with Heather and Cam.

*Karen Loeb*

## Metadata

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114 10<sup>th</sup> ST SE, Rochester, MN—a two-bedroom ranch on a quiet street, tan with brown shutters. It was the hardwood floors and the crown molding that I fell in love with, the fireplace, the finished basement, and the gigantic picture window looking into the backyard. Two houses down from my sister and brother-in-law. I never imagined I'd be a homeowner—25 years old and having my own housewarming party.

“I can't believe you own a house—all on your own. You are a *real* adult now.” Heather was my best friend since 1<sup>st</sup> grade, the single parent of a five-year-old daughter. She aspired to be a photojournalist, but verified insurance claims instead, afraid of being a full-time mother *and* a college student.

“I know,” I said. “It seems just yesterday I was still in college.” I glanced at my dining room table, littered with food—cheese and crackers, tiramisu, slender bottles of red and white wine. About twenty friends were scattered about the living room, kitchen, and dining room, eating, drinking, chatting, and playing cards. Heather, Carley, and I were nestled by the fireplace. It had been a long time since we'd seen each other—too long.

“New car too,” Carley said. “Although I miss your old Pontiac Sunbird, with those obnoxious green feminist bumper stickers Heather gave you. What did those bumper stickers say anyway? I can't remember.” Carley was visiting from Cancun, Mexico, where she had moved several years ago. She had a degree in French and International Business,

and went to Guadalajara to teach English but ended up in Cancun doing computer programming for an American contractor.

“If you feel attacked by feminism, it’s probably a counter-attack.” I could never forget what those bumper stickers said—they brought back so many memories of college. I touched my thumb to my index finger, feeling one of the band aids on my fingertips.

“Speaking of those bumper stickers, whatever happened to your backpack—the one with all the crazy patches on it?” Heather said. We sipped blackberry wine from tall, narrow glasses, the stems and bases accented in purple glass, a beaded pewter charm around the base of each. They were the trendy kind of charms that mark a glass as your own. I had the star. Carley had the moon. Heather had the sun.

“What about it?” I answered.

“Well I noticed earlier you were using a plain black backpack and it reminded me of that green one you had in college. Didn’t it have all kinds of crazy stuff all over it?”

“Yep. Patches from all the places I traveled. My mom sewed them all on as I collected them. San Diego. Dallas. Atlanta. Some miniature metal license plates from other places. And then I guess there were things I liked, like cats and rainbows. Kinda like a scrapbook I guess. I bought that new black one to take to Chicago. I guess I’ve kind of retired the green one.”

“No backpacks, no bumper stickers. What else have you retired? Next thing you know, you’ll be outgrowing us.” Carley chided me. “By the way, what are all those band aids on your hands, anyway?” I didn’t have time to answer; Heather had already changed the subject.

“Carley and I had this conversation on the way over here—about being happy,” Heather said as she handed me my housewarming gift. I tore open the paper, shiny silver with sparkling suns. It was a book. It said ‘Home Sweet Home’ on the cover, a scrapbook for the house, lined with pages for pictures, paint colors, and redecorating projects.

“Thank you!” I said. “This is great! What were you saying about being happy?”

“Are *you* happy?” Heather asked.

“*Happy?*” I wondered. I let it roll around in my mind, like a small object gaining momentum. I was a successful writer for a large software company. I was 25 years old and I owned a house. I had been to Europe, and all over the U.S. I had enjoyed the nicest restaurants, quarterly bonuses, golf outings, courtside NBA games, and stock options. This life had been good to me—or, was it that I was good at this kind of life? Everything about me looked good on paper.

“How do you define *happy?*” Carley wondered aloud.

Happy...I thought. The word tasted foreign, in a way that was light and liberating. Were we happy? Did we even know? Tomorrow I would be packing for my business trip to Chicago, filling that new, lifeless black backpack with papers and projects. Carley and Heather had driven over 100 miles to see me, and tomorrow they would pack up and head back to Wisconsin, leaving me and my lonely house to ourselves in Minnesota.

When I pressed POWER, snowy, fuzzy dots crawled all over every channel. The cable was out in my hotel room, but I decided this would not be a disruption of my routine; instead, I took it as a cue for some necessary silence. I didn’t even turn on the radio.

Without the sound bytes of CNN, I heard only my own noises: the shower, hairdryer, and

the coffeepot. Looking out the window I saw the miniature movements of the massive, extraordinary city ten floors below. I had only recently started experimenting with coffee and I tried with little success to brew a pot. I never drank coffee when I was in college. During those exhausting days of class, work, and studying, I never drank coffee.

Aside from coffee, data has become my staple currency: collecting, querying, reporting, forecasting, and predicting. It's the reason I am here today, I thought, to talk about data. Five years ago, I didn't know what data was. A grocery list? A checkbook register? A spreadsheet? All of the above, but I have come to know a specific type of data—the kind that is gathered instantly, from point-of-sale retail, industrial, and manufacturing systems, and propagated into colossal multidimensional databases known as data warehouses, where all possible combinations of data are pre-calculated, enabling instant queries—instant answers to any question you might ask that data. Instant data means immediate reaction. I go with it for the same reason I started drinking coffee—not so much for the taste, but for the way it makes me feel.

My thoughts were truncated by a rapping on my door, and I immediately grabbed my black backpack and company ID, which featured my picture with 'Athena Atkins' printed below it in a tidy black font. I left my hotel room to join my coworkers in the hotel lobby: two product managers, three software engineers, and several company VPs.

I saw Cam first, the VP of Research and Development. Dressed in a black pinstriped suit with a scarlet red scarf around her neck, Cam was only in her late twenties, not even four years older than me. Cam had hired me, and like me she had a degree in Literature. Back then we were something like friends, but she had grown distant as she climbed the

ranks, having started out as a writer, becoming a manager, and then a VP. She lived in Chicago now.

“All the executives were going for dinner and I said we should go *low-brow* and get beer and appetizers at Margaritaville on the strip. We went to a four-star restaurant instead. I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu, which was \$38 and amounted to a chicken breast with a quail egg on top.” Cam had a new kind of life that she was describing to the others. Everyone laughed. They were buying her still-a-down-to-earth-Minnesota-girl image. She turned and made eye contact with me as I approached, still laughing at her own joke.

“Hi Cam,” I said.

“Hey Athena,” she said. “It’s been quite a while. How are things going?”

Cam had that mom-like attitude, like she *seemed* to be concerned about me—well, about my career. But she went on with her next question before I had a chance to answer.

“Here’s my new business card. Send me an email, I’d love to catch up. Oh, there’s Doug—I’ve gotta get him to sign off on something before the meeting this morning. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Cam turned on her heel in a swish, her black suit, briefcase, and red scarf rising and then trailing behind her as she rushed after Doug, the VP of Emergent Technologies. I looked at her business card. Cam Noonan. Vice President of Research and Development. Everything firmly outlined by the red Company logo in fat red block letters. Broadway font, I thought. She always told me to email her, but she never actually answered. She hadn’t offered to have dinner or catch up in person while I was in Chicago.

Outside, we headed west on Wacker Drive for a hike to the Company corporate headquarters in the Sears Tower. My manager Jack appeared by my side, reminding me of

my new responsibilities in project management. He was in his late thirties, and his hair was thinning on top; he combed the hair he had up and over to cover his widening baldness. As he lost more hair, his body got bigger and bulkier. He had started weight lifting.

“Now, remember,” Jack said reticently as he walked beside me, pulling me behind the group, “What’s happening is a merger, not an acquisition. During the meeting, emphasize the tactical and strategic benefits of streamlining our organizational business models, but we must also leverage our expertise in deploying profitable business solutions.”

Jack was my manager, mentor, and my friend—he could simultaneously interpret and read between the lines of the corporate conversation, gathering information that was, even after three years, difficult territory for me to negotiate. I picked apart his phrase in my mind, and pieced it together. I comprehended the words, but I didn’t grasp the meaning.

I assumed my pseudo-confident voice. “Of course,” I said. “We need to assimilate ourselves into the new company but also keep ourselves unique.”

“What I’m saying,” he said, spelling it out for me, “is that we have to proactively justify our existence.”

There it was—the implied meaning I couldn’t see. Today we were walking a tenuous line of rhetoric: accepting the conventions of a new and larger company, yet clinging to our uniqueness as a way of validating our worth. At the meeting this morning, I would be pitching some of our products to the company we were part of, yet newly merged with. Everyone had been talking merger, yet “duplication of resources” was the underlying fear. We had to be good. I faced forward and kept walking toward my destination.

Ascending to the fourteenth floor of the tower, I remembered reading in a magazine that the Sears Tower was the tallest building in the world until 1996, when the Petronas Towers in Malaysia were erected with their 111-foot spires. From the top of the Sears Tower—the tallest building in North America—you can see for 35 miles. I tried to imagine even half that view—to see urban Chicago structures, thumbnail people, and Lake Michigan all rolling out for miles. I imagined a view that could make you feel like flying. When we exited the elevator high up in the Sears Tower, I saw the embossed Company logo engraved in opaque scarlet letters on the cracked-glass partitions, complete with semi-transparent flagship figures of data analysis: floating data models, lines of linear regression, neural networks, factor analysis, chi square tests, and cross-tabulated frequency tables.

This was my first physical presence at the Company headquarters—previously I had only constructed it in my mind, on conference calls with other writers and product managers whose faces remained unknown to me. I saw walls of red and white partitions and cubicles, hallways lined with conference rooms studded with padded office furniture, laptop docking systems, data projectors, and high-end phone conferencing systems.

A cacophony of ringing melodies emanated from the reception area, where a man in a black suit stood answering the calls. “The Company office is closed due to a security situation.” He seemed out of place, like he had been stationed in haste.

We lingered for a few moments, bewildered, as a group of men and women filled the hallway. One of them turned and looked directly at me. “Evacuate the building immediately. Don’t even wait for the elevators.”

We all looked at each other in confusion. We waited anyway. Cam appeared again.

“Something is going on,” she said, touching her manicured fingernail to her glossy lips in an uncharacteristic show of nervousness.

The others looked apprehensive as we lingered by the elevators, but I grinned smugly as I imagined an employee jumping out of her 7' x 5' cubicle, fulfilling her “Office Space” fantasies as she elbowed a small glass pane and yanked the fire alarm, all her restless energy embedded in one single pull to get out of the product development meeting or the perimeters of her cube. Perhaps I was even living a little vicariously. Back home in the Minnesota office, I would have been experiencing a similar routine: the chugging copy machine, the clicking of keyboards, the HR rep in the adjacent cube deliberating how to track consulting work for outside field reps, a discussion in the aisle about the effectiveness of calling the “software” a “solution.” Maybe even the 35 mile view gets oppressive after a while, I thought—maybe everything does.

We waited, but the elevator, which had only moments before taken us swiftly up many floors, was lost in the invisible shaft bisecting the Sears Tower’s 110 stories. The elevators had stopped. Maybe there really was an emergency.

“Follow me to the stairwell,” Cam ordered.

I lingered for a moment in the hallway until Jack tugged at my backpack, pulling me towards the rest of the group and winking.

“Hurry up, Athena. Pay attention. You can recite our strategic initiatives to me on the way down.” Just then, Rick, a new and enthusiastic product manager, joined the conversation. He had Cam’s drive and determination. The willingness to constantly talk the talk, to make connections. He had too much to lose with time *not* spent talking about strategic initiatives.

“Hurry, get going. Don’t waste any time,” I heard someone say.

We rushed down the hallway to the stairwell door, high heels and patent leather lace-ups clicking down the corridor in urgent staccato taps. At the stairwell entrance, all momentum stopped, absorbed by a wall of people easing down the stairs in slow motion. Movement was stalled. Tensions were high. Our feet urgently felt for the next step, our heads flowing downward, bodies oozing along like the sludgy backwaters of a forgotten river. Bodies were stalled. Minds were activated. We were helpless, like trying to run fast in thick water, slowly mixing with a mass of others who were descending one step at a time. I thought about the Sears Tower description I had read—how the Sears Tower covers two city blocks and rises a quarter mile—1,454 feet—above the ground, comprising 4.5 million square feet. I heard bits of many different conversations.

“Do you think the new web-based enterprise solution is as robust as the one deployed by the other business units?” Rick was questioning Jack. That’s not surprising, I thought, that they would still be talking shop in the middle of an emergency.

A young woman in front of me was on her cell phone. “I’m not sure what’s going on here, but we’re evacuating the building. Probably just another false alarm. Do you want to meet me for an early coffee break? I was starting to fall asleep at my computer anyway.” She dropped her phone and scrambled to retrieve it as we hit a bottleneck with people from the 12<sup>th</sup> floor merging into the stairwell.

The congestion was worse than riding a bus on the strip in Las Vegas—packed shoulder to shoulder, thousands of people caught in the flow, unable to navigate. I began to feel claustrophobic, but the magnitude of the crowd was impressive, this step-by-step descent gave me a new perspective. This hollow concrete stairwell, echoing with the

clustered shoulder-to-shoulder daily inhabitants of the building, inching their way down. I listened to the conversations around me and thought that this inside, unquantifiable view was really the essence of the Sears Tower. All its living innermost parts.

I was jolted from my introspection from the guys talking to each other beside me. “I was just catching the news before the alarm went off. Something about a plane down or something like that,” one of them said.

I began to have a familiar feeling—excited yet scared. Excited by the change in routine, yet scared about the possibility of something more than a fire alarm. What if people panicked? I began to feel extremely anxious. I picked at my fingernails and scabby cuticles, and wondered what Carley and Heather were doing. I had experienced these feelings before.

People had come from all over the world to attend the Company conference in Las Vegas. Hundreds of people packed into a large ballroom at the hotel conference site, just to see the opening ceremony of the Company conference. The Company name and logo were projected in fat, block scarlet letters on big screens to the left and right of the stage. The lights were dim, and Cam appeared, playing a marketing director for a fictional Company ABC in a skit that modeled the current Company initiative: the “predictive enterprise.” I was new then, and had only met Cam once or twice.

John, the Company CEO, called Cam to tell her that Company sales were down. “Fix it, Cam,” he said. The audience laughed. They identified with Cam already. “I don’t have time to deal with this. We’ve got stockholders to answer to.”

“Will do, John,” Cam replied.

Cam hung up the phone, and immediately logged in to the Company data management system. She looked at several reports as the audience watched on screen with the aid of a data projector. Within seconds she made an efficient diagnosis.

“Oh, it looks like customer retention rates are down on the internet banking accounts. We’ll send promotional materials to all internet banking customers; we’ll also contact them directly by phone to offer incentives and ensure customer satisfaction, which will also allow us to leverage additional cross-selling opportunities. Luckily, our customer-centric data system allows us to design credit cards and customized banking accounts that directly target customer needs.”

Promotions went out. Customers remained happy. Sales went up.

John called Cam back and praised her. “Well done, Cam. Sales are back up again.” John told us to aspire to the “predictive enterprise,” having the data that allows you to transform your customers from equity into assets. Quantifying and maximizing the approximate asset value of each customer. Driving data to address your business problems. I was a bit puzzled—I had never heard anything like this. It was interesting, but unsettling. Was he still talking about people—people as pure profit? I was excited, yet scared.

A representative from a Las Vegas casino came on stage to discuss how they had used the Company technology to implement Frequent Customer Cards. “One hour on a slot machine and we can project your usage rates and what kind of customer you’ll be. We instantly determine who will be the best customers and reward those customers.”

A VP of a grocery store chain discussed Frequent Shopper Cards. “We can determine customer life styles and shopping styles and design stores and promotions to target those customer needs. Now our stores are designed and built to match the

characteristics of the demographic group where the store is located.” He seemed to grin as he said it—a twinkle in his eye.

I saw Cam and other members of the Company executive group standing to the right of the stage. Cam had her arms folded, grinning smugly. She turned to Doug and whispered something in his ear. I removed one of my several band aids and began to pick at my cuticles, pulling the loose, rough skin of small hangnails into what would become large bloody scabs on tender and stinging fingers. I felt a tingling between my shoulder blades, and realized I was slouching, my shoulders curved and hunched forward in a tense position.

Cam and the others seemed thrilled by the showcase. This is what the Company was all about. I felt a little scared. Excited yet scared. Something didn’t quite seem to sit right with me. Something about viewing people as objects. Or maybe it was just a bad lunch.

Many flights later, inch by inch, the crowd clumped out onto Wacker Drive—a metastasizing mass of 10,000 people who work in the Sears Tower every day, and part of the additional 25,000 who visit daily. But it was not the numbers that made it extraordinary, it was the mix of Starbucks coffee; ringing cell phones; PDAs, portable headsets, and ear pieces; and slim laptops toted securely underarm. People sought familiar faces; some tried to continue meetings or conference calls. I heard planes fly overhead, and police and fire trucks arrived. No one seemed to wonder what was happening, but under all our business linings, I thought we probably thought about similar things—coffee, data, and CNN.

After a while, limbo set in, and restlessness began to grow among us.

“My cell phone still isn’t working,” I heard someone say for the hundredth time that morning. Bits of other evacuation scenarios sifted in from others who were equally

bewildered, similarly disconnected from their routines. I wished I was somewhere else.

Riding the Water Taxi on Lake Michigan, walking down Navy Pier, viewing the WWII submarine and fighter planes at the Museum of Science and Industry, watching the Cubs at Wrigley Field, or ordering Chicago deep-dish pizza with corn bread crust, the kind you can only get in Chicago.

“While we’re waiting, why don’t we walk down to Grant Park,” Jack said. My wish was partially answered, I thought.

We situated ourselves near the landscaped garden containing the Buckingham Fountain. That morning I had taken my cue for silence, and now, not two hours later, I took this as an unexpected cue for reflection. I listened to the conversations of those around me, briefing each other on leveraging strategic company objectives for growing the business units, increasing comprehensive product deployment, and implementing product champions to lead cross-selling initiatives. I felt myself drifting further from them. Everything seemed to be in a different language. I felt something like an itch, a mere hint of something I felt deeply, without having the words to label it. Whatever it is, I thought, it’s insidious. A fraction of unnoticed ounces at a time, and your shape has been altered. Perplexed by my thoughts, I left the group and headed towards the Buckingham Fountain.

“She’s alright, just a little introverted sometimes, you know,” I heard Jack talking to Rick as I walked away. I sat on the ledge of the Buckingham Fountain.

I remembered reading an article about the fountain on the plane. Built in 1927 by philanthropist Kate Buckingham, in memory of her brother, it seemed strange that this grand, 25-foot tiered fountain—one of the largest fountains in the world—was built as a memorial, a remembrance of someone who has passed, a reminder of mortality. It seemed

too much of a celebration to be a memorial, clad with pink marble seashells and water-spouting bronze seahorse sculptures symbolizing the four states touching Lake Michigan. Every hour, for twenty minutes, 133 jets propel water 150 feet high at 14,000 gallons per minute, creating a water capacity of 1.5 million gallons. It also seemed strange that in the heart of this 75+ year-old fountain lies the technology that generates this spectacular water show. And for some reason, I began to see myself, and who I used to be.

My high school English teacher had us write our obituaries. I don't remember what I wrote, but I'm sure it was an apt commemoration of who I was.

"People do the best they can for who they are at the time," she used to say.

She was right. When I started working for the Company, they gave us day planners—the kind you need a full-day training session for. Was this when I retired my green backpack and my feminist bumper stickers? I couldn't remember. I hadn't thought about those things in a long time before Carley and Heather brought it up. At the Company, they said the planner should be my daily "compass." We wrote Mission Statements in our planners, and on posters, creating a collage of sayings like "There are no such things as problems—only opportunities for growth." We took personality tests. My results said I was introverted with extroverted feeling—people in my category tend to be writers, counselors, or public servants. We talked about change management, business models, and the balanced scorecard effect. Soon we were all talking about "growing the business in vertical markets," "rolling out enterprise-wide customer solutions," and "leveraging our product scalability."

Sitting by the Buckingham Fountain, I couldn't imagine my obituary or even my Mission Statement; suddenly I could envision my life only as a case study in a business white paper—a corporate publication that, in the software industry, has a title like

“Predictive Analytics Yield Substantial ROI” or “Discover the Secrets in Your Data.” I began to look around myself and it was like looking at the tower through the stairwell view, or viewing myself from a new perspective. My life as a detailed case study showing how data analysis maximizes efficiency and increases productivity without increasing cost.

I thought of the conversation I’d had with Heather and Carley.

“Are you happy?” Heather had asked.

“How do you define happy?” Carley had wondered.

What is happy? I thought. Everything about me looked good on paper. But the view from within the harbor of the Sears Tower or from the chamber of the fountain is different from any other perspective—any numbers or standards or views. So I stepped outside of myself and looked from the outward perspective. Perhaps I had the empty, hollow chamber of the tower, or like the Buckingham Fountain, I was a memorial—a remembrance of who I once was.

I heard my cell phone ring. I had no idea how long it had been ringing, or how long it had been since I had last spoken to someone.

“Hello?” I answered, and I heard Heather’s voice.

“Are you there? Are you alright?” there was a sense of urgency in her voice, terror even. I was suddenly worried and confused. “I think you better try to get home right away,” she said, knowing I was in Chicago. “Can you get home?”

“What do you mean? Something strange is going on here,” I said.

“Oh my god,” she said. “You don’t know, do you?”

My mind raced with frightening possibilities. Had something happened to her daughter? Her wedding plans had fallen through? She had quit her job? I imagined all these scenarios, but not what she said next.

“We have been attacked by terrorists. The twin towers have fallen. All air traffic is grounded. You need to GET HOME NOW!!”

I heard a faint squeak, like air permeating a punctured airtight container, its contents rapidly losing form. Multiple visual perspectives converged into one convex bulge and I couldn't see anything but a crescent meniscus of the Buckingham fountain, the Sears Tower, and myself as I returned to my group of coworkers. My mind raced as I wondered where my parents were, and if they had heard the news, and where Carley was and if she was ok.

As I approached my coworkers, two businessmen stopped in front of them.

“Have you heard the news? one of them said to my coworkers. “The World Trade Center has been hit by airplanes. Terrorists. Maybe the Pentagon too.”

“O-o-oh my God,” Jack stuttered, his verbal finesse leaving him for the moment. All the shop talk had finally ceased. There was silence.

“All air traffic is grounded,” the other man said. “We're going to try to get train tickets out of town.”

We all stood around for a few moments, not sure what to do until Cam called us together in a huddle and coolly gave us our options.

“You can stay and wait this out. Who knows how long before you can fly back. Or you can try to get on a train. You might have to rent a car in Milwaukee. I could call ahead and try to see if we can secure one under our executive account.”

“Let’s go home, NOW,” I said, surprised at the sound of my own voice. Everyone stopped and stared at me, as if I had performed a magic trick or taken my clothes off.

“Alright,” Jack said. “Let’s run for it. See what happens.”

Frantically, we took green trains and red trains and Amtraks and stood in lengthy, branching lines of people.

All I could think about was data. What is “data?” I wondered as we waited, just as I had wondered about the word “happy.” I thought about the clients that had spoken at the Company conference. How their data systems enabled them to track purchases and tailor their product suggestions. How the grocery stores tracked customer purchases through the Frequent Shopper Card. I began to understand what I had felt at the conference that day—that excited yet scared feeling. However it was defined, data meant power. I thought about how much data was out there, and what kind of data those terrorists had, and how they obtained it. I wondered what kind of data I had enabled others to have. I wondered what kind of data people had about me.

Cam left us that day.

“It was nice catching up,” she said before she left, taking a select group of the Company executives and VPs with her back to her Chicago townhouse. As if we had caught up. She had not invited me. “Have a safe trip,” she said. I was sure she meant it, but I was not sure she knew who she was anymore. I wasn’t sure I knew who I was anymore.

As I watched her turn and walk away, I realized I hated myself for liking the money at the expense of my life meaning something. I wanted to scream at her, “I just want my life to *mean* something! That is all I ever wanted! That is what they led us to believe in college—that our lives could *mean* something! And look at me now! Look at *you* now! What does it

*really* matter if we spend the next twenty years building “software solutions” and leading corporate initiatives?!!!!” But I said nothing.

I called Heather. “You have to tell Carley!” I yelled.

“Slow down...quiet down...what are you talking about?” she questioned, unable to comprehend my craziness. Her daughter was competing for attention in the background, “Mommy, mommy, mommmmmmmmy!”

“I think I know what happy means to me,” I told her. “It means you are true to who you *really* are. That your life is in synch with who you are inside.”

“Yeah, so....what does this mean?” she said, pulling me toward my conclusion.

“I have not been happy for sometime,” I told her. “I am one person in my life and career, and then I am someone different inside. I need to leave this life behind, go back to school or get a different job. Before I become Cam. Before I am too embedded.”

We talked for hours as I stood and waited among thousands of people with the same mission—to get out of town, to get home, to feel comfort. After 12 hours of traveling, waiting, wondering, I made it home. At 10:30 pm Tuesday evening, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, I sat down on my couch, and I turned on CNN.

Metadata. My life as a living discussion of data, crafted out of the discourse of data. This is what my life was like, I thought. This is how I would describe it, if I were to write about it. I stopped in the hallway, reached into my green backpack and pulled out my journal to write it down. I had recently gotten a new job, teaching software training at a university, and I was attending graduate school. I had decided I wanted to teach English.

I was attending the Company conference for my new job, this time as a client and not as an employee of the Company. I walked down the hall, feeling strangely light, contemplating metadata, when I came face-to-face with Cam.

“Hi Cam,” I said, swallowing quickly to reduce the size of the lump in my throat.

“Hey Athena,” she said, her eyes suddenly wide with surprise. She tugged at the red scarf around her neck as if it had suddenly become too tight. “It’s been quite a while. How are things going? Here’s my new business card. Send me an email, I’d love to catch up.”

I looked at the card. Cam Noonan. Vice President of Research and Development. Everything outlined by the red Company logo in fat block letters. Broadway font, I thought.

Something seemed awkward and I realized it was because Cam hadn’t run away yet.

“So what happened?” she said. I hadn’t talked to her after I left the Company. Surprising, I thought, no Company talk, no business jargon, just “What happened?”

“I sold my house, quit my job, and went back to school,” I told her, matter of factly. “I’m teaching software training at the university.”

“Really? That sounds...interesting...” She sounded like she wanted to know more.

“Yeah. I am teaching. I train students how to use software they need to complete their assignments. It’s fun seeing what they’re trying to do—build web sites, make digital videos, conduct research—I learn a lot from their questions.”

“Don’t you miss *it*?”

“The Company, you mean? Not really. What I do now is really not that much different. Well, I guess there is one big difference.”

“What?” Cam asked, as if it really hadn’t occurred to her. This was the most she had ever spoken to me. It actually seemed like she was interested.

“Well, *you know*,” I said, “the goal is student learning instead of corporate profit.”

“But what about the *money*, the *advancement*,” Cam questioned. “You could have been at my level by now...if you had *wanted* it. What about your house, your car?”

“I was afraid of losing all that for a long time, but then I realized I never really needed all that to begin with. Sometimes that stuff just doesn’t matter anymore.”

What else could I tell her? That what I felt at the Buckingham Fountain didn’t surface there, but had deep roots? That I could no longer live in a world I felt was complacent and disingenuous? That all my measures of success and happiness had not truly been my own, but part of many social expectations about what your life should be like, and what should make you happy?

She looked at me with blank eyes, as if I was an alien that had intruded on her world. I had chosen my words carefully, sensing that Cam had experienced the same feelings I did, but successfully subverted her fears and dreams to the lifestyle her success had provided. If there was still a chance for Cam, she saw it when she came face-to-face with me. In a sense, we were each other’s worst nightmare.

I took one last shot.

“Cam, do you ever want anything different? I asked. “Even if it doesn’t make any sense financially or logistically?”

She lowered her head and backed up a little, white cards with fat block scarlet letters dancing to the ground.