In 1964 there occurred a bizarre crime in New York City that catalyzed two young psychologists to investigate HIttness behavior. Although John Darley and Bibb Latane were not Jewish, and never explicitly or implicitly tied their work to Nazi Germany, the results of their experiments in human helping behavior have been used in the service of a particular twentieth-century Western obsession: comprehending the Holocaust. Darley and Latane devised a series of experiments wherein they tested the conditions necessary for people to ignore one another's cries for aid, and the conditions wherein compassion holds sway. In some ways similar to Milgram's experiment on the surface, Darley and Latane's work has deeper significant differences. Milgram was looking at obedience to a single authority. Darley and Latane were looking at the opposite: what happens when, in a group crisis, there is no authority to take charge.

I. YOU, THE POTENTIAL HELPER, MUST NOTICE AN EVENT IS OCCURRING

Yesterday I ordered my gas masks, one for the baby, one for me. My husband thinks this is crazy and refuses to be included. It
is September 26, 2001, early fall, lyrical light, the Twin Towers down but still smoldering. Not long ago I received an email that read:

Warning: Germ Warfare

Do not open any blue envelope from The Klingerman Foundation if it comes to you in the mail. These supposed "gifts" contain small sponges loaded with the Klingerman virus, which has so far killed twenty Americans . . .

 Probably a hoax, but still. In a congressional white paper of far more authority I recently read how easy it would be to disseminate anthrax: put the virus in an aerosol bottle, depress the plastic nozzle, and watch the white mist rise into the air. My husband says, "Let's focus on the real emergency, which is the decline of civil liberties and the buildup of troops in the Persian Gulf." But what is the real emergency? The situation in this country is suddenly so ambiguous, difficult to decipher. Therefore, I have ordered my gas masks—it has come to this—from a military supply store in Virginia. They arrive at my door in a swift twenty-four hours, and now I unpack them. I am surprised to see that beneath the plain cardboard carton, the masks are delicately, even lovingly wrapped, the way some soaps are, in pale green tissue paper that emits a soft lavender scent. I unwrap the tissue paper, layer after luscious crumpled layer, until I get to the source, until I see the shock of black rubber, the canisters shaped like snouts, the straps with big buckles, and the shield for the eyes. Here they are. Perhaps I have overreacted. John M. Darley and Bibb Latane, two psychologists who have studied the human propensity to deny emergencies, might say no. "Given the work of Darley and Latane," says psychiatrist Susan Mahler, "we should now know that the best way to respond to possible crisis is to err on the side of caution." Now I pick up my gas mask and try it on. It fits to my face with a loud sucking sound. The gas mask for my daughter is really unbearable. It is so small, such a dense miniaturization of horror. I hold it in my hand. I call her over and try to put it on her, but she backs away, cries out, of course. Help is so hard to give.
In 1964, John Darley and Bibb Latane had little interest in studying styles of crisis management. They were two young psychologists, assistant professors trying to rise through the ranks of academia. Then something happened. I offer the details here not for their obvious shock value, but because they underscore how bizarre were the responses of the thirty-eight witnesses who saw the scene and offered no assistance.

It was March 13, Friday the thirteenth actually, in the year 1964. The early predawn hours in Queens, New York, were cool and moist, breezes carrying the scent of snow. Catherine Genovese, commonly called Kitty, was coming home from her late-night shift at the bar where she worked as a manager. Genovese, twenty-eight, was a slender woman with punkish black hair and a delicate pixy face. Her eyes were gem-green. She drove her car into a parking lot adjacent to her apartment, where she lived alone.

She pulled her car into a space and stepped out. It was 3 A.M. She noticed, just after her first strides toward her building, a hunched figure in the distance, a suspicious-looking man, so she quickly veered right, toward the police call box on the corner.

Catherine Genovese never made it to the call box. The man, later identified as Winston Moseley, screwed a knife deep into her back, and then, when she turned to face him, deep into her gut as well, and there was blood. She screamed. She said, specifically, these words: "Oh my god! He stabbed me! Please help me! Please help me!" Immediately, lights flickered on in the crowded urban neighborhood. Moseley saw them. In his trial he said he saw the lights but he "didn't feel these people were coming down the stairs." Instead of coming down someone yelled, "Let that girl alone," and so Moseley ran off and Catherine, stabbed in several places, dragged herself into the shadow of a bookstore door, where she lay.

The apartment building lights went off then. The street was silent.
Moseley, headed toward his car, heard the silent streets, saw the windows darken, and decided to turn back to finish his job. First, however, he opened his car door and exchanged his stocking cap for a fedora. Then he prowled down the street again, found the woman curled and red and wet, and started to stab where he'd left off, slotting open her body at the throat and genitals. Again, she screamed. And screamed. Minutes passed. Again, lights came on in apartment windows—imagine them—dabs of yellow both Catherine and Winston must have seen, so there and yet so absent. Again, Moseley retreated, and now Catherine managed, somehow, to stumble into the hall of her building, where, once again, minutes later, Moseley found her and set out to finish the job. She cried for help and then stopped crying. She moaned. He lifted her skirt, cut off her underclothes, and reported in his trial, "She was menstruating." Then, not knowing whether she was dead or alive, he pulled out his penis, but was unable to achieve an erection. So he lay down on top of her body and had an orgasm then.

This crime occurred over a thirty-five-minute period, between 3:15 and 3:50 A.M. It occurred in a series of three separate attacks, all of them drawn out and punctured with screams for help. People, the witnesses, those who flicked on their lights, could both hear and see. They did nothing. There were thirty-eight witnesses in all, watching from their windows as a woman was stabbed and snuffed. Only when it was over did one of them call the police, but by then she was dead, and the ambulance came to cart her away, and it was four in the morning, and those who saw went back to sleep.

At first, the murder was reported like any other murder of any other working-class woman in Queens. It received a four-line mention in the Metropolitan section of the New York Times. Soon, however, the editor of that section, A. M. Rosenthal, who has since written a book called Thirty-Eight Witnesses: The Kitty Genovese Case, learned that there had, indeed, been a sizable group of people watching the murder and doing absolutely nothing to help. Thirty-eight people, Rosenthal reports, stood by windows, normal men and
women, who "heard her scream her last half hour away and did nothing, nothing at all to give her succor or even cry alarm."

When the *Times* reported not the murder, but, later, in a series of separate articles, the bizarre behavior of the bystanders, the nation went into moral overdrive. Letters from readers poured in. "I feel it is the duty of *The New York Times* to try to obtain the names of the witnesses involved and to publish the list," one reader wrote. "These people should be held up for public ridicule since they cannot be held responsible for their inaction." Another woman, the wife of a professor wrote, "The implications of their silence—and of the cowardice and indifference it revealed—are staggering. If the laws of New York State do not prescribe some form of punishment, then we believe your newspaper should pressure the state legislature for an amendment to these laws. And since these people do not choose to recognize their moral responsibility we feel it would be appropriate, as a form of censure, for the *Times* to publish, preferably on page 1, the names and addresses of all thirty-seven people involved."

John Darley of New York University and Bibb Latane of Columbia University, like so many other New Yorkers, read these letters. They, like everyone else, wondered why no one had helped. Was it apathy, or were there other psychological forces at work? Darley recalls hunkering down for a while to focus on this singular, quite current event. Experts from all corners offered hypotheses to explain why the witnesses did what they did. Renee Claire Fox of Barnard College's sociology department said the witnesses' behavior was a product of "affect denial"; they had been, in other words, shocked into inaction or numbness. Ralph S. Banay hypothesized that TV was to blame; Americans, he said, are so subject to an endless stream of violence from the television that they can no longer separate real life from the screen. The same Dr. Banay also offered up the proverbial psychoanalytic explanations, the sort of thing that, a decade later, Rosenhan would so discredit in his pseudopatient study. Banay said, "They [the witnesses] were deaf, paralyzed, hypnotized with excitation. Persons with mature, well integrated personalities would not
have acted this way." Karl Menninger wrote, "Public apathy is itself a manifestation of aggressiveness."

Darley and Latane were not happy with these explanations, in part because, like Milgram, they were experimental social psychologists who believed less in the power of personality than in the power of situation, and in part because the explanations defied intuitive sense. How does an ordinary person stand by while a young woman is raped and murdered in a crime that stretched out over half an hour? It would have been so easy to seek help, so easy to merely pick up the phone and call in. There was no risk to life or limb for the witnesses. There could have been no damaging legal implications for "getting involved." A portion of the witnesses, we can be sure, had children, and some were in the helping professions, so these people were no strangers to compassion. Something mysterious was at work that night, the night Kitty Genovese was killed, the night spring was careening around the corner of what had been a mild winter, green buds coming early to all the trees, tiny nipped branches, opening up.

3. YOU MUST ASSUME PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Some experiments start with a hypothesis, others with just a question. Milgram, for instance, did not have a hypothesis as to how his subjects would react; he just wanted to see. The same for Rosenhan, who knew something would happen but was not sure what. Darley and Latane, on the other hand, had been following both the crime and the nation's responses, and something didn't fit. They may have thought about other similar incidents, for instance, how, if you're in a building and the fire alarm goes off, and no one seems worried, you too might decide it's okay; or if you're walking down the street, and someone falls, and no one offers to help, you too might keep walking on. For the two psychologists, these mundane examples could have held clues as to what really happened that early spring night, behind the windows.

So they set about constructing an experiment. For obvious reasons
they could not replicate a murder, so instead they replicated a seizure. They recruited naive subjects at New York University (NYU) to participate in what appeared to be a study of student adaptation to urban college life. A student sat in a separate room and spoke into a microphone for two minutes about the challenges at NYU. In a series of separate but audio-wired rooms were tape recorders carrying other students' stories, but the naive subject didn't know the voices were pre-recorded; the subject believed there were actual neighbors. The instructions were very specific. The naive subject was to wait in turn while each pre-recorded voice carried on about its troubles. When the subject's turn came, he or she could speak for two minutes. When it was not the subject's turn, the microphone would be off, and the subject was to listen in a sort of tag-team group therapy. In the original experiment, fifty-nine women and thirteen men participated.

The first voice to speak was the pre-recorded voice of the supposedly "epileptic" student. He confessed to the "group" that he was prone to seizures. He spoke with a halting embarrassment. He said the seizures were especially bad when studying for exams. He said New York was a tough place to live and NYU a tough college to master. Then his voice blinked off. Another voice came on. The naive subject, understandably, thought this was another live person, not a tape recorder whirring in an adjacent room. This voice spoke. It was robust and hearty. Then the naive subject spoke, and the disembodied voices went round and round, until at last this happened. A seizure started. The naive subject, of course, could not see the seizure, because he or she was in a separate room, nor could the subject see or hear the reactions of the other supposed subjects, because they were supposedly in separate rooms, although really they were all on a tape next door. The epileptic actor began speaking in a normal voice, which became increasingly scrambled, louder, more insistent, until it reached a crescendo of pleas: "I-er-um-I think I-I need-er-if-if could-er-er somebody er-er-er-er-er give me a little-er-give me a little help here because-er-I-er I'm er-er- h-having a-a-a- real problem-er-right now and I-er-if somebody could help me out it
would—it would-er-er s-s-sure be good . . . because I've got a-a one of the-er-sei-er-er things coming on and-and-and I could really use-er-use some help so if somebody would-er-give me a little h-help-uh-er-er-er-er c-could somebody er-er-help- er-uh-uh uh (choking sounds) . . . I'm gonna die-er-er-I'm . . . gonna die-er-help-er-er-seizure-e," and then a final choke, and silence.

Now the one live listener, who of course thought there were at least one, or two, or five other live listeners, could, at any point, get up and go down the hall and ask the experimenter for help. Before leaving the group to their discussion, the experimenter said, in the interest of privacy, he would exempt himself and would get the subject's reactions later, by microphone. However, the examiner had also told the subject to please follow protocol and speak in order.

Darley and Latane had been careful to set up their experimental conditions so they mimicked the Genovese murder. In the Genovese murder, the witnesses had seen the other witnesses but were unable to communicate with them, separated as they were by panes of glass. In this experiment, the witness was able to hear other confederates, but was prevented from seeing or communicating with them due to the separate rooms and the microphones, which were only on when it was a particular "person's" chance to speak. So when the seizure happened, the subject knew others could hear, and also knew he or she could not confer with the others, because the sound system was off.

The concocted seizure in Darley and Latane's experiment lasted for a full six minutes, similar to the Genovese murder, which was not a single stab but a series over the arc of a night. The students had a chance to think, and then to act. Here are the results: very few acted—thirty-one percent to be exact, similar to Milgram's thirty-two to thirty-five percent disobedience rate.

But then it gets more complicated.

Darley and Latane varied the size of the "groups." When a subject believed he or she was in a group of four or more, the subject was unlikely to seek help for the victim. On the other hand, eighty-five percent of subjects who believed they were in a dyad with the
epileptic student, with no other bystanders, sought help and did so within the first three minutes of the crisis. Darley and Latane also found that if subjects in any size group did not report the emergency within the first three minutes, they were highly unlikely to do so at any point. So, if you are on a plane when it is hijacked, and you do not act within the first 180 seconds, you are unlikely to act at all. In the case of emergencies, time is never on your side. The longer you wait, the more paralyzed you become. Keep that in mind, and body.

More interesting, however, than the relationship between time and helping behavior is the relationship between group size and helping behavior. You would think that the larger the group, the more emboldened you would become, the less fearful, the more likely you would be to reach out across danger. After all, do we not feel most intimidated alone, in the dark, in the back ally, where no light shines down? Are we not, as animals, most afraid and hesitant when we singularly roam the Pleistocene plains, our predators everywhere, the protective herd dispersed? Latane and Darley's experiment challenges the evolutionary adage of safety in numbers. There is something about a crowd of bystanders that inhibits helping behavior. If you have the unlucky experience of, say, falling off a Ferris wheel at a carnival, you might just be ignored, as Icarus was ignored when he fell through the blue skies while the city teemed beneath him and people turned so casually away. However, if you find yourself in the desert with one other person, and a sandstorm comes, you can count on his help, eighty-five percent of the time, at least according to these findings.

When subjects first heard the phony fit, they became scared. Not one subject displayed the kind of apathy so many hypothesized was at work within the Genovese witnesses. The examiner heard over the microphone subjects saying, "My god, he's having a fit." Others gasped or simply said, "Oh." Some said, "Oh god, what should I do." Subjects were sweaty and trembling when the examiner finally entered the room, after six minutes of seizure had resulted in no call for help. "Is he all right, is he being taken care of?" the bystanders
asked, clearly upset. We don't know who they are, but the Genovese witnesses were probably upset too, more frozen in fear or indecision, than in the syrupy urban lassitude people suspected.

When police asked the Genovese witnesses why they did not help, they were at a loss for words. "I didn't want to get involved," they said, but none could really give a coherent report of their internal monologue during those thirty-five minutes of horror. Darley and Latane's subjects also had no idea why they hadn't acted, and these were NYU college students with advanced verbal skills.

Darley and Latane surmise that, far from feeling apathy, subjects "had not decided not to respond. Rather, they were still in a state of indecision and conflict concerning whether to respond or not. The emotional behavior of these nonresponding subjects was a sign of their continuing conflict, a conflict that other subjects resolved by responding."

Because response rates were so consistently tied to group size, Darley and Latane understood what no one else yet had: a phenomenon they came to call "diffusion of responsibility." The more people witnessing an event, the less responsible any one individual feels and, indeed, is, because responsibility is evenly distributed among the crowd. Diffusion of responsibility is further compounded by social etiquette so strong it overrides even life-and-death situations; it would be terrible, after all, to be the only one to make a fuss, and perhaps for nothing as well. Who is to say what's a real and what's a false emergency. "We thought it was a lover's quarrel," said one Genovese witness. "I didn't know exactly what was happening," said several Darley and Latane subjects. I understand this. So, probably, do you. A poorly clad man falls on the street. Is he having a heart attack or did he just trip? Is he a "bum," who is drunk and might cop a feel if you reach out? Supposing he doesn't want your help, your bleeding-heart-liberal help, and he yells at you, and you are shamed in the marketplace, the public square, your politics and tendencies revealed for what they truly are, self-righteous and discriminatory. We doubt ourselves. Do we ever doubt ourselves! Feminist psychologists like Carol Gilligan
have written at length about how girls in this culture lose their "voice" and their perceptions once they turn the treacherous corner into adolescence, but experiments like Darley and Latane's suggest this loss of confidence is spurious. We never had it. We are animals cursed with a cortex that has bloomed so big above our snake brains that instinct and its corollary—common sense—get squelched.

4. **YOU MUST DECIDE WHAT ACTION TO TAKE**

The story is not over. It gets still stranger. We are unlikely to help others, Darley and Latane discovered, more because of the presence of other observers than because of ingrained apathy. What happens, however, when the "other" in need of help is now us? What happens if we find ourselves in a social setting, and in possible danger? Will we act on behalf of our own bodies, at the very least?

The critical phrase here is "possible danger." In clear danger, as in conflagrations, the snake brain uncoils and hisses its directives. But most of life, and most emergencies, reside in some more nuanced place, in twilight times where interpretation is difficult. You feel a lump on your breast: what is it? The house smells like gas, or is it tea? Darley and Latane's work shows us that even something as supposedly stark as a crisis is really malleable narrative; emergencies are not fact, but conscious construction, and this may be why we fail. Our stories, writes psychiatrist Robert Coles in his book *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, give meaning to our lives. The flip side of the story about stories is this: they lead us absurdly astray.

A second experiment conducted by Darley and Latane occurred in a room with a vent. The two psychologists recruited two college students as actors. One college student was the naive subject. All were to sit in a room together and fill out a questionnaire on college life. Several minutes into the experiment, the psychologists, crouched deep in the building's ductwork, released a form of nonhazardous but entirely convincing smoke through the room's vent. Picture it. At first the smoke wisped up slowly, but not so slowly that it wasn't
immediately recognized by the naive subject. The confederates were instructed to keep filling out their forms, to display no fear. They did. The smoke started pouring like cream, coming faster, heavier, smearing the air and blotting out figures, faces. The smoke was an irritant and caused one to cough. Each time, the subject looked alarmed, looked at the smoke going from wisp to waft, looked at the calm confederates, and then, clearly confused, went back to filling out the questionnaire. A few subjects went over to the vent and inspected it, and then looked at the confederates, who did not seem to care, and then went back to filling out the form. How odd! A few of the subjects asked whether it was unusual, smoke pouring from the vent, but the confederates just shrugged the question off. In the entire experiment, only one subject reported the smoke to the experimenter down the hall within four minutes, only three reported the smoke within the entire experimental period, and the rest not at all. They decided, based on the social cues of the confederates, rather than the material evidence, to interpret the emergency as a harmless failure of the air-conditioning system, and under the spell of that story, they just hacked away until many minutes had passed, and there was a fine white film in their hair and on their lips, and the examiner came in and called it off.

Now, this is funny. This perhaps more than any other experiment shows the pure folly that lives at the heart of human beings; it runs so counter to common sense that we would rather risk our lives than break rank, that we value social etiquette over survival. It puts Emily Post in a whole new place. Manners are not frivolous; they are more forceful than lust, than fear, more primal—that deep preening. When Daley and Latane varied the experiment so the naive subject was alone in the room, he or she almost always constructed the story of smoke as an emergency and reported it immediately.

**SOCIAL CUING.** The bystander effect. Pluralistic ignorance. The scientific-sounding phrases belie the absurdities they describe. Across
the street from me is a beautiful church with emerald moss tamped between the stones. Sometimes I go to this church, for the singing. After Sunday sermons, a collection basket gets passed around. One day, while in the midst of reading the stories of smoke and stabbing, I noticed that the basket, before reaching the first person in the first pew, was already mysteriously plied with a flurry of folded dollar bills. A few weeks later, my sister, a bartender, confessed to me how she "salts" her tip cup at the beginning of each evening with a few fives and tens: "I get a lot more tips that way," she told me. "People think people before them have given. And so they do too." We are driven by imitation.

The Darley and Latane experiments galvanized ethologists to look for similar tendencies in "the wild." Do giraffes, for instance, give a lot of sideways glances before eating from the top of that tree? Do primates depend on the reactions of the pack before figuring out how to proceed? Here's a tale about turkeys: Turkey mothers know to care for their young only when they hear the babies make a very particular chirping sound. If the chicks fail to make that sound, the mother is suboptimally cued, and the chicks die. So strong is the influence of that particular social cue that scientists have been able to attach tape recordings of the chicks' cries onto polecats, the turkey's prime predator, and thus fool the mother into maternity while she is murdered by the wired beast. Ethologists claim social cuing, or fixed patterns of behavior, in animals like birds is instinctual, a part of the brain's paste and circuits, while in humans it exists in another plane, a product of learning. Scientists doubt we have any particular "cuing" gene. I, for one, think we might. I remember being pregnant and how shocked I was that my body could make a baby, a whole separate other, with no conscious instruction from me. How did it know what to do? Cells, it turns out, are engaged in continuous conversation with one another, sending each other chemical cues to then set off a looping cascade of events that, over time, become particular human parts and then the complex whole. The human heart is made when one single cell cues another, and then that cells nudges yet
another, and so here is the hand, the tongue, the bones, which are fine white wires eventually sheathed with the silk of flesh. In my case, the cues were all correct and so I have my girl, and she is good.

IN A WORLD where ever complex signals—cellular, chemical, cultural—cascade through us and around us with amazing alacrity, we simply don't have time to sift through all the evidence and take considered action. We would be paralyzed if we did. Thanks to social cuing, and its chemical components, we can build babies and sit silently when silence is called for. Because of social cuing we know when to waltz, when to break bread, when to make love. On the other hand, as Darley and Latane have demonstrated, our interpretive gear, like the turkey mother's, is far from foolproof. Based on the smoke experiments, David Phillips, a sociologist at the University of California, has discovered a particularly bizarre side to the story. Data from the FBI and state law enforcement agencies clearly show that after any well-publicized suicide, the number of fatalities from plane and car crashes rise. Phillips has dubbed this phenomenon "the Werther effect," because after Goethe published The Sorrows of Young Werther, about an overwrought fictional character who killed himself for unrequited love, a rash of suicides rippled through eighteenth-century Germany. Phillips examined the suicide statistics in the United States between 1947 and 1968. He found that within two months after every front-page suicide story, an average of fifty-eight more people than usual killed themselves. More disturbing is the data that shows the rise in car and plane wrecks following such well-publicized suicides. Writes Robert Cialdini, a social scientist at the University of Arizona, "I consider this insight brilliant. First [the Werther effect] explains the data beautifully. If these wrecks really are instances of imitative suicide, it makes sense that we should see an increase in the wrecks after suicide stories appear... For several reasons—to protect their reputations, to spare their families the shame 'nd hurt, to allow their dependents to collect on insurance policies—
they do not want to appear to have killed themselves. . . . So purpo-
sively, furtively, they cause the wreck of a car or a plane they are
operating . . . a commercial airline pilot could dip the nose of an air-
craft . . . the driver of a car could suddenly swerve into a tree."

This is hard for me to believe. Imitative single suicides I can
understand, but is the Werther effect, or social cuing, so strong that it
would really cause a rise in commercial plane crashes following, say,
Kurt Cobain's death? Would pilots of planes or trains who have har-
bored suicidal impulses, but never been able to act on them, be so
liberated into imitation by a front-page story that they would bring
down other lives as well? Darley says, in a phone conversation, "Well,
there are certainly a lot of instances of people being cued into sui-
cide, but maybe the plane crash thing is an exaggeration." On the
other hand, Cialdini, one of the most cited living social psychologists,
swears by the accuracy of the data. "Truly frightening," he writes in
his book on influence, "are the number of innocent people who die
in the bargain. . . . I have been sufficiently effected by these statistics
to begin to take note of front page suicide stories and to change my
behavior in the period after their initial appearance. I am especially
cautious behind the wheel of a car. I am reluctant to take extended
trips requiring a lot of air travel. If I must fly during such a period I
purchase substantially more flight insurance than I normally would.
Dr. Phillips has done us a service by demonstrating the odds for sur-
vival when we travel change measurably for a time following the
publication of certain kinds of front page stories. It would seem only
prudent to play those odds."

How, I wonder, is Cialdini planning to play the odds now that
suicide stories have been in the front page for well over a month, and
show no signs of dispersing? He must be hiding in a hand-built
bunker somewhere. I call him up. A woman named Bobette tells me
he's in Germany and won't be back for quite some time. "Is he afraid
to fly back?" I ask her. "Oh," she says, "these are scary, scary times. Of
course Dr. Cialdini knows there will be more attacks, the principle of
cuing makes it inevitable."
"Would he think it's strange that I purchased a gas mask?" I ask her.

"Of course not," she says. "But he would also say to you that in light of what happened, you have to live your life and live it better."

"Does he have a gas mask?" I ask.

She doesn't answer.

IT ALL APPEARS grim. These are glorious autumn days, a sudden Indian summer, the air smelling of warmed fruit pulp from the apple trees, where every orb is flush. I pick apples with my daughter, holding her high in my arms so she can pluck the fruit from its tentative tether on the tree, hold it in her hand, bite it open, her tiny teeth puncturing the skin—sweet juice and bees. The bees drive us inside. The mosquitoes are having a renaissance, their nosy noses burrowing into our exposed skin, and welts swell. I spray DEET and other chemical things, but the bugs are of some strange, strong strain; they go on humming, higher and higher. These are glorious days but for the bugs and the DEET and the dead mouse I find beneath the stove, just its furred husk and the debris of decay here and there—its last breath was long ago.

Who could feel happy in such times? The Dow slides, the dogs are restless, and then the Cialdinis and Darleys and Werthers of the world are claiming how bad builds on bad, stupidity begets stupidity, publicity drives the day until we are all wrapped in a media movie where the reel won't stop. What hope for us is there, really? You read about Milgram and feel badly. You read of Skinner and feel confused. You read Rosenhan's findings and feel our folly, but you read these experiments and you feel something far more lethal than even the lethal shocks: You feel contagion. You feel how we infect one another with our immobility, our diffusions, our confusions. Is there a gas mask for that?

5. YOU MUST THEN TAKE ACTION

His name is Arthur Beaman and he's not famous, although maybe he should be. Beaman, a social scientist at the University of Montana,
made an interesting discovery that he and his coauthors reported in 1979 in *The Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. I went in search of the actual study and found it in the expected, dusty library tome, the paper extremely short, dense with correlation coefficients and two-tailed tests and quantitative symbols like \(^\prime\), \#, +, -, and —, which may be why no one knows of their findings. An experiment, in order to break beyond the container of science, needs to have some poetry in its presentation, some smoke, some shock, a verbal trill or two.

But let's try to shuck our way through Beaman's weighty writing style and try to find the fruits of the work, which are this: if you educate a group of people about the concepts of social cuing, pluralistic ignorance, the bystander effect, then you in some sense inoculate them against these behaviors in the future. Thus, what you have just read, these twenty or some odd pages, these eight thousand words, is as much a piece of pedagogy as it is description or report. According to Beaman's findings, now that you know how prone you are to miss the crucial beat, you are far less likely to fall victim to interpretative mishaps. It might even be fair to say that I bought one kind of gas mask and wove another, with words, to protect against a different sort of threat.

Beaman took a group of college students. He showed them films of Darley and Latane's seizure and smoke experiments, films that clearly articulated for the viewer what Darley and Latane developed as the five stages of helping behavior:

1. You, the potential helper, must notice an event is occurring.
2. You must interpret the event as one in which help is needed.
3. You must assume personal responsibility.
4. You must decide what action to take.
5. You must then take action.

The students who saw the films and learned the necessary stages that culminated in good citizenship were nearly twice as likely to offer help than those without such education. Students so exposed,
or inoculated, held out their hands to ladies who slipped on the ice, to people in fender benders, to the epileptic with a sudden seizure—accidents are everywhere, these water landings. One has to wonder why, if education is so effective in changing the rates of helping behavior and promoting effective crisis management, it isn't a permanent part of our national pedagogy. It would be so easy to slip it into the mandatory course on first aid, or CPR certification, or even public service billboards. Five simple things you need to do. Especially now, as our nation appears to be rounding some critical bend, we need to know. If the bus blows up, we need to know.

Now that I know, I feel I am better prepared. We are instructed by politicians to go about our business, but to be alert for strange signs. I decide it is time, and go downtown. One week has passed since this country's largest terrorist attack, and there are rumblings that another one is coming this weekend. "You must go about your business," everyone says, and, really, what else can you do? So I go downtown, despite the fact that crowds now put me on edge. Boston in the autumn is lovely, gilded with warm sunlight, the grass in the city graveyard a teal Atlantic green. The city, however, is oddly quiet, and what sounds there are have a heightened significance, everything saturated with meaning. A child screams as his swing arcs high into the air. A newspaper left on a park bench twitches in the wind. Up on Beacon Hill I see my favorite Boston site, the one I have loved since I was a little girl, the statehouse's gold dome, beneath which I used to imagine all manner of strange winged creatures convened, and I was right. Now, the politicians are nowhere to be seen, but what I do find, by the iron gate, is a bad-looking boy, of about eighteen, with an aggressively bald head sporting an etched blue cross. He is in his uniform, those lace-up black boots, the Aryan hair on his arms giving off a glint. He looks very suspicious. A knife handle, or what appears to be a knife handle, juts from his pocket. He is hunched in a corner, clearly trying not to be seen, and sketching something fast—a route into the statehouse, a route out, who knows. We heard, just the other day, that sketches of embassies and airports, along with crop-dusting
manuals, were plucked from dens in Detroit. The boy is muttering something to himself. He says, "Air." He says, "Swallow." Despite all I have read and studied about being a bystander, I am still not at all sure what to do. The safest thing would be to report him, but how really ridiculous that would be! This is the problem with education. Step number one. You have to recognize that help is needed. In a world more shadow than sun, this is not easy to do. Instead, I go a little closer to the bad-looking boy, the neo-Nazi, or someone's kind rebellious son, and then all of a sudden, sensing my prying presence, he whips his head toward me, and I see his eyes are a cut-glass green, in liquid.

I smile at him, a little shaky smile.

He ponders me up and down and then smiles back.

We say not a word, but he knows what I am thinking: the fast, furious sketches, the military crouch, the baldness, the badness, everywhere.

The pencil he is using is short, with a thick charcoal nose, and it gives off lush fuzzy lines of design.

This I know because the boy now, understanding my thoughts (that we can hear each other sometimes without any words exchanged, yet at other times not even a scream helps us make sense—how odd this is, how confusing the multiple languages of life), turns his sketch pad toward me so I can see what he is up to, and on it there are no exit or egress routes or anything suspicious. There is just a drawing of the single tree on the statehouse lawn, its leaves in the picture so intricately rendered, so multiply veined. And then I see it, how inside every leaf there is the slightest suggestion of a human face, life at the very beginning or at the very end. It is not clear. But the picture is lovely. Now the boy rips it from his sketch pad and gives it to me. I take it home. I hang it here, above my desk, and sometimes as I type these words, I stop to stare into the branches where those half-born human faces hover, the leaves' webwork so loaded with message and mystery and multiple meanings. I know the five stages, and still the story swerves.