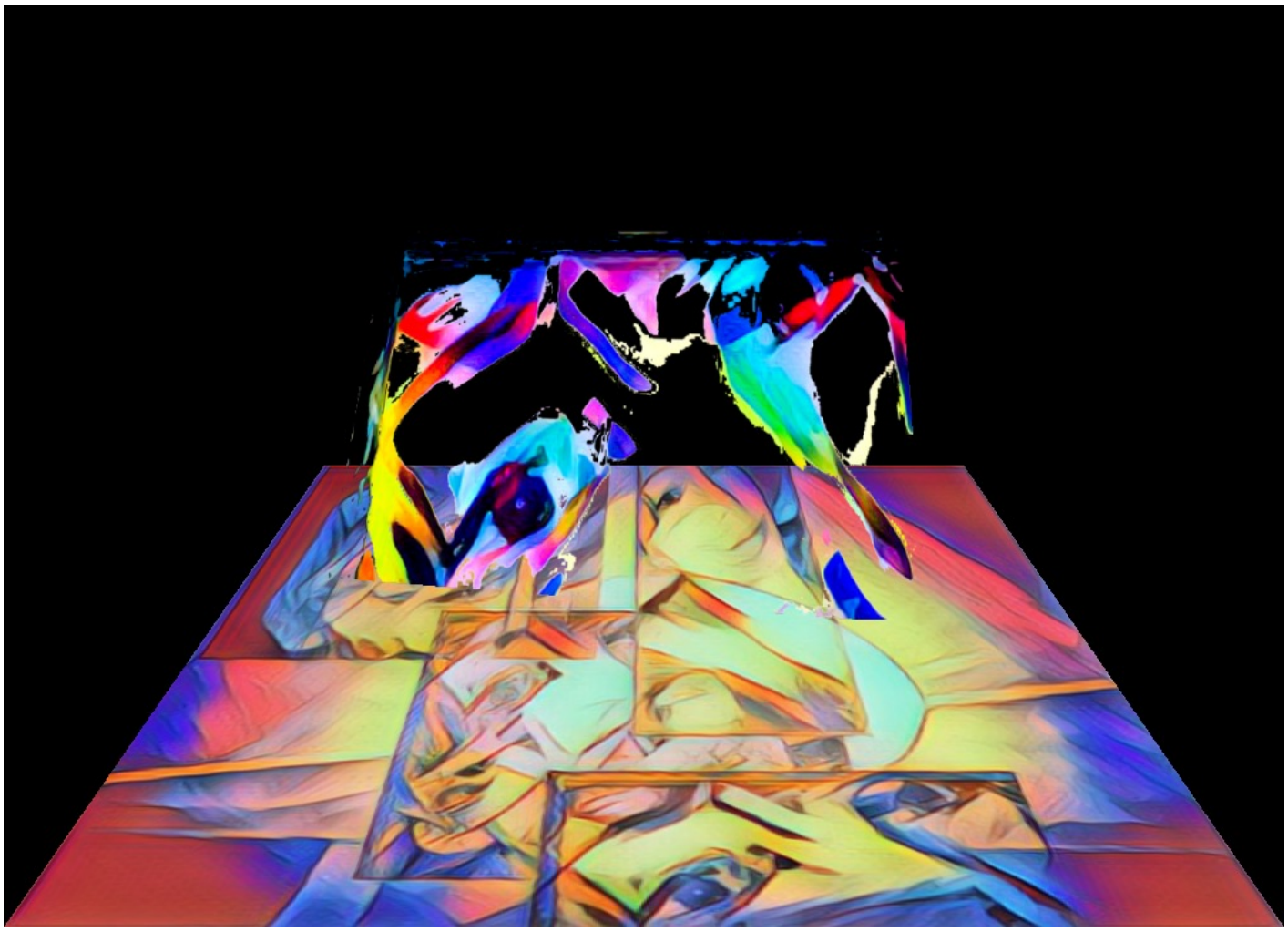
Beacons [1]

October 23, 2017 Short Stories [2]
Truth-telling [3]

Short Story by Julie Wittes Schlack

Don't miss the TW video interview with Julie [4] for her discussion of the editing process and key differences between nonfiction and fiction narratives.



With its vaulting, poured-concrete ceilings, faux marble floors, aisles wide as boulevards and almost as long, Chicago's convention center—McCormick Place—looks like a set from *Triumph of the Will*. As I hobble down its empty length in my dress-up shoes, I envision it holding tens of thousands of uniformed men, clones with pale faces and chiseled square chins. The vastness is overwhelming; in the unused exhibition hall in the south wing, the forklifts look like Tonka Toys, their hard-hatted drivers little Lego men.

MccormickPlace.com informs me that the complex offers 2.6 million square feet of exhibit space alone—not including its

173 meeting rooms, 4 ballrooms, and 18,000-person assembly hall. But for all its capacious mass, what lies inside is utterly ephemeral. Central American waitstaff bustle into improvised dining rooms defined by movable walls and curtains, whisk food on and off tables—then disappear. Cookie plates, baskets of salty snacks, urns of coffee and fruit-infused water appear on tables strategically placed mid-exhibition hall for the duration of each "expo break"—then vanish. Entire food courts pop up or evaporate based on the size and number of events going on in a given day.

I'm here to attend and speak at the annual Consumer Insights Today! Conference. An aerial view of the 600 of us—some of whom I now recognize from countless meetings and conferences like this one—would look like a tiny smudge, a stain on the floor of one of McCormick Place's many corridors. Eerily, we seem to be the only conference in the joint.

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In the first presentation of the morning, a guy with a shock of white hair, thick-framed hipster glasses, black shirt, black jacket, black pants, black shoes, and no socks stands before a slide displaying a dramatically bifurcated silhouette.

"People, especially young people, are paradoxical." His voice, quiet and effeminate, is at odds with the boldness of his graphics and attire. "They revile consumerism but voluntarily watch ads on YouTube; they deplore Nike's sweatshops but breezily buy iPhones made under similar working conditions. And as a nation, we like our celebrities to reflect our conflicts."

He advances the slides through a series of portraits: sexy but child-like (Marilyn Monroe); virile but vulnerable (Johnny Depp); brainy but degenerate (James Franco); Aryan but inclusive (Heidi Klum). Dialectical or not, members of this cohort need a single name so that pundits can discuss them and agencies can specialize in marketing to them.

"The Torn Generation, I call them," he says.

Why? I wonder. Isn't contradiction—the longing for novelty and familiarity, for challenge and comfort—characteristic of every generation, fundamental to being human? And today, in the twenty-first century, isn't everybody of every age over thirteen always as ambivalent as I am?

The presentation dwindles to an end, and I flee the darkened room in search of coffee. Outside the window-lined corridor, the fog has lifted to reveal Lake Michigan, a deep and gorgeous blue on this early June morning. But it, too, is strangely vacant, bereft of sails, tugboats, any sign of the Chicago shore life that I know must be stirring a mile or so north of where I stand. For a second, I wonder if one of those science-fiction movie plots has come true, if overnight some lethal virus has struck down all but those of us encased in the nation's largest convention center. Or perhaps it's the opposite. Perhaps we're the dead ones, unknowingly incapable of seeing actual life.

Reluctantly, I turn away from the big, silent view and plod to the next session, where a drab man from AniMate ("Brand Matchmaker for Today's Consumer!") explains the neuroscience behind the merchandising of cookies.

"Our unconscious emotions direct our conscious thoughts," he explains in a gentle sing-song. He could be telling us a bedtime story. "And our unconscious is still really primitive, based on animal responses like hunger and anger and fear. That's why we feel aroused in the grocery store, and if we succumb to unhealthy or socially undesirable impulses, it's also why we feel ashamed after leaving it."

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No surprise there. Of course our emotions around sweet snacks are complex. (I suspect that this is a man who's never bought his own groceries.) No, what's unnerving is *how* the AniMate researchers arrived at this conclusion. In-store *beacons*, little devices on store shelves that sense your presence via a signal generated by an app on your phone, capture how long you stand in front of the cookie shelves, determining whether you're spending more time considering the Oreos or the Pepperidge Farm Milanos. Then they can send you offers and promotions, or, in this case, images of the products you're already studying, accompanied by positive and negative adjectives describing them.

If it's a positive adjective—*healthy*, for example, or *delicious*—you're instructed to swipe the screen toward you. You swipe away if a negative adjective like *sugary* or *overpriced* is displayed. The theory is that if you really believe Milanos are tastier than Oreos, you'll swipe toward yourself on *delicious* more quickly when the Milanos package appears on your screen.

Come to me, we're signaling with one swipe. *Get away from me*, says another.

"Imagine the possibilities," the AniMate guy croaks, his anemic delivery at odds with the inspirational words some brand matchmaker has probably written for him.

I do, and it exhausts me.

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At lunch, I scan nametags before sitting down, looking for people from prospect companies, the people I know I should be trying to meet. But this shopping for tablemates is difficult and rude, and I quickly settle for the first vacancy I can find.

To my right is a woman in her late twenties who works as a market researcher for Subway sandwich shops. She confirms that yes, weight-losing Jared, the Subway spokesman, was trusted up until the day he was arrested, but no, they don't spend much time doing qualitative research into the needs of Subway guests, preferring to infer it from the relative volume of Meatball Marinaras and Classic Tunas sold.

On my left is a woman of similar age and complexion to the Subway researcher. She's a Consumer Insights Associate for HomeAway, the vacation rental company that, I learn, also owns all the other online vacation rental companies I

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assumed were its competitors. Yes, Airbnb certainly is a competitive threat—though a bigger problem for hotel companies than for hers—and no, she hates living in Texas and fervently hopes to leave as soon as her boyfriend finishes graduate school there.

Together, we trundle off to the keynote speech of the day. It's by another agency guy with a cool office in downtown Chicago. ("It has an old school Pac-Man console!" his introducer breathlessly informs us. "And the guy in Birkenstocks and the Death Cab for Cutie T-shirt who's the champion player turns out to be one of the smartest big data analysts in the country!")

He begins with a story—this one about his son's birthday party. Although he and his wife had barred weapons ("real or toy") from the festivities, the kids found a way around the prohibition by dropping their pants, flashing their *Fast and the Furious* underwear at each other, pointing their index fingers, and shouting "bang." After the party ended, he sat his son down for a talk.

"Not *the* talk—he's still too young for that—but *a* talk." He puts his hands on his knees, bending toward an imaginary child and lowering his voice to a gentle scold. "*Dylan, you know that we had a rule against even pretending to hurt other people, and you and your friends broke the rule.*" Then he straightens up, pauses, readying us for the punch line. "But every little consumer is smarter than his parents. My eight-year-old son—did I mention that he's eight?—he knew who he was talking to. Without skipping a beat, Dylan sat back on the couch, crossed his arms over his chest, and said, *Dad, you're old enough to know that boys will be boys.*"

A few titters percolate in the otherwise silent auditorium. The guy sitting next to me scrolls through his email in an iTrance. I stare at the broad-backed person in front of me. She has stuck her right hand down the back collar of her shirt—a synthetic, glistening plaid of lemon, orange, and strawberry sherbet-colored squares—and is scratching her shoulder. I'm mesmerized by the wriggling fabric, imagining a ferret on her back, or a mole, gleaming and blind, frantically seeking a way out.

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Between sessions, I join the other smartphone checkers in the hallway. Just the usual string of messages seeking urgent help with this client project or that sales opportunity, and a missed call from Mount Auburn Hospital.

I go to an unused room, its painted gold chairs mutely arrayed in perfect, undisturbed rows, and call Liz, a nurse practitioner. I'd met her two days earlier, immediately after a needle biopsy in my breast.

"The news is mixed, but mostly good," she says. "The pathologist didn't find any malignant cells." My heart leaves my throat and settles back into my chest. "But there's some atypical tissue, a papilloma that really should come out, just to play it safe. So, I'd like to schedule day surgery for you, an excisional breast biopsy so that we can remove it, just to make absolutely sure it doesn't turn into cancer."

Having gone through a similar drill fourteen years ago in my other breast, I dread the procedure. I've done my research since being told the previous week that the mammogram showed a small mass ("probably nothing, but just in case"). As I've studied my own films and ultrasounds in ignorance and fearful curiosity over the past few weeks, I've seen striations of white against the conical gray of each breast, the marbled markers of weight and time. And now, I once again consider the pros of early information against the cons of simply too damn much of it. *Swipe away*.

• • •

I'm back in Boston and sitting in the company cafeteria with my twenty-something colleague Martin, preparing for a workshop we're going to be leading next week. The session will be held in 7 World Trade Center, a new building in the original lower Manhattan complex. In attendance will be about 35 chief executive officers, chief marketing officers, and other executives from 15 agencies in the "family" of agencies owned by our parent company. Our mission: *Learn about how digital and data are transforming retail technology! Mix and match with sister companies to outshine and out-perform the competition!*

Martin will be opening the half-day session with the obligatory relationship-building exercise.

“We want to kick off the afternoon with an exercise that will hopefully help you let down your hair a little and create a climate of trust.” Martin’s rehearsing his opening. “I’d like you to break into pairs and tell each other a professional fact about yourself, along with a more personal fact that you’d be willing for your teammate to share with the rest of the group. For example, my professional fact is that I worked for a yacht manufacturer in Naples before joining my current company. My personal fact is that my father owned several bakeries, and *cannoli* was my first word.”

Martin pauses for my feedback.

“Here’s the thing,” I say. “If we’re doing this personal sharing to break down some defenses and get people talking more freely, I wonder if your personal fact should have a bit more emotional content.”

He looks at me, puzzled.

“Like, for instance, speaking for myself, I’m actually a bit freaked out to be in the World Trade Center.”

“Ooh, that’s good,” Martin answers. “Maybe I’ll use that.”

Behind his head, the wall-mounted video screen is cycling through a series of company announcements. *Welcome our Chinese colleague, Ching Ling!* says one against a backdrop of the Shanghai skyline. *Got a question? HR is here to help.* Outside the window, I see employees of the government building across the street ambling out onto their roof garden for lunch. It’s the perfect day out there, sunny and breezy, warm but not hot. I feel for the guys in black suits and navy uniforms perpetually guarding the place, so enclosed and unavailable to the tangy air blowing in off the water.

I will my attention back to Martin.

“So now, I want you to share something private, something that you wouldn’t normally tell a stranger within the first few minutes of meeting them,” he continues. “For example, my private fact is…. Shit, I haven’t figured out what my private fact should be.”

“Remind me—why are we doing this?”

“The point of revealing the private thing is to break down barriers and show how we all carry around stuff that shapes us.”

“That’s ambitious,” I say.

“To accomplish in five minutes? Yeah, you think?”

He’s getting flustered, and I realize I should try to be helpful. “Okay, so let’s think of a private fact that illustrates that point. For example, imagine you had a stutter as a kid. Even once you learned to stop stuttering, you might still be very deliberate in your speech. You might still hold back a little and internally rehearse, just being a really careful, intentional sort of person.”

“Oh, that’s great, too. Maybe I’ll use that, too!”

“We’re so fucking authentic, aren’t we?”

We both laugh. *Don’t forget Corporate Social Responsibility Week! There are many ways to give back,* flashes the PowerPoint behind Martin.

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It’s my last meeting of the day. Two finance guys from the parent company are making the rounds of all seventy

companies within our corporate division on a tour they call “Spend Together, Grow Together!”

“Now, we’re not here to tell you how to run your business,” the tall, cheery one reassures us. “We just want to introduce you to the capabilities of your sister companies so that if you’re spending on printing or advertising or public relations, you can keep those dollars within the family. After all, a rising sea lifts all boats!”

Then his skinny, ghostly partner starts going through the list of all our expenditures that could have gone to a preferred vendor or a parent-owned company and didn’t. He goes to great lengths to say that we *may* have had good reasons for choosing other suppliers—just as there *may* be a justification for fratricide—but for everyone’s sake, he’d urge us to look within the family first. He concludes with a video he hopes we’ll find inspirational.

It’s an animated movie. Against a soundscape of upbeat, synthesized music—a formless but repetitive collection of chords that sounds like an early version of a Diet 7Up commercial— a young man with a perky voice explains how the world works. *Doing business within the family creates jobs*, he begins, and pictures of happy new employees fill the screen. *Creating jobs increases wealth*—though he neglects to mention that our corporate overlord is already a $15-billion company—*and greater wealth* should *lower taxes. Lower taxes puts more money in people’s pockets!* We can see that. Like an amazing rewind, money is spurting out of dollar-sign-adorned bags and streaming into the pockets of the happy new employees. *When people have more, they spend more on the things they want. That makes them happy. Happy people are peaceful people. And isn’t that what we all want—a peaceful planet?*

The video ends. I don’t dare make eye contact with anyone else at the table. My mental jaw is hanging open to my chest, and I’m too stunned to know whether to laugh or cry.

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On Monday, seventeen of my colleagues are laid off. I knew this was coming, and for a time I thought I’d be among them. This company, which took shape in my old office and living room, which was partially funded for months by earnings I brought in as a freelance writer, has long since outgrown any claim I might have had on it. Real business people, people who have MBAs and track records, who know their bookings from their revenues, their margins from their COGs, who care deeply about “growing the business,” have taken over its leadership. I’m still valued, of course—as a smart person, a nice person, maybe even as someone with a degree of wisdom appropriate to her age (which is a couple of decades more than most of the young marketers and ad agency graduates swarming into management)—but I’m a luxury now, a sentimental attachment, a favorite aunt who is still welcome on Thanksgiving but would never be invited to go out to a bar, let alone to a vacation home.

The confidential memo those of us in management received last night in preparation for the layoffs advises us to be proactive in checking in with the survivors, to be empathetic while still projecting an air of stability.

The one vice president getting the axe in this round was notified at the end of day Friday, given the chance to pack up and walk out after the office had largely emptied. The one or two more VPs on the chopping block will ostensibly get to leave of their own volition a few weeks from now, when “family” or “exciting new opportunities” will draw them out of our orbit. But apparently, the dignity of the more junior people isn’t quite as protected. For many of our millennial employees, this will be the first time they’ll see a person they’ve worked next to for months or years stagger out of a conference room like someone concussed, who’ll then discover that packing boxes were placed on her desk while she was having a “check-in” with her manager. This will be the first time they’ve had to choose whether to hug, offer consoling words, or avoid the gaze of the normally wiseass colleague whose eyes are now swimming and whose cheeks are aflame with rage and humiliation.

Be positive, but be genuine, the memo advises. Acknowledge that this is an emotionally difficult time, but demonstrate confidence in our future. For those of us unsure about how to achieve this delicate balance, it offers some suggested phrases: *This was a hard decision that we were reluctant to make, but this short-term pain will put us on a much better footing for the long-term. And rest assured that we will do our best to support your colleagues in their future endeavors.*

Meanwhile, in a conference room at the other end of the building, seventeen new summer interns—college seniors or brand-new graduates working for ten or fifteen dollars an hour—are assembling for the start of their Professional

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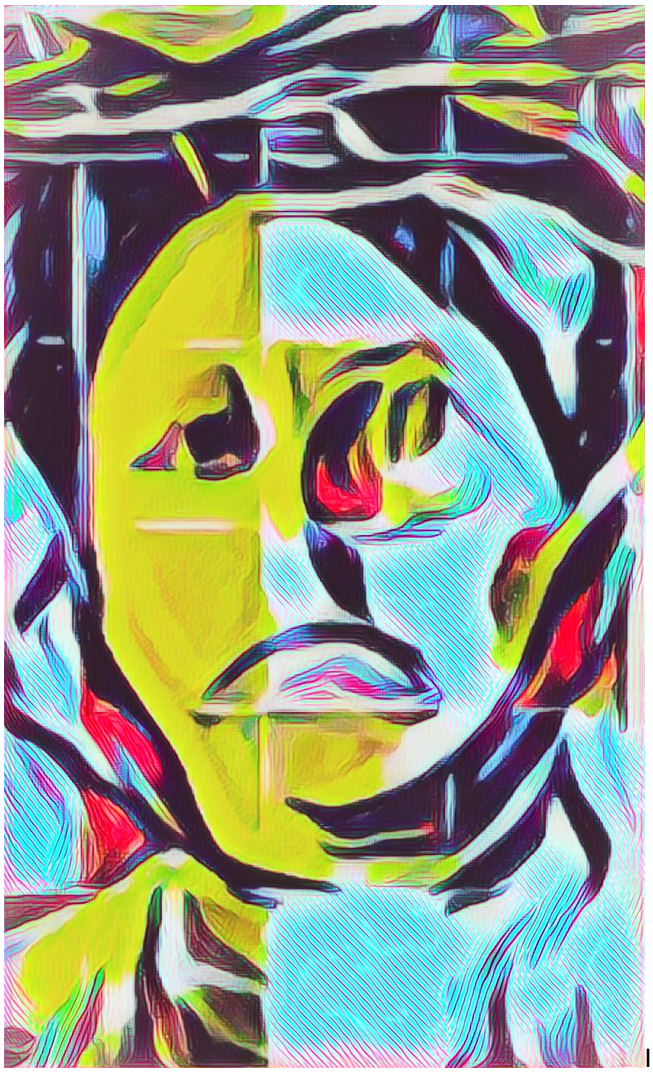
Development Day. We've gotten an email about this, too, which outlines the agenda for the session that our head of Learning and Development has put together. It features training in how to become a better face-to-face communicator, including a small-group workshop where *you will solve how to win your clients' trust* and one on what it takes to *Own Your Awesomeness!*



I feel like I'm in that scene in *The Godfather*, the one where Michael Corleone stands in church as his newborn nephew is baptized while his hit men are out executing the family's enemies. As reverential music soars, the camera cuts back and forth between rays of sun streaming through the cathedral's stained-glass windows and Moe Greene being shot through the eye as he lies on a massage table—between gentle kisses planted on the silky head of the baby boy and machine-gun bullets pulverizing the gangster stuck inside the revolving door of the St. Regis Hotel.

Emily, the snub-nosed young woman who had only been working at the company for a couple of years comes to our pod to say goodbye to Mike, the almost-thirty-but-still-very-very-young man who I think she's had a crush on all this time. She makes no effort to hide her tears, and one of her coworkers—accompanying her as a friend, guard, or both—feebly pets her shoulder.

Mike gives Emily a hug, then sits down, ashen-faced, and immediately resumes work. Inside his kelly-green Celtics T-shirt, his back is rigid.

"It's tough, isn't it," I say.

"Yeah," he mumbles, still not quite daring to look up.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “Your job is safe. If any of us were being laid off today, we’d know by now.”

His shoulders sag. “Phew.” Then blushing, he turns to face me. “I mean, I feel bad for Emily and the others. Who were the others?”

I violate the explicit instruction to not reveal those names—a stupid edict, given that it’s just a matter of time before word will spread—but otherwise try to honor Tip #3 in the memo about helping staff cope with layoffs: *If asked who’s being laid off and no one on your immediate team is affected, reassure them that while this is a difficult day, your team is safe. If jobs on your team are being eliminated, say everything but the part about your team being safe.*

#helpful

But here’s the thing. It’s all true. These were difficult decisions that will, at best, disrupt the lives and confidence of hardworking people, but will also save the company money and prolong the jobs of those who remain.

I can’t find a villain here, at least not a human one. Our parent company is demanding higher margins. And why? I don’t know if anyone in the parent company’s boardroom could even answer that question beyond paying a vague homage to “growth.”

This is how the system works. I’m just not sure I can bear to be a part of it for much longer.

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Martin, our colleague Jenn, and I pull up a block away from 7 World Trade Center. After signing in and being issued photo IDs, we head up to the 32nd floor. The view is spectacular. The copper cupolas of the Woolworth Building gleam, as do the shoes of the women who greet us. We’re welcomed as experts, as stars in the craft of facilitating conversations. I feel vaguely queasy, and as every good workshop leader knows to do, steer clear of the arugula-adorned tuna-salad sandwiches offered for lunch. Never eat anything with mayonnaise before getting up in front of people.

The room has a wall of windows facing out over the Hudson, and, as at McCormick Place, I get momentarily lost in the silent blue outside the glass. But this is no time for reflection. The execs are taking their assigned seats, Martin and I are being fitted for our lavalier microphones, the English woman who leads Corporate Learning is introducing us.

Make it a great performance, I think, planting myself in front of the giant ficus tree. Gliding from one slide to the next, I tout my company’s services and give an overview of the day.

“Before hearing from the first speaker, we’re going to do a short team-building exercise,” I say, then rush to add, “I can see you rolling your eyes. Don’t worry, it’ll be short and high-impact, but no Koosh balls, no trust falls….”

They laugh appreciatively. My nervousness has passed. They don’t know what I know, I realize, and they don’t know all that I don’t know. I speak authoritatively, though I occasionally and disarmingly confide my ignorance about things that don’t really matter.

I hand off to Martin, whose coppery hair, crisp delivery, and obvious smarts evoke a young, corporate Jude Law, at least to every woman in the room. But he plays it straight and confides his sample secrets with disarming sincerity before instructing the attendees to pair off and share their own professional and private facts.

The room gets as noisy as a pick-up bar. People are eager and willing to share, to generate some interpersonal spark that will make their next few hours together a bit more fun. In the share-out, we learn who likes to surf, who has just had a new baby, who has just moved from one coast or continent to another and misses the weather or friends or housing prices or taco restaurants of their old homes. They seem like nice people.

We introduce the first round of speakers. A brilliant Brit talks at length about how our purchasing data, RMV records, and browsing data are triangulated so that companies whose business is to measure the return-on-investment of

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advertising can determine who is seeing what and how it correlates to who is buying what.

“It’s anonymized, of course,” he says smoothly. “But marketers can do amazing things with this incredibly valuable information. You can see that the people living between East 50th and East 54th who watched *Dancing with the Stars* didn’t change their behavior after seeing your ad, but those who saw it while watching *South Park* went out and bought a new pair of your sneakers sometime within the next three weeks.”

“The holy grail,” a paunchy man next to me murmurs to his female companion. “Measurable ROI on creative. The agency guys must be shitting their pants.”

“And this is just the beginning,” the Brit speaker concludes with something approximating animation. “Five-billion people are already walking around with the Internet in their pockets. I believe the applications of Big Data are infinite and transformative.”

Wow—concepts once reserved for God and natural selection. And here I thought we were just talking about selling stuff.

On the break, Jenn sidles up to Martin. “I had no idea you stuttered as a kid. Really, you’re such a great public speaker, I never would have guessed it.”

Before he can respond, one of the conference conveners gives Martin a warm hug. “Don’t worry,” she says, “the World Trade Center is the safest place in New York City.”

Stricken, Martin flashes me a wide-eyed look over the woman’s shoulder.

I’m going to hell, he mouths.

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The next two speakers do me in. Not only have they put beacons on store shelves, but they have placed them on benches and trash bins throughout Manhattan.

“Imagine it,” says the one in the yellow shirt. The room is hot, and he’s sweating profusely. “Once enough apps have enough beacon receptors, we should be able to know who’s walking by a given store every day and feed that data to merchants so that I could say to Sal at Sal’s Consumer Electronics on 10th Avenue, ‘Hey Sal, there’s this guy who I know is in the market for a cell phone ‘cause he’s been searching Best Buy and Walmart and researching different brands, and he’s walking past your door at around 5:10 pm every day, Monday through Friday, and I bet that if you were to beam him a great deal on one of your phones, that business could be yours!’”

“Hyper-localization, hyper-personalization, hyper-contextualization,” intones his partner. “These are the characteristics of Data Driven Personal Retail, and it’s not just a dream. It’s a reality. When you’re sitting at a red light near a KFC and an ad for Chicken Littles shows up on your Waze screen, you’re seeing it in action.”

In many accounts of near-death experiences, people describe the sensation of levitating and looking down on their own bodies lying on the floor or the operating room table, often surrounded by the people trying to revive them. I’m feeling that strange but powerful mix of curiosity and disbelief right now. Here I sit, the Hudson beaming shards of light through the windows behind me, in a room full of nice people with dogs and dinner plans and a recorded episode of *This is Us* awaiting them at home, hearing about how these other really smart people have developed extraordinary technology to merge physical and digital experience, to intercept people with enticements to act on ideas they barely knew they had, to harness the exceptional power of having the Internet in one’s pocket, all in the service of getting people to buy more stupid shit that they don’t need.

I’m frantically taking notes for the obligatory report-out when I get back to the office, every insane story of mobile commerce; every malapropism (“let’s be proactive and not reactionary!”); all the new words like *omnichannel* and *pretail*; each and every example of how you can see a virtual image of a store on a subway wall, touch what you want, and discover it delivered to your home five minutes after you get there. My writing is getting smaller and smaller as

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scenarios cascade out of the perky coral-hued mouth of Google's "retail imagineer," stories about how shoppers can connect with product experts in Google Hangouts, make their purchases with Google Wallet, which then passes user data to retailers who rely on Google Express to fulfill the purchases. I record that the Me-Ality app installed at select Bloomingdale's locations somehow scans your body and recommends items of clothing based on your measurements. At least I think that's what it does, because I'm writing so fast that my cursive is illegible. It looks like it's come from someone else's hand.

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Tonight, back at LaGuardia, Martin, Jenn, and I drink. We talk about music and the World Cup and vacations.

As the jet lifts off and the New York City lights unfurl beneath my eyes like a breaking wave on this hot summer night, I rest my sweaty cheek on the cool plexiglass porthole. Tomorrow, I'll have my breast surgery, wondering until I go under why I've subjected myself to another wound—another excised warning that will simply confirm what I already know.

Art Information

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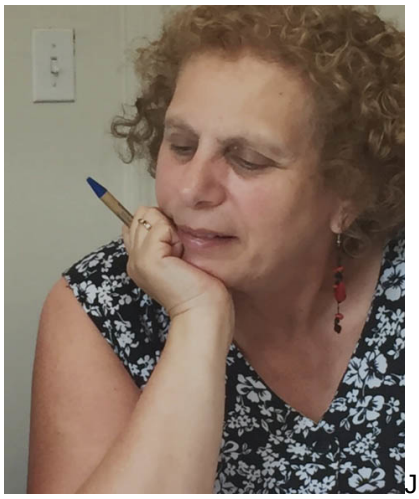

Julie Wittes Schlack is a researcher and writer with an MFA from Lesley University. Her essays and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Shenandoah*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Ninth Letter*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *The Tampa Review*. She reviews books for The ARTery [5], and is a regular contributor to NPR station WBUR's journal of ideas and opinions, Cognoscenti [6].

You can read more of her work at Julie Wittes Schlack's website [7]. Follow her on Twitter @jwschlack [8].

Links:
[1] https://talkingwriting.com/beacons
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[4] http://talkingwriting.com/author-talk-julie-wittes-schlack
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