



ON CRAFT: SARAH MANGUSO ON CONNECTION

March 12, 2015

In the beginning, I thought it was a contest, a puzzle, an intellectual exercise. Or an abduction—a desperate, physical grab. I didn't consider kindness because I didn't yet believe in it. I thought kindness was a deficiency. The connections I intended to make were not to people but to abstractions with human names. They were so distant, they might as well have been ghosts.

I called magazine editors on the phone. This was before email. I called them at night. I broke into mailrooms. I hand-delivered envelopes with stamps on them. I wanted my submissions to look as if they'd arrived by magic, as if the US Post Office had blessed me by delivering my notes an hour after I'd been invited to mail them. This was before 9/11. You could go anywhere. Loading docks were left open. Elevator banks were gestured to. A smile and a confident pronunciation of a name was all it took for me, a white woman in a black blazer. I never wavered, never doubted.

Everyone repeats it: *To get anywhere you need a connection*. But what is a connection? A stranger who, in your most hopeful imaginings, will do anything you ask? Is it a best friend? Is it a slave?

A connection is not gained by attrition. You cannot make a connection by throwing yourself against a locked door a thousand times. To do this is to confuse the door with the person behind it.

You cannot manufacture a connection any more than you can manufacture friendship or love.

The only way to forge a connection to the person on the other side of the door, or on the other side of the auditorium, is to begin with the assumption that he is human. Assume that he has amassed a lifetime of shame and regret, just as you have; that he finds his job frustrating; that people ask too much of him; that he has been disappointed in business and in love.

Would that I had known.

There is always sex, of course. Such an arrangement might even last a while, might bring you many good things. But if the work is bad, the connection is laid bare for all to see as bare as if the world stood watch at the foot of the bed.

On the other hand, good work possesses a powerful magnetism. People will want to protect it, to guard its success. You might not have to try at all, as long as you don't mind dying before a connection is made.

You can assume every successful writer arose from two things: writing and a connection. Don't get so caught up in one that you forget the other.

Sarah Manguso is the author of seven books including *300 Arguments*, *Ongoingness*, *The Guardians*, and *The Two Kinds of Decay*. Honors for her writing include a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rome Prize.