

## **Nine Eleven**

Our mountain bikes flew down the steep hill over twigs and rocks on the foggy park trail in Ann Arbor. The path curved as the guys and I came around the edge of the drop-off. My muscles ached but adrenaline was helping me keep up with them. We went over a patch of tree roots, slick with rain. I watched my front tire hit a wet root the wrong way, slip sideways, and I slid over the edge and crashed through the brush of the hillside. Later, sore and limping slightly but bandaged, I rushed to the airport to catch my Monday evening flight to La Guardia.

The tech company I worked for in Ann Arbor, Fry Multimedia, sent me to New York for a Tuesday meeting with NYMEX in the financial district. I checked in to my room at the Marriot and had a late dinner in Tower One of the World Trade Center. The next morning, I was supposed to be in front of my hotel catching a cab, but decided to take my time since I didn't have a key to the Manhattan office. I stood in the bathroom brushing my teeth when I heard what sounded like the pipes bursting in my hotel room ceiling. Looking up at the ceiling, the sound got louder and louder until I started fearing the ceiling wouldn't hold. I imagined being crushed by the weight of floors above me so I left the bathroom and heard pounding on my windows on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor. I saw burning debris landing on the roofs of surrounding buildings, and flaming chunks were going past my window; some of them hitting like a baseball pitcher throwing hardballs. It seemed like the window would break and spray glass on me, so I ran for the door. I didn't want to get stuck in the elevator so I headed for the stairs.

As soon as I stepped into the surprisingly deserted stairwell, the eeriest sound stopped me in my tracks. Faraway wails were coming down through the long

stairwell and as I started to run down the stairs it was like being chased by howling demons; after taking a few flights I realized I was hearing screaming from the upper floors echoing through the stories of the stairwell.

When I came out at the end of the stairwell, there were four or five people already there and we tried to figure out where we were -- it wasn't the lobby. There weren't any signs. Even after we found a railing and saw the lobby below, we couldn't figure out how to get down from the mezzanine; everyone was anxious. We ran in different directions trying doors and someone finally found one unlocked leading to more stairs.

There were about 40 people in the lobby and more were rushing in from the street bleeding and crying; some were in shock. Someone was shouting about broken glass, and I realized when I thought I heard water pipes upstairs it was glass pouring on the building. Discussions were going on throughout the lobby about what could have happened. I heard a few guesses of a construction accident because there were renovations going on in the hotel; someone remembered seeing a crane. Maybe there had been an explosion. Someone said something about an airplane. I pictured a little twin engine plane. But how could it have caused so much damage? Security guards stood at the hotel door and wouldn't let anyone leave because the street was a mess. I looked out the front window and saw piles of burning debris, pieces of jagged sheet metal sticking awkwardly into the fronts of buildings and vehicles, and clumps of unrecognizable stuff in all sizes that hotel staff were covering up with white tablecloths.

Someone at the front desk heard that hijackers drove a plane into the World Trade Center. The hotel staff tried directing everyone up to the second floor lounge

by offering free drinks; it was around 9am. They didn't want anyone to look out the windows but the entire front of the lobby was windows, so they pulled curtains shut. I stayed in a corner acting like I was using my cell phone although it wasn't working. I was afraid that if I didn't look busy they would make me go upstairs to the cocktail lounge and I wanted to be as close to a door as possible.

Injured people were still stumbling in crying or panicking, but a few of them were annoyed that their path to work had been hindered. One such man got on the front desk phone and made a call. "I'll be over there in 15 minutes; part of the road is blocked and I can't get a cab through, but I'll run over. Don't let the meeting start without me." I thought he must have lost his mind. As he spoke, he dabbed a bleeding spot on his face with a handkerchief.

A pretty girl next to me in the lobby was in tears because her cell phone wasn't working. She said her family was staying in another hotel nearby and she didn't know how she would meet up with them. Suddenly we heard an explosion, screaming, and a large group of bloody people rushed in from the street through the revolving doors and that's when an overwhelming panic began. It started then and turned on and off for the next five hours with brief interludes of people trying to make sense of a senseless situation; and then the wind would shift and bring a cloud of debris back overhead, or a piece of glass would break somewhere, and the screaming and panic resurged. Panic engulfs a crowd in chaos and makes everyone move by adrenaline in a fight or flight mindset. I could try to get out from among them. I went behind a curtain that was blocking off an employee-only area from the lobby. There was a small foyer at the bottom of a stairwell and an open doorway into what looked like a kitchen. About five other people went behind the

curtain, and we could see an employee exit at the bottom of a stairwell, but a hotel security guard was blocking it.

The plaster walls in that small corridor were comforting compared to all of the windows in the lobby. I crouched in a corner thinking that, if the building collapsed, maybe there was a chance a small pocket of air would form in a strong corner of the debris where I could live without food for a few days until possibly being rescued. Others milled about nervously trying to decide what to do next, including the girl whose family was in another hotel. After a while the guard moved and I slipped out the door with a man who was pulling a suitcase.

We spoke for a moment about the best way to go. The man looked about 35, medium build, had dark hair thinning on top, and was dressed professionally. He said he was in the middle of giving a presentation in a hotel conference room when he saw the giant Marriott sign drop past the window, and he decided to stop and ask everyone to leave. Now out in the street we were surrounded by chaos. We hurried south, and the man stopped and held my elbow a moment and asked if I was OK. We continued on together, maneuvering around debris. You could still hear glass breaking back at the towers where people fell. Most people around us were walking as fast as they could without breaking into a run, heading south since the road was messier to the north. People were deserting belongings everywhere so they could move easier. There were strollers, bags and briefcases, but mostly shoes. Suddenly nobody wanted anything that they might normally pick up and keep; they just wanted to get rid of their possessions and stay alive.

At the first intersection we crossed, there were giant wheels and metal buried about two feet into the asphalt. "Landing gear," said the man. I never realized

how big the tires on landing gear were -- I've always seen them from a distance. I wished I had a camera because that sight was so surreal, I didn't want to take my eyes off it but we kept moving.

A few steps further we came upon the largest bloody mass yet, with a long piece streaming eight or ten feet out of it. The man took my arm again and made a sudden turn when he saw it, thinking he'd prevent me from seeing it. But it was everywhere. I thought of the grade school biology lesson when everyone is surprised to hear how long the intestines are when uncoiled, then I imagined someone is at an airport somewhere waiting for that person.

We walked past another car divided almost in half by a sheet of metal. It looked the same as if someone took a Matchbox car and hammered a razor blade through it. Other large pieces of metal were jammed into the fronts of buildings, the road, and other vehicles. About six blocks further we stopped and looked back and just stared, along with others in the street doing the same -- watching the gaping holes in the towers burn. That's when the man introduced himself as Mark VanBuren from Connecticut. One woman in the group said she thought she'd go back to her apartment and get her shoes. We all told her to forget it. A woman rushing by heard us talking and tossed the barefoot woman her gym bag and said, "Take my bag, there's a pair of shoes in there for you."

As we stood there I told Mark how, when the Hudson's department store was imploded in Detroit, the debris clouds blew up all the streets and were much more destructive than expected. I suggested we keep moving. A gray-bearded guy overheard me and said with a heavy New York accent, "There's no way in Hell the trade center is coming down." Mark said that he agreed the further the better and

we walked on. He said water could get scarce if we ended up stranded somewhere or the water supply was tainted, so as we headed toward Battery Park he bought a few bottles of water from a vendor and stuck them in his bag.

People kept trying to use their cell phones and those without phones were begging to use someone's phone, running up to each other, "Can I use your phone to call my wife? I think she's still in there," many different requests, but there was no cell service. I hated to even try my phone for fear someone would see me and get their hopes up that I had service.

A few people were huddled calmly trying to decide on a plan of action. Most were falling apart - in shock, crying - grown men in disheveled, dusty business suits sobbing; some bleeding; everyone walking in a daze. Then we heard the thunder of the first tower coming down. A wall of people were running toward us screaming followed by a massive gray cloud - the cloud coming up and over faster than people could run. We ran with them and crouched under the ledge of a small brick building where you buy tickets to get on a ferry. There was another woman under the counter holding her baby. The mob of people and dense cloud quickly surrounded us. Some people running by would yell at us, "Run! You're going to die there." Others would yell, "Stay there! You're in the best spot." People were trying to be helpful, but even the security guards were confused and in shock.

We finally decided to go toward the ferries and stepped out in the air thick with debris. Mark said, "Good luck," to the woman with the baby. We came upon an area where there were a few parked vehicles. The back of a linen truck was open and a man was throwing out pieces of cloth to the crowd for them to tie over their faces. We joined them, and he tore up a large tablecloth and gave us pieces;

that's what we used to try to filter our air. Everyone walked around looking like bandits with their eyes showing above a white triangular mask. I looked at my new friend Mark and noticed a pile of debris settled over his balding spot making him look like a Jewish man with a grayish-white kippah on his head.

We continued toward the ferries and suddenly the wind shifted over the Hudson blowing debris back. Everyone in the direction of the ferries started screaming and running toward us while people were still coming from the opposite direction. At first it seemed there was nowhere to go and we'd be trampled. We crouched behind a small, white car. I peeked out at the charging crowd and didn't think the car would stop them, but it did. We shared some of our water with a couple of women behind the car that were crying and couldn't speak English. We heard military planes flying above the debris - it was too thick to see anything. I was afraid they weren't American planes and thought that I keep getting closer to a different but not easier death.

The crowds finally diminished and Mark and I admitted to each other that we had to find a bathroom so we stepped away from the car. A woman suddenly ran up to me and asked, "Are you a doctor?" I felt useless and said no and she ran off. I suddenly thought about what I did for a living. I was working for an e-commerce company and it occurred to me: I help people shop faster. That was one of the most horrible realizations that ever came over me. What is the point? What does it really mean in the grand scheme of things -- when it comes to life and death and everyone realizes their possessions are meaningless?

Mark and I found a building with a heavy, back door that wasn't closed all the way and went through it. It turned out to be the kitchen of a large restaurant

or cafeteria. The kitchen staff in their white shirts didn't mind us coming in; they were listening to the Spanish news on the radio. We walked through to the seating area at the front of the café. That's when the thunder struck of the second tower collapsing. Crowds of people ran in all directions screaming again and it looked like a blizzard outside - you couldn't see a thing. We ran back into the kitchen and hid under a large, stainless steel counter until the mayhem started to die back down. A panicking woman ran into the kitchen and said, "My baby quit breathing from too much debris and needs a tracheotomy, can someone help me?" Again I wished I was a doctor, but one of the cooks grabbed a knife and followed her. He probably saved a life because he had the confidence to try. Under the stainless counter we listened to the radio. Maybe hours passed. I found a place to plug in my cell phone to charge it. Although I still couldn't make any calls, I thought it might come in handy later if we ended up stranded somewhere without electricity. The manager of the restaurant asked me to watch the back door because there was too much mayhem in the streets, and only unlock it for people who worked there - he said they'd knock three times. But I let in anyone that came to the door, and asked them to hurry through to the main seating area. One woman who came in was in shock and couldn't speak. I led her to a chair and got her some water. The employees were pouring glasses of bottled water for everyone in the restaurant.

Mark saw a patch of clear sky out the back door, so he said he would venture out to check the situation. He was gone so long I started to worry. He came back and said we could get a ferry to Jersey City. He was surprised that there wasn't a line. We went to the ferry and walked on and sat down. Mark noted it was like a Titanic raft -- there were only about 15 people on the ferry yet thousands of people



were stranded in the destroyed streets. One New York couple actually got off the ferry - we heard the guy tell his girlfriend, "There's nothing in Jersey."

Once in Jersey City, a woman came up to me and asked if she could use my phone - I had been trying but it still wasn't working. Her parents were behind her and couldn't speak English. She said her sister worked in the World Trade Center. I handed her my phone to try and miraculously her call connected. She spoke a moment in another language and started crying and she said to us, "Her alarm clock didn't go off - she's still at home!" She turned and told her parents in their language and they all hugged and cried in relief. Some of the things you're afraid to tell your family crossed my mind -- being humiliated about a bad marriage, financial problems, other troubles and bad decisions. But when you could be dead, you suddenly realize that none of the other stuff was so terrible in comparison. I couldn't get a phone call through to Michigan so I called an old boyfriend that had moved to the west coast. The call worked and I asked him to call my parents for me.

We walked until we came upon a Marriott, which seemed like an obvious place to finally rest. The guards at the front door wouldn't let us in. We told them we just came from the World Trade Center, but they said we had to prove it and of course we had nothing on us from our hotel so they made us leave. We walked to the seawall and gathered with others watching in disbelief the scene on the other side of the river. The fires and smoke continued and we watched the #7 tower collapse. A young man wearing his baseball cap backwards shouted across the river, "We're going to get you back, ragheads!" Mark and I moved away. I sat

against a tree and found a pair of nice sunglasses on the ground. It seemed odd how many pairs of sunglasses I've lost in my lifetime and then finding one here.

Mark recognized the name of an apartment complex and it turned out to be associated with one where he used to live. We went in and the employees were being very kind to everyone. They had put out a large table covered with food and drinks for anyone who wandered in. There must have been 100 people sitting in different areas watching the events on TV. That's the first we realized what really had happened and it was so unbelievable -- those massive jets, full of human beings and fuel, those incredible towers, all those people. I couldn't watch. My phone finally connected and I called my parents. They were waiting by the phone; thank God I finally got through.

We stood watching the city burn across the river as dusk fell. Mark had a conversation with an older woman who impressed him with her determination to get her law degree at age 65. She called her husband and he was on his way down from upstate New Jersey. Mark asked her if we could hitch a ride, maybe to a rest area near Poughkeepsie. He had a brother in upstate New York that could meet us there. The woman agreed and eventually her haggard husband arrived. He said the roads were shut down and he had to drive the wrong direction down the highway to get her. We all sure appreciated his efforts.

They dropped us off at the rest area in northern New Jersey and Mark's brother picked us up to spend the night with him and his wife back in New York. When we got in the truck his brother asked, "How did you two meet?"

Mark told him, "Tripping over the same dead body." That's how brothers can talk to each other, but it sufficed to sum up our day.

The VanBurens pampered me with a beautiful guest room and shower, clothes, and hot food. We watched the news in disbelief until we couldn't anymore. The next day they took me to stores to get shoes and replace some of the necessities I lost. There weren't any cars to be rented in New York so Mark took me to his apartment in Connecticut and arranged a rental car for me for the next day. He had a picture of the twin towers hanging in his bathroom; he loved those buildings.

The next morning I drove halfway through Pennsylvania listening to the news on the radio, coughing up debris, until I finally switched to a classical music station. I have got to stop listening to this madness, I thought. I stopped for the night and got a room near the baseball hall of fame. I called Mark to see how he was faring. He said that someone drove past his apartment on a loud motorcycle and the sound scared him so badly he started crying and couldn't stop. I called home to talk to my 7-year-old daughter; I needed some stability. But there was confusion when she answered, first she said she was home alone then she said she wasn't – it was unnerving. She wrote a short letter to God which I'll always keep along with my receipt from my dinner in Tower 1.

Dreams - day and night: mostly plane crashes and other disasters. In one recurring dream there's a train wreck in the late 1800s. A bridge collapses in the Midwest and the train plunges into a river – I'm with the other ladies in Victorian dresses trying to crawl out the train windows.

People in Michigan were devastated and in disbelief but they were geographically removed. When I went to my daughter's school the secretary asked me what happened. I barely said anything and she was crying. I found a therapist

and when I started telling him some things that were keeping me awake, he started crying. I learned I had to keep it to myself -- tell people that it's just like what you saw on TV and it's good to be home, and leave it at that. My marriage finished disintegrating throughout the fall.

Back to work, I was told I could take some time but I didn't understand what time -- use my vacation? I thought I might need my vacation later and if I took it now what would I do, stay home by myself and relive one moment after another? A few months later I went in to work and our intranet home page had the New York Museum of Modern Art post-September 11<sup>th</sup> photos highlighted, even though the president of Fry had announced that no one was to post 9/11 photos on our intranet. I was so devastated and confused that someone posted these photos when he said not to do it. In my mind I saw the towers as I had last seen them in person. I sat there frozen at my desk crying for over two hours. People sat around me at their desks but no one acknowledged that they noticed I was falling apart. I finally was able to move my arm and send an email to my friend Becky, sitting in another area. She came and helped me out of the building and walked me around outside. Eventually I calmed down so I could get in my car and drive, by myself, nowhere. I finally took a week vacation. My manager had told me I was "the last person that would ever be let go," but the day I got back from vacation she told me they had laid me off while I was gone. Then there was nothing else to think about but the train going off the tracks, car crashes, ship wrecks, explosions, body parts. Someone called me from Fry said it was interesting how the whole thing turned out because the company forgot to schedule the meeting with NYMEX, so I really didn't need to go to New York that day.

I witnessed many acts of kindness between strangers and was relieved to feel camaraderie among Americans surrounding this event that I've never felt before. But it is horrible how many people never made it home - their cars crushed in the parking structures, their unfed pets, their kids, spouses, parents, and friends.

## **Five Years After**

*Hear water go through a house's plumbing somewhere and think of breaking glass, and the people who chose to jump and fall into it.*

*Drive down the road and see an animal that has been hit and fear that it's human road kill.*

*See them in slow motion -- the bleeding, the ones wandering in shock not able to comprehend the carnage and insanity surrounding them. The people screaming and running because they're surrounded by crowds of people screaming and running. Always hear the screaming. Stop going to any events where there could be crowds.*

*Look in the closet or on the floor by the front door and straighten any disheveled shoes, or put them away somewhere, so you don't feel like running from them.*

*Remember YOU'RELUCKYTOBEALIVE, YOU'REASURVIVOR; LUCKY, SURVIVOR.*

*Someone cracks a joke at a 4<sup>th</sup> of July party that has "burning flesh" in the punchline. Toss and turn for the next few nights crying off and on.*

*Call Mark in Connecticut to ask how he deals with the images of the body parts. He says, "When I accidentally stepped in the first body, I immediately told myself I was walking across my kitchen floor and slipped on some spilled ketchup. You're still attaching a personality to those pieces and thinking of them with names and*

*waiting families." Yes. He said, "I force myself to think of them as inanimate objects like they aren't people, but stuff ... like chunks of chicken."*

*Stop having ketchup and eating chicken.*

*Wonder when I will start doing something that really makes a difference to humankind.*

*A plane flies too close over the house and think, "This is it, they're getting us back.*

*Our government invaded a country and now we're going to get it. What kind of plane is that - is it us or them?"*

*Knew the towers were going to come down, but didn't go back. There's the logic of 'you could have been killed,' but still - didn't do anything. That's the rub this year. Last year it was something else and next year might be something else.*