

## *What I Saw That Day (September 11, 2001)*

Tuesday, September 11th, 2001 began for me, as it did for almost everyone in the world, like any other day. As on most days back then, I woke up in my crummy little apartment in Jersey City, just a block away from Journal Square and the PATH trains I rode every weekday morning to 33rd street before walking a few blocks to work.

I was born on May 8, 1978, and so I had six months experience being 23 years old. I was mostly single and certainly didn't have any commitments in the world. I was working as a freelance broadcast production assistant at 285 Madison Avenue, which was my fancy way of saying I was a temp at Young & Rubicam, New York. I was only a year out of college and deserved fancy ways of saying things, didn't I? I was young and naïve and blissfully unaware of the world on a grander scale, all of which was about to change.

Given that I didn't know that morning was going to be different from other mornings, I didn't mentally record it. I remember the shower curtain with the tropical fish in my bathroom and the trunk of the old elm tree just outside the bathroom window, and ironing my pants and hurrying out of my apartment at a few minutes to 8 in the morning, but those are as likely memories of other mornings as they are of that day. There were a lot of mornings like that back then. I miss mornings like that.

The first real memory I have of that day, the first that I am certain, mentally, was part of that day, is of waiting in the line of the corner breakfast cart to buy a cranberry muffin and an orange juice. I did that often, but I remember that day, an attractive brunette was in front of me. I'd seen her

before. She had a nice figure and was gorgeous in spite of her enormous nose. Or maybe I thought she was attractive because of that enormous nose; perhaps it added a touch of distinction to her to separate her from all of the other spectacularly attractive brunettes I often saw on the streets of Manhattan. I remember thinking one day I'd have to say something to her. Maybe later that week. Maybe I'd invite her out for a drink.

I paid for my muffin and orange juice and walked into my office building. Young & Rubicam had temporary ID patches for their freelance workers, but I'd been there for more than a year by then and could greet all of the front desk attendants by name, and they always just waved me by. They did so that morning.

But that was the last morning they ever did.

\*\*\*

I worked on the third floor, and took the stairs to my desk. It was in a cubicle, and I got to my cube at five minutes to nine. My voicemail indicator light on my phone flashed, so I dialed our audix system as I booted up my computer.

Just as I did so, one of the business managers with whom I worked came hurrying down the hallway opposite me. It was not unusual to see any of my colleagues hurrying down hallways.

"I just heard a plane hit the World Trade Center," she said as she passed, heading further down the hall toward the office of the director of our department.

I wonder if you ever realize the exact moment your life changes. I didn't. I keyed in my extension and password to listen to my messages. I don't remember what they were, but I remember I wasn't concerned. I do remember my first thought: single-engine Cessna, pilot error, clipped that giant antenna sticking out of the top of the one tower. Port Authority officials would be fishing the yahoo out of the water off Battery Park before most of the city had gotten its coffee, we now return you to your regular programming. Not

for a moment did I consider the possibility of . . . well. What actually happened.

\*\*\*

I walked down the hallway to our director's office. The business manager had fished the key out of the director's assistant's drawer and tuned the cable-enabled television to CNN. That third floor office was on the corner overlooking the intersection of 40th Street and Madison Avenue, and given the density of sky scrapers in Manhattan, we couldn't see the World Trade Center from where we were, and so we watched it happen on cable, just like everyone else in the nation. You know what I saw. You saw it, too. Somewhere, wherever you were, you saw it, or heard about it. Your eyes were riveted to a television, your ears to a radio.

Given the timing of the impact of those two planes, many of our producers were already on their way to work when the first struck, and as they arrived they joined us in the office. The usual morning pleasantries were dismissed for something more intimate: exchanges of information, and hugs. "Did you--- oh, thank God you're okay!"

"I was so worried."

"Did you hear from her?"

"Has anyone talked to Los Angeles?"

No one had. It was still early. The towers still stood, pouring grey smoke into the sky like blood into water. We all had cell phones, but the circuits overloaded in an hour, and even the land connections were spotty at best.

When the first tower fell, I went numb. Words like "shock" and "surreal" were used a lot during the following days, but neither quite adequately describes what I felt at that moment. Not even terrified manages it. To really explain that feeling, I need to take you back to my childhood, when my grandmother gave me "The World Book of Knowledge," which contained hundreds of articles arranged with no real order about subjects from the first money to black holes to odd musical instruments. It was a fun book, and, at the end,

included an article about Nostradamus. Who he was, what he did, what people believed he predicted.

That article mentioned several of his predictions that hadn't by then come to fruition: shooting stars and a couple of others, but the one I remember most was "The destruction of New York and the start of World War III in the late 1990s." I was six or seven years old when I read that sentence, during the mid-80s. It terrified me. For years I had recurring nightmares about that sentence. Buildings falling, airplanes and boats... In my teens, those dreams came less frequently, then stopped completely when I went to college. By then I was anxious about other things.

Until my senior year. I was engaged then, had just realized I didn't want to be a doctor but not yet figured out what else I might do, and was completing my major when my nightmares began again in earnest. One every few weeks. Dreams of watching the Manhattan skyline fall, of fire and smoke and chaos.

I don't believe those dreams were precognitive; I think the book scared the wits out of me when I was young, and it became a great subconscious source of anxiety. When I started to worry about grades and credit card bill due dates and assignments, I think I made that anxiety into the biggest, most terrifying thing possible.

And there I stood, in a corner office, and the biggest, most terrifying thing I had ever thought possible, the thing that had haunted my dreams for so many years, was happening. That was how I felt when I saw that first building fall. That terror had been part of my dreams for so many years that it was almost familiar. It was like opening the closet door when you're thirty and meeting the bogeyman.

\*\*\*

I don't remember much about those first few hours, save a few intermittent moments. I remember the moment of looking out those office windows, down at the corner, and seeing cars backing down Madison Avenue in reverse at decent speeds. I don't think, before that moment, I'd ever

seen a car in Manhattan driving in reverse before. It may have been related to the evacuation of Grand Central Station, but I can't be sure; there were many rumors, and even having been right there, I'm still not sure exactly what happened.

I remember the moment those towers fell. I remember the image on CNN; that one moment both were there, the tops in flames and obscured by smoke but still intact, and then one just wasn't. The tumbling down of dust as first one tower and then, an hour later, the other. I remember watching that occur with my colleagues. I remember the tear that traced out of a green eye and down the drawn cheek of one. I remember the empty feeling that came, the feeling deep in the pit of my stomach that I still haven't been able to identify. I still feel it sometimes, and I still can't figure out what it is.

I knew I should call my parents, who lived near Philadelphia, to let them know I was okay, but I realized I knew neither of their work numbers. Instead I called my old high school, where my sister was then a student. She was out at lunch and couldn't be contacted, so I told the principal I'd call back in 45 minutes. When I did so, they put my sister on the phone. She was in tears; they'd told her I'd called but not that I was okay, because I'd forgotten to tell them I was. She gave me my mother's work number.

My mother burst into tears when she heard my voice, but I don't think it was the first time she'd done so that day; I could tell by her relief just how worried she had been. She asked what I planned to do and where I planned to go from there, and I had to admit that I hadn't gotten that far yet. We'd all agreed that it was safest to remain in our office building for the time being, but as the day progressed, that changed. People made plans to stay with one another, extended invitations, made plans to find homes with people they'd only ever drunk coffee with, previously. My director pulled his backpack over his shoulders and set out to walk home across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Just after noon, one of my colleagues and her husband mentioned that they were going to trek across town to the Hoboken ferry to get back to their own apartment in New Jersey, and they invited me to join them. Though I'd been invited to stay with friends in Manhattan itself, I hadn't wanted to remain in the City: I had nothing with me, no contact solution, no toothbrush, no extra clothing, nothing but what I had with me and maybe twenty bucks. I didn't have any credit cards because my credit wasn't very good after college.

I also wanted to get back to my room. My bed. My floor messy with the clothes I'd laundered but hadn't yet put away. My apartment. Home. The PATH train from 33rd Street was my normal transportation home, but they had shut down the subway in downtown Manhattan for fear of the subterranean vibrations, so I accepted the invitation from my colleague and her husband to walk with them, and at around two in the afternoon began a journey across the city along 40th street.

\*\*\*

It was only upon leaving the building that I realized how quickly and vastly Manhattan had changed, and that I suddenly felt completely exposed. In the office, I had been insulated from the noise, the chaos, the destruction. The windows and walls and floors and ceilings had created a bubble, isolating us, where we already had friends and family. I consider that now, and it makes me feel so terribly guilty; so many people were lost that day. Almost 3,000 workers and rescue personnel lost their lives during the attacks and the subsequent recovery efforts, and there I had been, in a cushy corner office on Madison avenue watching the events unfold on CNN. When those buildings fell, when I watched them tumble down over themselves in massively roiling clouds of dark grey dust, I watched it happen on the large television in that office, surrounded by the people I loved and worked with.

I couldn't sort my feelings that day. Scared and shocked, yes, but mostly just numb. Overwhelmed. Everything felt new, and different. I'd always believed Manhattan is a city unlike any other, but I realized even more true how true that was that day when I realized how different it had become.

The Manhattan I'd grown to love over six years was a cacophony of discordant scents all jostling each other for elbow room: body odor under failed deodorant; streetcart pretzels and hotdogs and falafel; those hot, muggy, surprising blasts of foul-smelling steam from subway grates; sudden-and-then gone whiffs of designer perfume like lavender and lilacs worn by beautiful women who make so much money in such high positions they could buy and sell you and you probably wouldn't mind, not when they smelled like that.

Manhattan, too, is a million-instrument orchestra: car horns and engines; jackhammers and clanging percussion; people shouting on their cell phones; homeless people who are probably mad and certainly angry. The sound thrums through the streets like blood through veins, some in frequencies you can only feel, and as though it is the City's life. It is industry, and it is constant. I often went out with my friends to bars and clubs, at nights at the end of which I would trek back to 33rd street to take the PATH train to my Jersey City apartment at 4 in the morning, and there were always other people around. Sinatra sang that Manhattan never sleeps, and he was half-right; it never even goes to bed.

The first difference I noticed when I left my office building that afternoon, through those revolving doors and into the still-brilliant sun, was the smell. The air seemed heavy, as dense with dirt and dust and grit as it could possibly be without actually becoming solid; I could taste the grains in it, feel them rattle down my throat and into my lungs. I was several miles from the World Trade Center, on 40th and Madison, breathing the towers and the attacks and the fear into my body. Though I was several miles from the site of the attacks, they became a part of me, trapped in my lungs, in

my eyes, in my memories, as crystallized as silica and asbestos.

It smelled like a construction site. A vast, near-silent, deserted construction site.

Even now, years later, I sometimes find it difficult to take a deep breath. I work out, and afterwards I struggle to get enough air. I know that smokers get emphysema and cancer because foreign particles accumulate in their lungs over the years and form tumors, and I wonder if a similar thing occurred that day. I wonder if I still have dust from that day in my lungs. I wonder if my breath caught the World Trade Center and won't let it go.

The city was near-silent, too, and nearly empty. I walked out into the same city, with the same great buildings, the same famous avenues and streets, the same stores and public library, but they seemed different, sapped of their usual energy. The whole city was preternaturally quiet. There was no industry, few cars, even fewer people. I felt as though the city were hurting, and I could feel it on the street; without the sound and the life that was its energy, the city itself seemed to be in shock, as if it were bleeding out.

It felt so foreign.

It hurt.

\*\*\*

My coworker, her husband, and I made light conversation as we walked across a City that felt unfamiliar. All that remained of the towers was the dust you could smell all over the City. I remember hitting Broadway and looking downtown; given the density and height of Manhattan's architecture, I'm not certain I would have been able to see the World Trade Center from that spot on 40th and Broadway, but I couldn't then. All we could see was a great, settled mass of grey-white smoke we could taste even from where we stood.

I only ever managed to visit the World Trade Center once, that previous June, when I'd attended a reading by Neil Gaiman on the day his novel *American Gods* was published.

The Borders in which he'd read was at street level, and its second floor was the highest I had visited; I'd never had occasion to go any higher. When I was in college, however, I'd taken a class called "Culture and the City," in which our professor took us on walks in various neighborhoods of Manhattan, pointing out the architectural styles present. I remember going on the walk around downtown Manhattan and pausing next to Saint Peter's church and listening to my professor talk about the Chinese gothic style of the World Trade Center, and I remember standing there, in the shadow of the towers, and craning my neck as far as it would go and still not being able to see the tops but goggling anyway, because that was really all you could do.

\*\*\*

As we continued walking across the city, I remember hitting 9th Avenue and seeing a dazed business man. His shoulders were hunched, and I couldn't determine how old he was because he walked slowly and as if he were much older than he appeared. His charcoal suit hung loose on his frame and looked expensive but didn't fit him well; it was wrinkled, too, and it appeared as if he had slept in it. His hair was mostly dark streaked with some grey, and then my coworker pointed out the man's feet.

His shoes and the cuffs of his probably-tailored pants were caked with thick, white dust.

I wondered if he'd walked all the way to 40th Street from the World Trade Center. It would have been a long walk, in the bright, warm sun, dressed in a suit like that, and walking as he was.

\*\*\*

When we finally got to the line for the Hoboken ferry, which went down several blocks, I don't know how long we stood in it. Quite a while passed before we boarded the ferry: a large, white boat with benches for seating spanning starboard to port with two aisles cutting through. We took a seat in the middle of the boat; on any other day it would have been a gorgeous ride on the Hudson River. The water was

calm and sparkled silver in the late-afternoon sun, and the ride was smooth.

It was 5:20 then. I don't remember the time because I looked at my watch; rather, I know what time it was because I've read, since then, that was when the third building, World Trade Center 7, fell, and I watched that happen from the middle of the Hudson River. Everyone on that ferry watched that building fall, in fact, because all our eyes were fixed to the dust cloud that covered most of downtown Manhattan as we rode past it. There's been a recent proliferation of conspiracy theories about "what really happened" that day and much speculation about why that third building collapsed when it did; I've read many people argue that it was controlled demolition.

I've seen controlled demolition, both on television and in real life. I've watched construction crews collapse the buildings in on themselves so that first one section falls and then the next and the next, until all that is left of all those stories is a pile of rubble and dust.

What I watched happen to World Trade Center 7 from the middle of the Hudson River did not look like any controlled demolition I've ever seen. I remember seeing that reddish-tan building in front of the dust cloud. There were no tiny, squib-like explosions that puffed from the sides to bring that building to the ground; rather, it shimmered like a heat mirage over hot asphalt, didn't sparkle with the light of tiny explosions but rather wavered slightly without ever actually moving, and then it sank as if the ground beneath it had become water.

That was the moment I remember having been terrified. It was a cold, icy, resigned terror, not a panic, because why would you panic when you're on a ferry in the middle of the Hudson River? There was no place to go. I remember wondering, in that moment, if there had been a nuclear weapon aboard one of the planes, if it had been timed to go off several hours later to wipe out the rest of downtown Manhattan, and I remember wondering, in that detached way,

how quickly it would happen. How long before the blast radius hit the ferry I was on and capsized it and blew us apart and boiled the very water on which we were floating, all at the same time?

I counted to five, and those five seconds seemed to last forever. I didn't feel safe after they had passed, either, only reasonably sure that whatever had made that building fall hadn't been nuclear, and that we people on that ferry were going to survive that day, that we'd made it out of Manhattan alive.

I didn't feel excited, nor jubilant, nor triumphant, nor even relief.

I remember noticing that my coworker was watching that same space, where that third building had been, as I was, and that her eyes filmed over and that several tears streaked down her cheeks. I remember taking her right hand, and her husband's taking her left hand, and I remember riding for the remainder of the ferry ride like that, and I remember how I felt.

I felt incredibly sad. I felt heartbroken. I felt guilty. I felt deeply affected, but also like I didn't have the right to feel that way, that there were people who had jumped from the building, that there were who-knew-how-many rescue workers who had lost their lives, and there I was on the ferry on the Hudson River because I only wanted to go home. I'm an Eagle scout, part of the Order of the Arrow, and I felt like I should have put on my uniform and gone down to the site and helped hand out water or helped sort through the rubble or God, helped any goddamn way I could, and I felt so selfish because all I wanted to do was go home. All I wanted to do was hug my family and my friends and for everything to be okay, even though I knew that it wouldn't be, it couldn't be. I felt so impotent, so useless, too, because what could I do, really? I couldn't even give blood, because I'd just gotten a tattoo the previous January.

I was 23 years old and I might have been strong and smart but it didn't feel like enough. It was the first time in my entire life I felt like the best I had to offer wasn't enough.

\*\*\*

When we got off the ferry, there were several places to go: one was a general exit, while another included decontamination equipment, including flash-showers, for anyone who had been caught in the dust and the cloud that had permeated the air at the site of the attack. My coworker asked if I was sure I didn't want to join them at their apartment, but I declined. I only wanted to get to my own, and so we separated. I found my way to the Hoboken PATH train, and realized, even as I did so, that if I had left my apartment only ten minutes later that morning, I would have been on the train when the first plane had struck.

The PATH train is much like the subway, with a similar set-up of seats, but I never sat: trains always filled up, and I always gave up my seats to people who looked like they needed them more, anyway. I took a spot against a wall by the door, and for the first time that whole day, I exhaled. I felt like I was almost where I wanted to be. Almost home.

While we waited for more passengers, two gentlemen boarded the car, a well-dressed black man in a caramel leather jacket guiding a white man dressed in a wet, flame-resistant jumpsuit. I wondered why it was wet if it was flame-resistant. The white man's eyes were red and irritated, and the black man led him to a pole in the center of the train, then sat down. I noticed the man with the irritated eyes was constantly blinking and shaking his head, and I offered him the eyedrops I always kept with in case my contacts started acting up.

He declined, telling me about what had happened. He'd been there when the first tower had collapsed, and the dust had scratched his corneas badly. They'd taken him to their decontamination shower, which was why his clothes were wet, and even as he explained I realized that the dazed

business man my coworkers and I had seen hadn't slept in his suit; it had dried that way.

The train ride was smooth and uninterrupted, and I felt a rush of guilty relief when the doors opened at Journal Square, as I bounded up the stairs and into Jersey City, as I walked the block back to my apartment and then collapsed on my bed. I didn't realize how much nervous energy had been thrumming through my body until it finally left, and I passed out.

\*\*\*

I was awakened by a call from a girl who lived just across the street and with whom I'd gone out a few times even though nothing physical had ever happened. She asked if I was home and then what I was up to, and then invited me to her place to split a bottle of wine and just be together.

I went. She opened a bottle of red and we split it between us, and she turned on CNN until we couldn't watch the planes fly into the towers any more, and then we just sat and talked. She was an accountant at American Express and had been at World Trade Center 7 the day before, and she was supposed to have been there the following day.

This is probably the point where it would make sense, storywise, if we had sex. That we needed to connect somehow, that our words and feelings had failed us and we needed to use our bodies to do something physical, something to escape, however temporarily, from what was occurring, but we did not. All I remember, now, is that I wasn't in any sort of mood for any such thing; I was tired and scared and felt impotent in a way that had nothing to do with sex, and maybe I could have initiated something, but I didn't have the heart. The wine had gotten to me, perhaps, and I just wanted to be back in my own bed.

I kissed her on her forehead and left her there, in her apartment, on her couch, settling in to sleep. I let myself out of her building and crossed the street to my own; night had fallen, but still I could smell the dust in the air on an

otherwise clear night. If I dreamt at all that night, I don't remember them.

\*\*\*

Five years later, those are the details that remain with me and probably always will. The pain and the hurt remain, as well, and in the years since I have realized that they extend more deeply than I had at first realized. It is only now, recently, when I have begun to write about it, that I have begun to unravel my emotions about it. I'm starting to believe that I blocked myself from feeling certain things until very recently, that perhaps I sensed I wasn't strong enough, yet, to face my feelings about that day.

Not the fear and the pain; those were the easy ones. No, there were other ones, as well. Guilt, for one, and selfishness for another. The posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms I feel are not nearly so severe, nor acute, as those of others who experienced that day, but they are there nonetheless. Perhaps one of the most revealing things I can tell you is that I feel ashamed that I may be suffering from survivor trauma because I don't feel like I have any right to that feeling. I didn't survive that day: I lived through it. I'm not certain I feared for my life except in retrospect; it all happened so fast that I experienced it, that day, with some detachment.

My memories of that day are interwoven with my memories of the years I spent in Manhattan. I was only a New Yorker for a short time, less than two years, and even then my address was in Jersey City. But that was just where my bed was; I worked and ate and danced and lived in Manhattan. When I went out, which was often because I was 23, I did so in Manhattan. I have a lot of memories I hold dear of those years, and that day has become part of them. Part of college and working and being with my friends. When I think of September 11th, 2001, I also think of the *Kiss Me, Kate!* revival, the Met and the Cloisters. When I think of how that day smelled, I also think of my office, of the commercials I helped produce, and all of my friends. When I think of the fear, I also think of being inside the World Trade

Center and listening to Neil Gaiman read about *American Gods*, and of later looking up at those towers from the ground, of standing in the far-reaching shadow of those towers.

I wonder, when I think of that day, what American gods passed away that day, and how many. How many of us has it killed, and in what ways?

\*\*\*

It is difficult to write about that day, and the only way I can end this account is to acknowledge that. That as essays and writings go, I don't feel this is successful even if I don't know how it could be successful: I've laid bare everything I have, everything I remember, and still it feels inadequate, as I still do.

Perhaps it is that I still have trouble believing that this world I find myself in can possibly be real. That my nation, my great country of which I've always been proud to be part, has strayed so far and done so many things I disagree with. That our own government could have possibly corrupted the ideals on which our entire national ideology was based in an effort to trade our freedom for some false sense of security. In the years since, we have run a rainbow of terrorist alerts and been prevented from bringing hair product with us when we travel.

I can't seem to shake this feeling that it's a bad dream. I can't help looking at the plans and design for the new Freedom Tower and wonder why we can't just build the World Trade Center back. Why we can't recreate those buildings so that, one day, when we talk to our children and tell them about that day, they can look up at us and say, "What're you talking about, Daddy? You mean those buildings? Right there? They falled down?"

I live, now, in Los Angeles and attend school at the University of Southern California, but I can't help the desire that, tomorrow morning, I might wake up back in my tiny, cluttered bedroom in my crummy little apartment in Jersey City, and I might shower and dress and take a PATH train

into midtown, where I might walk again to that advertising agency like I would have every day for the past five years, and I might spend the day writing copy and brainstorming new ideas for new clients and new accounts.

And that I might, at some point in the day, find myself on the higher floors of the building, and I might look out the window, toward downtown. I would see the Empire State Building just a few blocks south, but it wouldn't be the tallest building in Manhattan again; just a mile or so beyond I would see the sunlight shining off the windows of the World Trade Center, and beyond even that the Statue of Liberty.

And I would stand there looking at it, and I would appreciate where I was, and I would smile.

*-Will Entrekin*