

# 9/11/01

It is not long after 9 am on Tuesday, September 11th. I climb up from the subway at 49th Street and 8th Avenue and head toward my building entrance. As I approach an electronics store, a small crowd is hovering around the entrance, staring upwards. Jeffrey, a co-worker, comes up to me and I ask him what is up. "They bombed the World Trade Center." It barely registers, so foreign a thought it is. Then I, too, look up at the TV screen. It doesn't even occur to me to look south, where the Twin Towers stand. Besides, they're obscured by the nearby buildings.

On the elevator up to the 5th floor, I glance up at the "Captive" news screen, looking for any updates. The news is spreading. Everybody is cautious; they choose their words carefully.

I make a beeline to the nearest conference room, but the TV control panel isn't working.

Others have already crowded into the 6th floor conference room. Practically standing room only. It's packed. People are hovering outside the entrance as well. I slip past them, spy my friend Oksana, and slide into a chair next to her. There are about 30-40 people in the room; all eyes are trained on the screen as we watch the scene play out. They're replaying the footage of the first, then the second plane crashing into the Twin Towers.

There's a collective gasp. Not a few expletives are tossed off. Some have tears in their eyes, others are clutching their cell phones. One man makes nervous but ill-worded observations that are completely ignored. He's then even more flustered. Then news comes about a crash in D.C. Another collective gasp. Five excruciating minutes later, we're told that the Pentagon has been hit.

I slip out of the conference room, realizing that family and out-of-town friends will start calling. Two relatives have already called, anxious for news of my safety. When I finally get a line out, I check in with both to reassure them that I'm okay. Then I call Dad, tell him I'm safe. This is World War III, he says.

People at work are wandering around, not sure what to do. No announcements blare over the public address system. I call my account executive to see if our 10 am conference call with a client in London could possibly still be scheduled. The first thing I hear after the ring are gasps of air and the sound of anguish.

"Do you need help, Jackie? Shall I come up?" I say. The meeting is forgotten.

The TV is now on in the 5th floor conference room — closer to my office. After 15 tense minutes, I mention that it won't be long before CNN devises a logo for

the crisis. I know it is cynical and tacky to mention it, but can't hold my tongue. Not even 15 minutes later, my theory is supported when I check back into the conference room for a news update. In a red, white and blue box, the graphic appears: AMERICA UNDER ATTACK. "The fuckers," I said.

By 10:30, people are leaving. Others are making arrangements for those who live outside Manhattan and cannot make their way home. I decide to stay around. Who knows what's in the air at this point? Rumors abound: they're evacuating the city from midtown and farther south. Why head south, then? I venture outside to buy a drink at the deli. On Broadway and 49th, you can look downtown and see the smoke streaming up into the sky. Times Square is barricaded off. Otherwise, though, people are calmly walking around. Not hurriedly like commuters, but like people who don't have a destination in mind.

Back at the office, I find that the CNN Website is overloaded, so I cannot even get on to their site. An official from the building finally comes around and tells us that they're moving everybody to the fourth floor cafeteria.

No one should be on any floors above. I think we have at least 50 floors; our department is on the fifth floor. They'll keep the fourth floor open all night, the cafeteria will remain open for people who can't leave.

Finally, at 2 pm, I decide to leave work. I walk out with Tim, a co-worker. He's headed off to Brooklyn on foot (it's the only way he can get there at this point). His boyfriend works downtown, just a stone's throw from the World Trade Center. Luckily, after a few white knuckle hours, Tim found out that he was safe.

We walk across town on 49th Street. I'm hoping to avoid most landmarks: Times Square, Empire State Building. Tim and I separate at Park Ave. I continue on and head south at Lexington Avenue. I could avoid Grand Central by walking further east, but don't, since I live on Lex. Grand Central Station is locked up, though it looks like they're selectively letting people in — probably MetroNorth customers who are heading north of the city. All subways are shut down, though, according to reports flying around.

I find organized chaos on the corner of 42nd and Lex, it's mayhem. Traffic jams. Ambulances. Undercover police sedans with sirens and red lights blaring. Suddenly, we all hear a loud boom. Collectively we look skyward toward the Chrysler Building. Another possible — and obvious — target? All airplanes have been grounded in the area — and apparently across the country. It's a relief to see an F16 flying overhead. One of ours.

On 26th Street, the Armory is barricaded. National Guard soldiers with machine guns stand guard. Humvees at the ready. A fleet of camouflaged vehicles are lined up on both sides of the street.

I finally arrive home. Lexington and 24th Street. Exhausted. Not from walking, but from the obvious collective stress. Already a few friends from across the country and around the world have called in or e-mailed me. It's hard to place any phone calls, though I keep trying, despite feeling guilty for tying up the phone lines.

I grab my camera and take the elevator to the 27th floor. Other residents clearly have the same thing in mind. On the roof, I have a 360 degree view of the city. Instinctively, I face south and take in the billowing cloud of black smoke. But no Twin Towers, of course. Amazing how we take that vista for granted. Other rooftop spectators are scattered across the surrounding buildings. An American flag flaps in the wind on the rooftop about five blocks to the south. A man on a nearby building is poised on a water tower. His footing seems precarious to me, but he doesn't move an inch for ten minutes.

After a few hours of listening to the radio, I walk east to some friends' apartment a few blocks away. I pass a computer store owned by a Middle Eastern family. Like other stores around, it's already locked up and the metal gates are pulled down. Posted in the window is a flyer:

**DUE TO THE WTC TRAGEDY  
WE NEED BLOOD  
GO TO THE NYC HOSPITALS  
GIVE BLOOD**

I was to soon see these flyers posted all over the city. On light posts. In deli windows. On telephone kiosks.

My friends' place is just down the street from the a New York Police Department station house. Only official vehicles are allowed south of 21<sup>st</sup> Street. The playground across from my friends' building is now overrun with cars of officials who came in to report for duty. Inside, we watch the news broadcast on for awhile. Then, we take Ivan, their Siberian Husky, out for a walk. Nearby Gramercy Park is actually open to the public today. Normally, non-residents can access the park only one day a year. Today is not that scheduled day. The park benches are filled with mostly women with their baby strollers. Pockets of children play on the lawn. All are seeming oblivious to the events happening not far to the south. Of course, they're just in an escapist mode right now.

We meet up with two colleagues I know and worked with at another agency. Eunice has tears streaming down her face. John is consoling her; she can't get to her home in the boroughs.

Back at my friends' apartment, we play Scrabble to pass the time, with the TV humming in the background. Already media fatigue has set in. I can't help but think that I've seen the image of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers far too

many times. How long before people become immune to it? How long before it blunts the impact? Still, we watch.

Around 8 pm, I return home, but am still restless. By 8:30 pm, I decide to head out to see if there's any way I can lend a hand. I head over to Park Avenue and turn south. An M103 bus passes by me, speeding north, filled with the bulk of the passengers dressed in surgical scrubs. I remember hearing on the news that St. Vincent's Hospital is overtaxed and that Bellevue Hospital is underutilized. Maybe they're trying to rebalance the load.

Farther down, hospital personnel — also in scrubs — walk toward me. Stethoscopes hang from their necks; their faces are blank; they barely talk to each other. The smell of smoke permeates the air.

I continue on to Union Square. At the south end, a crowd of people — teens, homeless, foreigners, whites, black, Hispanics, college students, neighborhood people. Upon closer inspection, I see dozens of votive candles illuminating the long reams of brown butcher paper taped to the sidewalk. Markers and pens are scattered about and many people are busy adding their inscriptions to the heavily rendered paper.

Some inscriptions are filled with vitriol, some with anguish. Others with hope, others with politics. Many platitudes. Many heartfelt emotions. French. English. Spanish. Arabic. Pro-American. Anti-American. Pro-Israel. Anti-Israel. Pro-Islam. Anti Islam. Vitriol. Love. Hate. Pacifists. Hawks.

A local TV news camera is on the scene. I move out of range of the viewfinder. Others capture the moment with their digital cameras. I have purposely not brought my camera out. It seems too morbid. Too opportunistic. Instead, I head over to the drugstore to buy a pen and a mini notebook. I'll capture it with mental photography. With words.

Throughout, sirens are blaring. They will not stop for days, I'm sure. Back at Union Square, I begin copying down some of the sentiments:

**"out of MOTHERFUCKING control"**

**"THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH BEING SANE"**

**"Will someone please wake me up from this horrible nightmare."**

**"We are at war with each other, because we are at war with ourselves."**

**"There is a war plane over my head."**

**"BUILDINGS RISE.  
BUILDINGS FALL.  
SO DO SPECIES.  
WE ARE NOT IMMUNE.  
WE CANNOT LET THIS ESCALATE."**

**"PAZ para todos los pueblos." Carlos, Spain.**

**"THE END IS NEAR"**

**"At last, now America will really wake up and help Israel."**

**"MAN-FLATTENED!"**

**"WE WANT WAR"**

**"Think of the countries where this happens weekly. R.I.P."**

**"WHY?"**

**"Once again, we are condemned to repeat the past. We have not evolved."**

**"How the cookie crumbles. George, tell a joke now."**

**"Dios, tenga en su santa gloria a todas las personas que murieron."**

**"24 hours left"**

On the paper, someone has transcribed a Robert Frost's poem about choosing your death: fire or ice. A few lines of Arabic that I wish I could decipher. Mixed in with these scribblings are illustrations of peace signs, doves, gravestones, tears, drawings of the World Trade Center. I kneel down to add my thoughts to the mix. Someone snaps a picture of me. I quickly rise and fall back into the crowd.

Now I head west on 14th Street. Toward St. Vincent's in the West Village. Ground Zero for triage. As I get closer, a thin stream of medical personnel in surgical scrubs pass by me. Tears. Stone faces. Stress. Silence. I feel completely useless. Like a voyeur. But I don't turn back.

At the corner of 12th Street and 7th Avenue, floodlights from TV network vans fill the intersection. Legions of ambulances have transformed the avenue into a parking lot north of the hospital. A fire engine stands by. So does a somber, silent crowd. I pass by the hospital side entrance where family members are arriving to find out about the fate of their loved ones. People are clinging to each other. Others gasp for air as their grief overtakes them.

Hesitantly, I approach two cops. "Is there any place where I can volunteer?" I ask. They direct me to a building across the street, saying that they're taking down names there. Once there, I discover that it's cordoned off with police tape and is unlit. Deserted.

On West 12th Street and Greenwich Avenue, a Mac truck takes up the parking spaces, three car lengths long. A sleek, stainless steel 20-foot long tank is hitched to the truck. It's an industrial gas transporter. "AGA: Oxygen Refrigerated Liquid." Discarded face masks lie in the gutter. A Porta-Jon stands in attendance curbside.

At the Greenwich and 7th Avenue intersection, you can see the triage unit set up at the main hospital entrance. Gurneys. IV bags. Stretchers. Groups of EMTs. Surgeons. Nurses. Cops. Some are smiling. Some are silent. All look tired.

On my side of the street, there's a cordoned off area for the press. One reporter is refreshing her makeup off camera, but it doesn't mask her exhaustion.

Cameramen. Reporters. Technicians. Behind the press barricade, next to me is a large man in his forties with shorts and a baseball cap. A spectator like me, I guess. He's chatting with a reporter.

"Whatcha doin' here?" the reporter asks the guy.

"Takin' in the sights, I guess," the spectator says.

"Whacha got there? Pictures?" the report holds out his hand and the baseball cap guy hands him pictures of the Twin Towers. It captures the exact moment when the second plane slammed into the south tower. The sky is still a gorgeous, sparkling blue, except where the plane has crashed into the tower. Smoke is billowing from the building.

"You take these?" the reporter asks.

"Nah, I got 'em in Chinatown. They were selling 'em," said baseball boy.

How gruesome. And now he's migrated uptown? Then again, I'm here, too. Aren't I?

"How much?" says the reporter.

"Two dollars each. Three for five," baseball boy says. I turn to leave. A Salvation Army van is parked across the street, sitting there nonchalantly as an ice cream truck. Only it's not children who rush toward it, but cops, emergency workers and medical personnel. The menu is completely different: Beef stew. Chicken. Sandwiches. Water.

Crates of bottled water are stacked up nearby. Posted on the telephone pole, a flyer reads: GIVE BLOOD. 12th AVE & 7th. It also gives other locations of where people can go to donate blood.

Unfortunately, this is one thing that I cannot do. My fear of needles has nothing to do with it. I'm ineligible because anyone who has cumulatively spent 6 months or more in England in the past 10 years is disqualified. The U.S. government is worried about the risk of transmitting Mad Cow Disease. It's a good precaution, I suppose, even though my blood is perfectly fine. Instead, look at the other disease of that we've imported: violence. Obviously, we're not as diligent about that.

Feeling very much an intruder and completely superfluous, I continue on down Greenwich Avenue. Sirens. Lights. Everything's a blur. Everything's the same.

Seventh Avenue is nearly empty, except for a few taxicabs, livery cars and, of course, emergency vehicles. Still, here and throughout my walk around lower Manhattan, sidewalk cafes and bars are playing host to New Yorkers escaping from the uncertainty of the day. Sushi Samba is open. So is Caliente Cab Co. The Dew Drop Inn. Many others. Which is more callous? To wine and dine in the shadows of tragedy? Or to wander the streets, looking for god knows what? At Carmine Street, further access south is restricted.

I turn east onto Bedford Street, where the ubiquitous blue glow emanates from practically every apartment window. Everyone is glued to their TVs. In an old tenement entryway, about ten residents gather on the stoop. A mini-block party. A radio is tuned to a news station. They're smoking. Talking quietly. Bonding like they've been neighbors for twenty years. They probably have been.

At Sixth Avenue and Houston Street, there's a phalanx of cops and sawhorses, barring access to any more traffic. A food table is set up — like Kraft Services caterers on movie sets. It only serves to reinforce the fact that this all seems so unreal. That it's like a whack 'em, rock 'em, sock 'em movie that Bruce Willis is starring in. Where's the smoke machine? Didn't need it. Houston Street seems darker than usual. All the street lamps were lit up, but it didn't seem to help.

Looking east along Houston, it resembles a parking lot for a monster truck rally. Earth-moving machines. Fuel oil trucks. New York City Housing Authority garbage trucks. Heavy machinery sits idle, waiting to be called up for gruesome duty. Cops on every corner are vetting the pedestrians. The only ones permitted farther south — aside from emergency workers — are those who show ID that lists them as residents.

On Houston, from Sullivan to West Broadway, a fleet of dump trucks loiter. They've obviously been pulled out of service from picking up garbage from all the

public housing sites. Listed like the home teams on each truck, their local affiliations and neighborhoods are listed on their side doors: Manhattanville, Fort Washington, St. Nicholas Houses, Gompus Houses, Wald Houses. Now, instead of carting residential garbage, they'd cart away the World Trade Center.

Next in line sits trucks weighted down with scaffolding. Colgate Scaffolding. Atlantic Piers Scaffolding. In each window is a piece of paper with their company name and "EMERGENCY SERVICES" listed below. They have clearance.

At Broadway, I veer north. My feet are sore. Six city buses are idling at the corner between Houston and Bleecker. Instead of their usual destination listed on the display, it read "NOT IN SERVICE" or "EMERGENCY." Now they would transport a new type of passenger. Emergency service personnel. Victims' families?

Throughout the city, most shops are closed. Many have been shut down for hours. Except for delis. Newsstands. Drugstores. Strangely, though, some clothes boutiques as well as other retail stores are still open. I guess they suppose that those who cannot get out of the city will have some free time on their hands. They're probably right.

I turn west again on West 4th Street toward NYU and Washington Square Park. It's dark and isolated, yet I don't feel any danger. Too late for that. Besides, people here in the city have been incredible. Looks of empathy. Gentle acknowledgements. Cooperation.

In the student center, I can see through the windows to find a group of 15 or so people manning the phones. Taped to the window is a notice informing us of a **'VIGIL IN THE PARK'**. It must be scheduled for another night, probably Wednesday, because the park is strangely empty. It's only 10:30 pm. Occasionally, joggers run past. Dog walkers are herding their pets on leashes. Pockets of students gather here and there, but nothing cohesive. Nothing organized.

A long-haired musician, a bit rough at the edges, sits in the shadows on a bench on the peripheral part of the park, playing a flute. He's playing the same passage — a string of minor arpeggios — again and again. I wish he'd stop. Then he changes key and starts over. Now it's strangely welcoming. Comforting.

I'm almost clear of the park when a man entering the park approaches me. He stops abruptly alongside, a tote bag at his side. Dreadlocks. Looks like he's been shopping.

"Umm," he says, to catch my attention. I stop and acknowledge him guardedly. He continues: "Do us both a favor. Take me home with you." I raise my eyebrows but cannot register any other response. I continue walking.

Walking up University Place, I see that pedestrians have abandoned the sidewalks and taken over the empty street. Only the occasional car intrudes. A group of four "revelers" head out into the street. Three girls. One guy. She's had too much to drink.

"Walk her home. She can't go by herself," one guy says. She protests, but Kevin has been designated her escort.

Back at Union Square, the glow of flames has expanded. There are more votive candles, more inscriptions. People have laid out sleeping bags on the lawn. Some are already nestled in. The crowd has not thinned. I look to see what new insights have been added.

Finally, heading up Park Avenue toward home, I see only a few buses and emergency vehicles. My feet are killing me, but I don't have my Metrocard with me. Nor do I have the exact change. I'll walk the remaining ten blocks. However, from across the street, I see the bus driver waive all the passengers past the toll box and pick up speed. Besides, it's only ten blocks.

At the corner of 23rd and Park Avenue, I cross the street. Just as I step onto the curb, an ambulance speeds past, coming from the East. At the same time, another ambulance is lunging up Park — northwards. They barely miss each other.

On Lexington Avenue, the National Guard has expanded their area of influence. Truck after camouflaged truck lines both sides of the street for blocks. I pass one where a tank of potable water, hitched to a jeep, is leaking. But there are many more such tanks in formation. In the Baruch College dorm across the street, students and skateboarders populate the street along with the soldiers. It seems an odd juxtaposition. They seem to ignore each other.

Back home. It's well after 11 pm. The same doorman has been on duty for all three shifts. I check my voicemail at work. The broadcast message is short and businesslike: "As of 5 pm today, September 11th, we are not officially opening the office tomorrow. The building remains open, however, so use your discretion."

I call my brother. As soon as he hears my voice, his voice is strangely choked up, emotional. I, on the other hand, am incredibly composed. Cold, It's too close here for it to seem real. Or is it that we're all in shock?

I turn on the radio for more news. Out on the balcony, a half an hour later, I see the students and soldiers talking. Some students are taking pictures of willing soldiers. Co-eds are armed with digital cameras and are capturing the scene.

This time, I don't set the alarm before I head off to sleep.