

9/13/01

Thursday. It's 6:45 am. I'm up well before my alarm sounds off. I turn on the radio. Some people have been rescued from the rubble. There's hope.

I meander about the apartment, in no rush to go to work. I don't leave the house until just before 9 am. I'm not particularly keen to ride the subway at rush hour. Who knows what havoc may be wrought today?

Today's headlines:

NEW YORK TIMES:

**STUNNED RESCUERS COMB ATTACK SITES,
BUT THOUSANDS ARE PRESUMED DEAD;
F.B.I. TRACKING HIJACKERS' MOVEMENTS**

DAILY NEWS: There's a picture of the firemen carrying out the dead down at Ground Zero. The headline reads: "**10,000 FEARED DEAD**"

NEW YORK POST: The photo is of three fireman raising the flag on a mangled and slanting flagpole at Ground Zero. It's reminiscent of the soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima. The headline: "...gave proof through the night that our flag was still there."

I decide to walk. It's a beautiful sunny day. As I head north up Lexington, I pass the Armory, where armed soldiers wait, barricades bar everyone but families of the victims. The line-up of Port-A-Jons along the newly built Baruch College building gives it a new, surreal façade. It's as if there were some sporting event nearby.

I turn left and step over to Park Avenue. People all around me seem shell-shocked. No smiles. Just blank faces. It seems like my fellow New Yorkers tend to meet each other's eyes more than normal, but more in an acknowledgement of collective anguish. Around 29th and Park, a woman walks toward me with a miniature Americana flag. Five yards past her, a man on the corner is fanning out a handful of them. Hawking them to pedestrians. At least I assume that he is because as I walk by, he doesn't hand me one. I'm not prepared to be jingoistic yet.

The closer I get to 42nd street, the harder it is to put one foot in front of the other. All I want to do is turn around and go home. I have my radio Walkman on my head, alert for any new developments. Finally, defiantly, I make my decision. I'm going to cut straight through Grand Central Station. Landmarks and bomb threats be damned. Two blocks before Grand Central, I pass a set of stairs where people are sitting down, reading the paper. I almost veer right to do the same. Just sit. Go no farther, my instincts tell me.

But I don't. I keep going. Outside Grand Central is a company of firefighters. It looks like they've already been downtown. They seem exhausted. Ash-covered. I walk into the main station area. There are a number of trains listed on the departure board. It seems busy enough. Perhaps not as busy as usual, but buzzing with activity nonetheless.

I cut over to the escalators and up to the walkway that will lead me through various buildings and out onto 47th street. I zig-zag across town until I hit 49th Street. Past Saks Fifth Avenue. Past Rockefeller Center. The tents for the fashion show have been pulled down. On the other side of the block, the windows on the street level TV news show are papered over. No crowds today with "hi, Mom" signs, elbowing each other for air time.

The security guards in the lobby of my building are busy checking everyone's ID. Of course, I diligently set mine out on the kitchen counter this morning. Ever vigilant. But I forget it. After showing my driver's license and reciting my company ID number — as well as having a security guard recognize and vouch for me — I make my way past the checkpoint and take the elevator to the 5th floor.

Upstairs, everybody's restless. No one is prepared to work. Co-workers gather in various offices and hallway to debrief each other. I just want to close my door and lock everyone out, but members of my team filter in; obviously they need to talk. After about ten minutes, I am able to sequester myself. Briefly.

Already, rumors are flying about more terrorist activity in the city. Keith, a writer in our group, gets a phone call from his girlfriend that her company building is being evacuated. We race into the conference room and turn on the television. It's national news, though. I run back to my office and grab my radio and pull on the headphones. I turn on the local news station.

Grand Central, it seems, has received a bomb threat. We're all in limbo once again.

Christine, my creative group partner, calls in and leaves a message for me. She sounds frustrated and anxious. She's been waiting in the subway for 45 minutes. The platforms are overcrowded so she has set out on foot from the Upper East Side. She'll be late, she says.

When she gets in around 10:30 am, I ask why she even bothered to take a train. She's 40 blocks away. But Christine hasn't been in the city long enough to become a true pedestrian.

I call Jackie, my account executive, about an e-mail one client had sent the day of the crash. He sent it from L.A. at 8 am our time. She doesn't return my call.

Keith asks if it's even worth working today. We've already heard about more bomb threats and evacuations. Everybody is nervous.

People are already walking out. Heading home to family and loved ones. I tell Keith to leave, to check on his girlfriend. But it's about an hour before he decides to head out in to the melee.

Alex, an art director, stops by my office. She's got an anxious look on her face. I tell her to call it a day here, too, but she lives in Queens. Who knows if she can get home? Subway service is also interrupted. Again.

"Did you bring walking shoes today?" I ask.

She's got an incredible sense of fashion and wears entirely uncomfortable but beautiful shoes. Thankfully, she knew enough to bring in a pair of sneakers.

Still, I'm anxious that she may not be able to make her way home, so I give her my address and phone number and tell her to go directly to my apartment if she has any problems getting home. Around noon, Keith stops by before leaving Enrique, too. I make sure to get all their phone numbers.

Bomb threats are called in all over the city. Todd and Jerry, an art director and writer here, haven't even shown up today. Apparently, they headed downtown Tuesday afternoon and have been at Ground Zero. Todd was in the army and Jerry was previously a construction worker. Both had skills that were useful. Both were still unaccounted for. My boss, Audrey, is "furious with them," as she said. Tears welled in her eyes as she said this. Of course, she is mainly worried.

I call Lynn, my friend who lives in Brooklyn. She had left a message telling me that she was heading to the Jersey shore to be with her family. She works for the Army Corp of Engineers as an archaeologist, but couldn't get in to work. Her building is downtown, near Chambers Street. Close enough to Ground Zero to blow out her phone lines. Given all the hysteria that's already going on, I call her. Luckily, I catch her on her way out the door. "Don't come into the city," I urge her. "It's too crazy right now." Am I giving in to the hype, too?

Rumors and reports of bomb threats at Port Authority and Penn Station pop up. Lynn has to catch a bus at Penn Station. I call her again. She doesn't promise not to leave, but will call me if she decides to head out. I leave voice mail messages for Todd and Jerry. Tell them that I'm leaving the key with the doorman if they need to stop by to sleep or shower.

Back the conference room. Everybody's checking in on everybody else. We have a 2 pm emergency meeting to discuss next steps on how to continue our project. The company that we're using as a message management platform for all our sites has all their servers hosted at the World Trade Center. Our entire project is

up in the air. The client is redeploying a lot of their people toward helping the companies who are now left hanging. On one hand, we're trying to get work done, keep busy. Help our client. On the other, how important is it, really?

In our "War Room," as we called it until today, Jethro, our lead account exec, is calm and proactive. At the end of the meeting, he relays his concern for all of us. "I know some of you may be waiting to hear about friends and family. Keep in mind that that's the most important thing." After he leaves, I'm told that his best friend is missing. For the past two days, he has been roaming around the city, going from hospital to morgue to try to track down his friend.

Finally, at 3:30 pm, I decide to head home. This time, I avoid all landmark buildings. I zig-zag across town. Across. Down. Across. Down. At 42nd and Sixth Avenue, where a tent is set up for the Full Frontal Fashion Show, two women are holding a plastic bucket, taking donations. From the Red Cross. I drop \$10 into the bucket and continue walking downtown.

Past the Armory on 26th and Lexington Avenue, which has lines of families streaming inside to file missing person reports and hear news of their loves ones. I can go no farther than 26th street. Soldiers redirect me back to Park Avenue, then back to Lexington at 25th Street. Along the wall, on phone kiosks, on cars — are color and black and white photocopies of the missing. Vital statistics shout out at me: age, weight, tatoos, what floor they worked on, which tower they worked in. The pictures are like any that you'd find in a family photo album. With their kids, on their honeymoon. At work. At a black-tie event. At the school prom. At a barbecue.

It's hard to hold back the tears. I hastily don my sunglasses after slowly scanning a wall full of photos. I turn toward home. On the southwest side of 25th Street is a sign-up station for volunteers. I jot down my name, phone number and skills. Writing? Advertising? Interactive work? What good will that do? I jot down cooking and cleaning, too. Next to this table is a station where you could donate food, clothes and medical supplies.

The street is jam-packed with people: National Guardsmen, police, missing people's families, the media. At home, I'm feeling incredibly antsy. I pick up my snail mail. Check my e-mail. Make a few calls.

After twenty edgy minutes, I make my way to the kitchen, open the fridge and pull out three two-liter bottles of soda and seven or eight cans of soda still left over from various summer parties. I load them all into a few plastic bags. Then I pull on my faded New York State Police Academy t-shirt. Tuck my ID and PBA card into my back pocket. I head next door. Hopefully this will give me entry.

On the walls of the buildings that lead to the sidewalk, pictures of the missing are posted. At the corner I slip past the barricade with my bag of drinks. No one

stops me because anyone with donations is whisked through. Directly in front of the Armory is another donation and makeshift reception tent. At the tent, I show them my offering and ask where to put them. "Right here," one guy says and points to ice-filled buckets. Once I unload them, I see other volunteers walking around with boxes of snacks and water. They're distributing it to families in the line that snakes around the building.

"Can I help?" I ask.

"Sure," he says.

I pick up an empty box and the man starts help me filling it up with cold drinks. First, I distribute drinks outside to the cops, soldiers, spectators and hopeful volunteers who can't get past the barricades. For the next hour I will refill the box numerous times. The news cameras and floodlights are all but forgotten. It's hard to look into the faces of the families, let alone approach them. Some can barely speak. All are grateful, though, for food or water.

Finally, I take my box, fill it up and head inside the Armory. No one stops me. No TV cameras are allowed inside, thank goodness.

The Armory has been hastily organized into three main areas. In the southeast quadrant are hundreds of chairs where the family members and friends are initially directed. There are two big-screen televisions in front.

The second quadrant, in the southeast corner, is where the volunteers are dispensing food, medical supplies, water, snacks. The back two quadrants are filled with row upon row of tables, each manned with a phone. Some are filled with uniformed cops. Others with plain-clothes detectives. One table is populated with an emergency rescue team from Maine. New York State Policemen and Connecticut State Police Men stand out among the crowd, sporting their traditional Stetson hats. Along one wall are interpreter stations. Along the other wall are chaplains and therapists.

Each time I head over to the cordoned-off quadrant where the family members are, I try to catch the eye of anyone who needs drink or food. Everybody says thank you. Everybody is gracious. Amazingly, no one is hysterical. Few are even crying. They are simply quiet. They whisper. Very little registers, even while they stare at the TV screens.

After only an hour inside, one cop who apparently has been keeping a kind eye on me, tells me that I should sit down. Sweat is pouring down my face; it's incredibly stuffy inside the Armory that's nearly as big as a football field. There's no air conditioning and I've been hauling buckets of food and water for two hours already.

He looks at my hands. They tremble as I hand drinks to the family members.

“Are you tired?” he asks.

“No, I haven’t been here long enough to be tired,” I reply. I realize that it’s pure tension. Fear. Stress. Those poor families. They don’t need to see this. What right do I have to be so upset? I need to get away to compose myself.

As family members are escorted row by row out of the waiting area into the downstairs stations where volunteer social workers are taking their information, a cop asks me to find someone who will clean up the mess that the families have left behind. She’s right. Banana peels. Half-filled bottles of juice or water. Snacks, half eaten. It IS a mess. Chaotic.

I flag down another volunteer and we find some garbage bags and start picking up the trash. A man, probably in his early sixties, leans down to hand us some garbage. Obviously he’s here to find out about a missing loved one. In a thick Dublin accent, he comments: “They can eat and drink, but they can’t pick things up.” He is disgusted. I make some mute acknowledgement. Who can criticize them, though? It’s his way of dealing with these things, but other people aren’t so conscientious. Why should they be?

I’m determined to keep the family area clean so that the next wave of people won’t have to sit in squalor. I make it my mission to make sure that they’re comfortable.

As I drag garbage out to the back entrance, two other volunteers help me lug the garbage. Then I head back to refill my milk crate with food, fruit, juice and water. This time I make my way to the back quadrant, where the family members and friends sit at tables with cops and detectives. I’m amazed that even in the midst of filling out reports and helping these people, all the cops up at me and say thank you as I offer them refreshments. Incredible. Just like the family members do.

On one table, I see a shaving razor in a baggie, next to the report about one of the missing victims. I’d heard on the radio about having families bring in tooth brushes, hair brushes — anything that might contain a trace of DNA.

In the waiting crowd, so many people had pictures of the missing taped to their back. One man has a full-sized sandwich board with a photo of his missing brother on it. A woman is passing through the family area, offering chains that people attach to their photos and hang around their necks. Another man, who looks like he’s from India, is completely alone. It doesn’t appear as though he has anybody to guide and support him through this. I try to catch his eye, give him water. He looks right through me. In shock.

Another woman asks if I have anything for her husband, who has some sinus problems. I haven't a clue, but tell him I'll be right back. I spy a first-aid table. I ask the volunteer doctor on duty for some sinus pills. On my way back, I pick up a bottle of water and deliver it back to the couple.

One woman at a chaplain's table asks if someone could go downstairs where the families are being processed. "It's dirty down there," he says. "The bathrooms, too. And they also need water down there."

I grab a few garbage bags and another volunteer and we step downstairs. The area is cordoned off and police line the area. FAMILY MEMBERS ONLY, the sign says. Somehow my garbage bag give me access. Downstairs, the wall is lined with scores of photos of the missing. The WALL OF PRAYERS, it reads. A computer printout.

In one of the family rooms, about 25 feet square, the air is humid, stuffy and stifling. Even with the fans that were brought in. Amazingly, the family members have the same stoic demeanor here in the face of further tragedy. Boxes of tissues line the desk, like they do at the detective stations upstairs. Though no one seems to be crying.

After cleaning up and dispensing water, I head upstairs. I'm rushing around, lugging garbage to the back entrance. I pass the Guardsmen who let me take the garbage outside. Along the outside Armory wall are legions of neighbors and well wishers viewing the ever growing pack of photos posted on the wall.

They're guarding the door possessively, but the Guardsmen recognize me and let me re-enter. On my way back in, a soldier looks at me and tells me I need to take a break. "You must be exhausted," he says. "You've been running around since you got here." I tell him that he must be even more tired than I am. Then I rush off.

The only way to keep going here is to keep going. A matronly woman advances toward me and pins on a ribbon made up of miniature red, white and blue flowers.

Still, fifteen minutes later, I realize that the soldier is right. I AM exhausted. Drained. I grab a bottle of water and a banana and sit against the wall for a few minutes. It's hard to sit still longer than that. I jump back into the fray again.

It's easier that way. You don't have to think about the implications of everything if you keep moving.

It's time to fill up my carton with more drinks for the families and cops. They can't keep the bottles cold enough. At the food services area, I stop at the huge garbage can filled with ice and cold drinks. I have to dig down to the bottom of

the 3-foot bin to find any cold bottles. After about six or seven dunks, my hand is completely numb. Still, it feels good, I'm so hot at this point that I think my body welcomes the chilling shock to the system.

Passing by one table, a detective flags me down. She asks me if I could make a photocopy of some pictures that the family with her had brought. In the photo, a man smiled out at me. I turn it around and went to the front of the Armory, where I found an official who made black and white copies for me. I track down the cop again and wordlessly hand over the pictures to her. It made it seem all the more final for the family gathered noiselessly around the table.

After another half an hour, I feel the need for air, so I escape outside. I'm afraid they won't let me back in since I have no volunteer tag on, so I drag a milk crate with me to look like I belong. On my way out, I glance over and recognize Kathy, a creative director with whom I've worked at another agency. She's just standing in the hallway with a **VOLUNTEER** tag on her shirt. She looks hesitant and uncertain about what to do, so I grab her and pull her inside after giving her a hug. I ask her where she got the name tag. She made it herself at home.

I hand her another crate and show her where the food and water is. She's off and running, so I finally find myself outside. It's dark now. The TV floodlights nearly blind me. There are now more spectators than family members. I veer over to some cops who look like they need some water. One cop is lighting up a cigarette and I practically lean in to inhale his smoke.

"I just quit smoking last week," I say and look longingly at his cigarette.

He makes a joke about the Airplane Movie, where the pilot, after every new disaster talks about what a bad time it is to give up smoking. It is probably not the best time to bring that up, but if he can't say it, who can? After getting my vicarious fix, I move on.

Upon making a few refreshment rounds among the crowd, I head back inside. It's around 9 pm. Jonathan and Jon are on self-appointed garbage duty as well. Throughout the night, donated food arrives. Huge containers of gourmet food from trendy restaurants. Box upon box of pizza — a big favorite with the cops.

The donations were pouring in: Cases of water. Juice. Pastries. Home made food. Boxed desserts. Water melon slices. Zip-lock bags of sandwiches that school kids had sent, along with a hand-decorated note and chocolate kiss included. They had written messages of hope. Gratitude. Sorrow. Amazing.

Other volunteers have nametags on. I ask them how to get one. One guy told me that at the back of the room, near the interpreters' station, is a table with blank nametags sitting on it. He just made his up. I find my way to the table and craft my own name tag:

VOLUNTEER RED CROSS

Now I feel legitimate.

It's after 8 pm. The Armory has thinned out slightly in the back quadrant and I start to clean up. I strike up a conversation with a table full of cops who are taking a well-deserved hiatus. They are incredibly effusive with their thanks. Again. Tell me I need to relax. Again. They're going to be there, they tell me, 'til 6 in the morning. Who needs to relax?

During this time, I've learned the name of some other volunteers. Michelle, a tech girl who works around the corner. Simon, the Aussie who couldn't board a flight home and headed in to volunteer instead. Phyllis, a dot com refugee who lives in my building on the floor above me — and whom I had never met before. John, a comedian who flew past me on errand after errand.

The official Red Cross workers are sitting in the middle of the melee in the food area. Arms crossed. Resting on folding chairs. Moving not an inch. They've been there all evening. Some volunteers are indignant. Then there's Barry, a Red Cross worker who came down from Toronto and had been working tirelessly since Wednesday.

As I weave my way back through the tables where families are filling out reports and handing over pictures. I overhear a woman at a table, making out a report with the detective. She is wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. A tall, trim woman with silver gray hair, probably in her late 50s, early 60s. No tears. No visible anguish. But her words said it all. "I just want to get down there," she said quietly but forcefully, "Get on my hands and knees and dig him out." There's an eagerness to her wish. A determination. A helplessness.

At 10 pm, I rush home for five minutes. Once again, I check phone and e-mail message. Iain calls in from Glasgow to see if I'm okay. I make a pit stop in the bathroom. Back to the Armory. This time, I breeze right through with my NYST t-shirt and nametag.

At 11 pm, I'm stumbling over myself. It's hard to put one foot in front of another. I'm still hauling garbage. Delivering water. Carrying in donations that are coming in from outside. Checking in on the family rooms downstairs. I'm thinking that it's time to get out of there. But it's hard to walk away.

I make my way back to the table where the cops I'd spoken to earlier were sitting. We introduce ourselves this time. Shake hands. They ask about my t-shirt. I tell them that my Dad and brothers are cops. That another brother is an Apache pilot in the Army. What am I trying to say? That I'm one of you?

At the adjacent table, a massage therapist is working on the muscles of one detective. God, I could use that. Even one cop tells me that I should sit down and get one, not to let the cops hog her time. As if I could even think of doing that.

Around midnight, I sit down and relax with some other volunteers. We're all drained. But I'm still edgy and get up after only a few minutes. I fill up another bag of garbage. Take it out back. Talk with the soldiers guarding the back area.

It's hard to pull myself away. Finally, Michelle pulls my arm and said "Let's go. It's the only way you'll get out of there. Otherwise, you'll stay here all night." She'd been here far longer than I have. Simon, too. Even Phyllis.

Simon tells me that I'd made up my shorter shift by running around like a whirlwind for hours. Hauling things here and there. I show him my pumped up biceps. Swollen from carrying around cartons. "I wouldn't want to meet you in a back alley," he jokes. Simon gives me a back rub. I give Michelle one. We all exchange e-mail addresses before we leave.

Finally, Michelle and I head out. She's heading uptown, but has no spare change for the bus. Actually, she finds two quarters, but bus fare is \$1.50. Exact change required. I purposely had filled my pockets with quarters before I left the apartment, in case anybody needed to make calls. I hand her four quarters. "I can give you a dollar," she says.

"Of course not," I say. We hug, say we hope to see each other the next day and head off.

I walk the one block home, but am restless. I head over to the pizza place on 23rd and Lex. Order a slice. My "**RED CROSS VOLUNTEER**" nametag — is still on. People look at me curiously. Compassionately. I guess.

Like all good New Yorkers, I head to the spice carousel and load up on garlic, dried red pepper. I pick up another container and pour it on. It's salt, unfortunately. Not garlic or parmesan cheese. It streams out ridiculously fast. I try to wipe the salt off the slice, but to no avail. On my way out the door, I toss the pizza into the garbage. A petty thing that chokes me up. I fight back a gasp, and head across the street to home.

I go upstairs and sit for a few minutes. The doorman also comments on my exhaustion. What can I say, it is only eight hours. Nothing compared to what so many others had done. Upstairs, I cannot rest. I head back downstairs. At the deli on the corner, I buy a pack of cigarettes. Fuck it. I need one.

I walk back to the plaza of my apartment building and light up. The cigarette tastes disgusting. It takes me forever to finish it. Some Police Academy rookies

sit on a bench across from me, obviously exhausted. Next to them are two homeless men who frequent the plaza.. The rookies leave after a nod to us and the homeless guys.

As I get up, I look to my left and see a 2001 day planner sitting on the edge of the bench. Someone has obviously forgotten it. I pick it up to give it to my doorman. Obviously someone will want it. As I pass the homeless men, I ask them: "Do you smoke?"

"You bet," one said.

I then hand them my pack, explaining that I'd quit until just a few minutes ago. We talk of war, of the tragedy, of what I did for a living and what they didn't do for a living. We introduced ourselves. Johanna. John. Mike. John sleeps in the parking lot down the street.

"What will you do in the winter?" I ask?

"I'll find something," he says.

"Take care," I say.

"Take care," they say.

At home, I run a hot bath and sit in the tub, waiting for the hot water to loosen up my muscles. It's nearly 2 am. I look at the errant day planner. Open it. A French woman from New Jersey is apparently the owner. Should I call? She was probably at the Armory. She probably had lost a family member. I'll call the next day.

I phone April, my sister in law in Wyoming. Someone to talk to. To share the day with. I still can't sleep, so I pull a book from the shelf to read "POWER" is the title. With the light on, the radio blaring and the book at my side, I fall into a restless sleep. It's well past 3 am.

