

FROM WHERE THIS NEW YORKER SITS

The next night all I wanted was human contact—primal, indubitable, close human touch—but there was none. Instead I was accompanied by irritating air, tainted by an odor that was roaming Manhattan, the consequence of water scorching as it touched the twisted blazing metal of New York's toppled Twin Towers. So, I was forced to settle for my own arms for human contact, my eyes stinging and my nose accepting its violation by the stench equivalent to a million electric fires, and I wept, never feeling so alone in all my life.

Then I heard the media's announcements of the evacuation of the Empire State Building, and I rolled off my futon, so drained that I appeared callous to the thought of another Manhattan icon collapsing, this one into my apartment, and headed into the streets again where I was haunted by two things.

First. The visual memories. Countless images. Turning on the television after Howard Stern's announcement and seeing smoke and flames thriving in a place where they were not supposed to. Ever. And that gaping hole, where floors, ceilings and walls were no longer barriers, no longer existing. I immediately pictured these humans, adrenaline-drenched, pressed by divine heat on one side and divine distance on the other. And I pictured how they would be forced to elect the distance, the quarter-mile fall to rain down with the debris.

Then the second plane, creating a flaming universe that climbed into the atmosphere, absolutely tainting the gorgeous clarity of the day and bleeding another fertile black river onto the blue sky.

So I went to work. What else was I to do? Temping at 42nd and 5th Ave., stopping at every intersection to join New Yorkers gaping south at the source of our sick Mesopotamia. At work, I turned up the television for the crowd in Martha Stewart's own office. Nothing changed from the second I saw that first gaping hole: it was a steady pressing fear and absolute incredulity. Until it was taken to the next level: just when I had taken my eyes off the television and out the window to find the two towers beyond the Empire State Building that tried to block my view... and I wish it *did* block my view, because around the right side of that New York landmark, I saw the collapse. The unthinkable collapse. I figure my body stopped functioning, because I could feel nothing. It was seconds of coma, and I was haunted, in the back of my head, by the cheering of those who had been waiting for this day, planning, and now celebrating that their dreams had come true, as if they had just toppled a tree and could start making houses in their perverse society. This strange thought occupied me during my prolonged emptiness.

It was replaced by panic. Names flew into my head, people I knew, slamming me with the reality, once again, of the terrible suffering and loss of humanity. And one name stood paramount: such an indelible part of my reality and who I am, that I felt I was dying every second I had to wait to hear Her voice. Just a voice.

Panic ruled me. Panic for Her. Panic for Her when I heard the news that the Pentagon had been hit. Panic for Her when I left the building, hugging co-workers, begging them to stay safe. Panic for Her as I charged through the bleary streets, my cell phone screaming at me that it was redialing, it was redialing. Panic for Her as the world felt wrong, crowded with a foreign fear

New Yorkers were strong enough to tame. Panic for Her as I studied the mountain of dust that had replaced Two Financial Center, trying to calculate the immense volume of the cloud and how fast it must have been moving down the streets, coating life with its presence.

Panic for Her as I realized my apartment was pathetic, three important miles far from where the very rules of humanity were changing. Panic for Her as the television showed the second tower fall to its doom.

I fear words can not truly describe the sadness. If I have a soul, it left my body at that time, such was the emptiness that was carved in me.

Intermittent service on my home phone allowed reassurance from my two New York brothers and to my family of my well-being. I miraculously managed a message to Her office phone and Her home phone. Cell phones might as well have not existed. DSL was not working. Media was screaming about a demand for blood, so I changed the message on my answering machine to announce to any callers that I was safe, and then I ran to the CitiCorp building to donate my wanted O positive.

On the streets, I cradled my cell phone, my umbilical cord to the world, constantly glancing down at the screen to see if I missed a call or an email. Just then, a beep. The first beep. An email. A website's newsletter. I griped the phone and called Her again, only to be greeted, again, with the antiquated sound that I've since been continuously reacquainted with: a busy signal. Triple-checking to make sure the phone's volume was set to maximum, I joined the crowd outside Citicorp that was so anxious to help, it was dangerous, tempers threatening to flare at any second.

Five beeps on the phone. A blurt of life through my connection. Five emails. Most from family. They had already been reassured. Where was She? I remember less than a month ago buying gladiolas for Her at the World Trade Plaza before crossing the street to surprise Her on the morning of Her birthday. A street. A street separated Her from this collapsed city. Nerves made me stomp my foot into the ground. Four more emails, and tears came to my eyes. It was She.

“You OK?”

Sent: Sept. 11, 2001 7:50 PT

Never had a beep replaced a voice in my life before, but that monotone held Her timbre and energy. I swear it.

Am I OK?

Me?

Are YOU OK?

And I remembered why she would be concerned... why anyone could be concerned about me. I had just been there, a bit over a week ago, ever since regaling how I had had breaks in my graphics work to run around the building like a child, memorizing the sunset as it colored the north, west, south and east. And at one in the morning, pressing my nose to the glass to comprehend the volume of lights, some moving, some blinking. Helicopters flying beneath me. I was sure I would never forget those twin nights with Marsh Technologies, 94th floor of World Trade One... Now there was another reason to never forget them. God, what of my acquaintances now? I remembered I had my invoice to them in my bag, ready to mail, to an address that no longer existed. I had just emailed my Marsh contact that morning, just before their Armageddon, asking her when I could visit.

My phone rang. Caller-ID Unavailable. I grabbed it, still dreaming of hearing Her voice, but it was not She. Instead, my ex-roommate recently moved to New Hampshire. "I'm fine, everyone I know is fine, let's clear the line."

I remember the blood-rich crowd trying to push O negatives to the front, while some people whined that it should be first come, first serve, not universal donors first, and I wanted to scream to them, "This is not about you!" And I remember hearing a jet overhead and the entire melee froze, scared the day was starting all over again. The location was too crowded, only twelve beds to service donors, so I ran to Sloan-Kettering, 69th and 1st Ave. They were only accepting employees. Blood bank down the street, line 4 blocks long. I called an end to my quest, realizing they would need blood throughout the week and I could bleed then.

I found my brothers in their apartment in the East Village after a lengthy walk through a Manhattan I didn't recognize, but I felt more a part of than ever. The street's usual streaming vehicles were replaced with throngs of slow-walking brothers and sisters. Every face was low. Very low. Suffering from the "100-yard stare," as I'd heard it referred to. I saw someone smile, and I was repulsed, nauseous. And angry that a smile would make me repulsed and nauseous.

My siblings were safe. I wanted to hug them and not let go as time crawled in their apartment, the only thing changing was the footage of what seemed like the wrath of whatever God one could divine. I forced myself to eat and made it home in time to see President Bush's announcement. How quickly I ignored the fact that I did not vote for him. How quickly I forgave him for quoting the bible in a country that separated religion and state; how quickly I ignored the fact that the quote related to one's dying, not a message he needed to send to America. How quickly I dropped it all behind, because I heard the word I am still clinging to: Harboring.

That night my dear friend came to our apartment, Her hair still heavily dusted, and She told of how Her lobby had been decimated a minute after She had left it. How once on the street, She heard the rumbling of the collapsing tower and how there were countless cars on fire and body parts strewn about and how She had never been so scared in Her life as when she saw a tidal wave of dust, papers, objects sailing towards Her at speeds She could not outrun. And how She ran, anyway, south, until hitting a tunnel off the island, something She didn't want to get stuck in, so She grabbed her two work-mates and huddled along a wall as the cloud hit them and brought with it the darkness of night, the darkness of hell, the darkness one associates with

closing their eyes in a remote spot, untouched by tungsten or halogen. Reassuring Herself that She had Her eyes open, She gagged and vomited, Her body fighting for air anyway it knew how to. And how She was sure She was going to die. *Die*. Holding two friends under the blanket of particles. She had considered tearing off Her shirt so She could have a barrier from the atmosphere to breathe into. She remembered hearing jets overhead and asked Herself if those weapons were theirs or ours. Then there was a dot of light that slowly grew and they ran east. As far east as they could get. In our apartment that night, I tried to clean dust from Her new bag and noticed how the buckle had been pressed so hard in the leather, the accessory had permanently been scared.

I hugged Her. All night. Whenever I could. I hugged her. She put Her head on my lap after eating pasta and I ran my fingers through Her hair, steadily inches away from bursting into tears. She was watching the footage for the first time, having been cooped up in a meeting all day that had focused on maintaining financial stability in their bank, and therefore in the entire US economy. Where to house six thousand employees now office-less, computer-less, phone-less? What of all their servers lost in the destruction? All their data? Their services? Their belongings?

I wanted to lie down next to Her. I didn't want to let go, ever. Of Her, of anything. Of anything. I slept three hours the night following the attacks, using the other hours to clean the kitchen and the bathroom as I was instantly repulsed when I tried to do anything habitual. I was too overcome with emotion when I sat at my musical keyboard. I was too frustrated when my DSL didn't work. I was too... everything but what I wanted to be.

I accompanied my friend to Her apartment the next morning, walking past the police barricade on 14th St. I left Her place soon thereafter because, as I told Her, I felt I was suffocating Her, which I didn't mind, but She probably did. She had had enough suffocating for a lifetime. But even as I said the words, I was desperate for Her to ask me to stay, but She only nodded, and so another day of waiting for news and two failed blood donation attempts lay ahead of me. I felt sick after a few nighttime hours of darts with friends where I let my guard down and laughed repeatedly. I felt ashamed of myself when I returned home to the smell of burning electronics and the imminent evacuation of the Empire State Building.

Second. My selfishness. My selfishness at how my vantage point on the terrorism was too difficult for me to bear, when my story was so disaster-free, sickened me as I strolled and while dogs inspected the Empire State Building for explosives. I imagined what it would be like to not have heard from my brothers and all of my close friends, and I wanted to crawl out of my skin and away from this American society that seemed so strong.

Back home after my spell on the streets, I slept a couple of hours after the false alarm, but the hours of 2am-4am found me wandering the streets again, compounding my loneliness by wishing that I could hold Her, wishing for yet another night. And I thought of how She hadn't called me that day, and she was probably sleeping like a baby as I sat in Union Square, realizing that people recovered at different rates, and that I wouldn't be able to keep up with Her. Like so many other times.

And in that altered space of Union Square where message boards and candles crowded the ground, I felt some reassurance that no one, again, will successfully hijack and control an American plane unless every passenger lay dead at the terrorists' feet.

That entire walk I was plagued by an inability to communicate what I so desperately needed to. I wanted to thank the firemen, some flying up Third Avenue in the back of a pickup, clearly fatigued, the policemen, the Red Cross, the volunteers, the doctors and nurses, especially those working at these ungodly hours, but every time I approached anyone on this list, I was overcome with emotion, eyes watering before I could get within ten feet of them. It was a feeling I was growing used to as all day I had been trying to tell family and friends that I loved them, but I dared not, too scared the phone would drop as I lost control of my body, or that the words would not come out as I was wracked with shuttering breaths and uncontrollable crying.

Back at the apartment: a couple more hours sleep and I crawled to work, as I thought I should do. Get out. But it does nothing as I write this. I still feel my eyes well up as I go to collect water at the bubbler. I still cringe when I hear laughter, no matter how nervous it sounds. I can hear sirens screaming down the street like mad and I learn there are bomb threats a block away at Grand Central and one at the Public Library across the street.

And I remember the sweet individuals at Marsh who burned the midnight oil with me, and I feel like it is too much to bear. And how the unique image of New York's skyline is permanently altered, but in a terrible, terrible, terrible way. The towers lasted twenty-eight years... and their loss seems to me like the Great Library of Alexandria that caught a flame of its own, erasing that Greek universe. And how sick minds had thought to hijack and use the planes as weapons and how many people spent their last minutes in utter fear and how... it is too much. Too much. And I'm still immeasurably lonely, and I'm still tired, and I'm still incredulous, and I'm still mad, and I'm still lucky, and I'm still reminding myself that I'm not the only one who gets to tell future generations about the time, from 1973-2001 when there were the Twin Towers, the soaring elements of Manhattan's nature, Manhattan's jungle.

-- John de Guzmán, September 13, 2001

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