

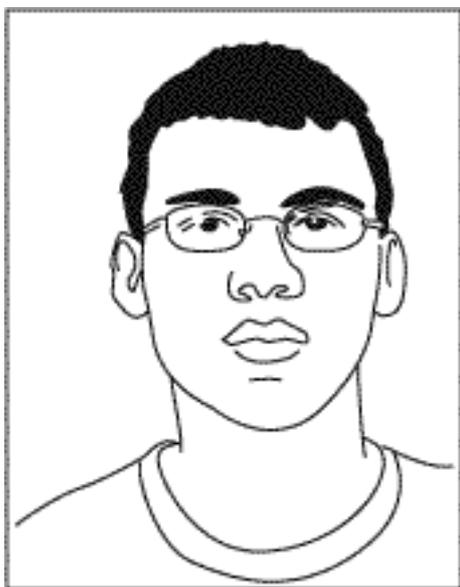
Nine Eleven
A novel

by
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jjgreif.com

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Hi, Ken!

“Eureka!” Nikita shouts.

“You found the secret of teleportation?” Igor asks.

“Not yet... But this tiny green rectangle I’ve been wondering about for days, down there on the terrace, I know what it is: a ping-pong table!”

“Or maybe a piece of fake grass. You know, all these Wall Street guys play golf during the week-end. They install a putting-green on their roof to practice.”

“I should bring a telescope.”

“We could borrow one. I bet there are thousands in the World Trade Center.”

Nikita always spends a few minutes at the window before checking his elder brother’s computers. When you look at Manhattan from the 78th floor, you discover another town: a patchwork of terraces, an embroidery of spherical and cylindrical water tanks, a lace of antennas and cables. Nikita doesn’t find this hidden city as much fun as the great metropolis that rocks and rolls around the clock at street level. There’s lots of life up there, actually, but you must raise your eyes to see it. The sky kneads and stretches clouds, frays them, gathers them like a flock of white sheep. Its powerful breath shakes the tower. Nikita remembers spending whole nights in the office to track bugs in bad software. At dawn, a fuzzy gray band above the horizon becomes pearly, then seems to blush when the sun prepares to emerge naked from the ocean. This morning, the sky looks like a piece of blue fabric without any sign of a white thread.

Someday, Nikita thinks, I’ll go and take a closer look at this Barbie doll who stands in the harbor, with her flashy green dress. She raises her arm to salute her boyfriend. Hi, Ken!

Igor smiles.

“Checking that the Statue of Liberty didn’t fly away?”

“If we had arrived on a boat, it would have welcomed us to New York City.”

“People don’t come by boat anymore. They’re not looking for freedom, either.”

“Dollars?”

“You bet! From the airplane, I remember, I saw these towers that flaunt America’s power.”

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“And you thought: someday, I’ll have an office in one of them.”

“No—I wondered how people could distinguish them, since they were twins. I thought they looked like chopsticks emerging out of a rice bowl.”

“They were there already?”

“Ten years ago? Of course. You saw them too, actually. You stuck your nose on the window... You said: *Good morning, good morning!* The only words of English you knew.”

“I don’t even remember not knowing English.”

“You were seven. You were so funny!”

Nikita looks at his big Timex watch. 7:46 AM. All the computers display the same time. They’re supposed to, as he synchronizes them himself.

“Anything unusual, Igor?”

“Yesterday, the big server crashed again. A subscription screen for *Fiddle Diddle* came in empty. A violinist in Chicago or San Diego thinks he has subscribed, but he won’t receive his weekly newsletter.”

“He’ll try again... Let me check the server. It’s getting temperamental with age, anyway. You’ll have to renew your hardware, you know.”

“I barely finished paying for it.”

“You wanted to become a capitalist entrepreneur! Otherwise, you should have stayed in Belarus... All right, I’m going to school.”

“So how’s senior year?”

“Just beginning. We spent the two days last week filling up forms and listening to speeches. Today is only the second day of real class. We’re still getting acquainted with our teachers... You know what, if you talk to the violin guy, you should tell him to record sound samples for each instrument. We could digitize them and insert them into *Fiddle Diddle*.”

In the middle of the 78th floor, there is a 2,600 square-foot hall called *Sky Lobby*, a kind of transfer station between express and local elevators. Nikita enters a downward express cabin. It takes him a minute to reach the ground floor. He exits the tower at 7:55. He runs along West Street. Six hundred yards. A good thing my brother’s company is so close, he thinks.

He crosses West Street on the Tribeca Bridge. At 7:59, he enters Stuyvesant high school. He climbs to the fourth floor. He meets Laura in the staircase. She is taller and wider than he is. American kids drink gallons of milk while Bielarrussian mothers wean their babies on sweetened water.

“Good morning, Laura. Did you spend pleasant vacations?”

“I ate too many pastries. I’m really fat.”

“I wouldn’t call you fat. Maybe plump...”

“I worked in an English bakery on Martha’s Vineyard. Gobbled scones and crumpets all day long. I should have gone swimming after work. I lived with friends in a big house they have there. What about you?”

“I stayed here to help my brother. He has this small company, you know. He sends newsletters to subscribers by e-mail. I help him with technical stuff, programming his computers, that kind of thing.”

“Are you going to the math team meet?”

“Yes.”

“Me too. I’m not a recognized genius like you, but I belonged to the team two years ago, when I was a sophomore.”

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They select forty kids—the Stuyvesant team. Then several high schools compete. They retain the five highest scores for each school. Stuy will win again, Nikita thinks. It's the best exam high school, after all¹. When they organize worldwide math Olympics, it's quite different. The Russians or the Chinese beat everybody to pulp.

Nikita sits down and looks at the problem sheet. This is not real maths. More like math games you find in some magazines.

Each day, Jenny eats 20% of the jellybeans that were in her jar at the beginning of the day.

At the end of the second day, 32 remain. How many jellybeans were in the jar originally?

A 40 B 50 C 55 D 60 E 75

If she has 40, she eats 8 so she has 32 at the end of the first day. If she has 50, she eats 10, so she has 40 at the end of the first day and 32 at the end of the second day. Elementary, my dear Watson. You shouldn't eat so many jellybeans, Jenny, or you'll become too fat.



Alfreda finds a piece of paper on the breakfast table.

“Peter?” she asks.

“Yes, mom.”

“Can you go to school by yourself? Andrew forgot the card for the yearbook photograph. He asks me to sign it, then he leaves it here.”

“He'll take it tomorrow.”

“No, he needs it today for his college application. I'll bring it to Stuyvesant before 8. I'll be at work early, which isn't a bad thing.”

She gets off the subway at Chambers Street instead of Cortlandt Street. Andrew often leaves at 7. He likes to walk to school, especially when the weather is nice, like today.

¹ Every year, 25,000 New York pupils who like science (out of 100,000 junior high students) pass a special exam. The 750 first ones enter Stuyvesant, the next 750 Bronx Science, the next 1,000 Brooklyn Tech. The others go to their neighborhood high school.

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Twenty-five minutes along the Hudson river. Then he meets his friends in the little promenade in front of Stuyvesant and they talk until 8.

She doesn't see him in the promenade. She enters the school. She stays near the door, watching the small groups of students gathered in the lobby, looking for her son with his long hair. A girl comes towards her.

"Hi, Alfreda!"

"Good morning, Tierney."

"How are you? Did you drive Andrew to school?"

"Not at all. I came to bring him the card for the yearbook photo. May I give it to you? You'll see him, I'm sure."

"Of course. I'll take it."

Alfreda walks out of the school and across the promenade. Tierney is a charming girl, she thinks. Pretty? She'll change yet. His girlfriend... They're only seventeen. Next year, they'll go to different colleges. She finds it tough to imagine her son as a married man.

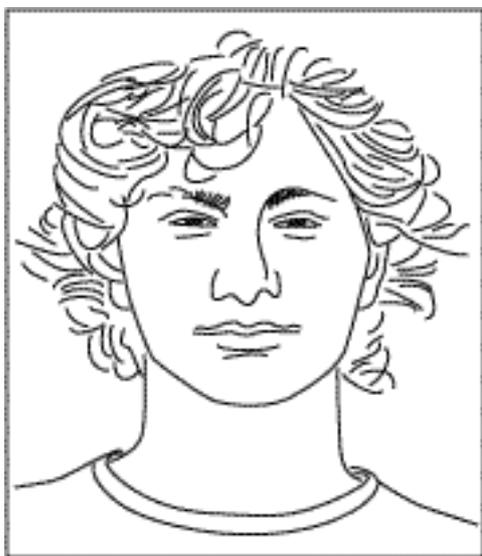
She can't help looking at the city as an architect. She likes Stuyvesant. Her own boss designed it ten years ago. Not an easy project. A high-rise school is unusual. Ten floors. Had to put escalators inside. As the school terminates the promenade, it should be monumental and attractive. He designed a stately façade, but lightened it by inserting nooks and crannies. Does close the street in a satisfying manner. The buildings along the promenade are okay too. This neighborhood is called Battery Park City. They scooped a gigantic lump of earth when they dug the World Trade Center's foundations, dumped it into the Hudson, then built an instant neighborhood on the acres of landfill. Doesn't feel ready-made, though. The architects followed traditional Manhattan guidelines, with well-placed cornices and window casings. Fine quality design and materials. Architecture as it should be. So much better than the World Trade Center. She can't even look at the dismal twin slabs...

They were careful to set aside some space for a nice walk along the Hudson. Pleasant stretches of waterfront are scarce in Manhattan, she thinks. Which is strange, when you consider it's an island.

She comes to the small sailing harbor, North Cove. She enters the part of the World Financial Center known as the Winter Garden. A huge indoor space, light and airy, under a glass roof. She remembers a book fair they held there recently. Wish my kids read more, she thinks. She walks to the South Bridge. She reaches 90 West Street, at the corner of Cedar Street, at 8:15. The architecture company she works for moved into this landmark building the previous year. Cass Gilbert built it at the beginning of the twentieth century as a prototype for the Woolworth Building. It stood right on the bank of the Hudson before the landfill pushed the shoreline away.

One hour early. Quite a stimulating little walk. I should do this more often, she thinks.

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Noah looks like a bear who just woke up after his winter nap. Under their thick skin and placid mien, bears often hide a sensitive and tormented soul. Someone tasted my soup! Someone tried my bed! Shall I overcome the hurdles of senior year? Lots of work, especially in Stuy. Every year I wonder whether I'll make it, he tells himself. But then, I've always been able to.

From 8 to 9:25, he has an advanced placement biology class. A good thing about Stuyvesant, these university-level courses. A good preparation for college.

The new biology teacher. English, kind of old. He seems knowledgeable. Doesn't just read from a book like some others. A former researcher, so he really knows what he's talking about. Funny guy, with a dry British humour. He doesn't laugh out loud, he isn't bubbly, but Noah guesses he might be friendly and helpful.

He begins at the beginning: the origin of life on earth. He seems to find this subject fascinating. Small molecules stick together to form big organic molecules, which assemble themselves into units that might become living cells. Several theories try to explain where it all came from: maybe asteroids brought some molecules necessary for life, or they appeared at the bottom of the ocean, or in damp clay.

Noah is taking notes in his new three-ring binder. Suddenly, he hears a loud bang outside. Might be a car backfiring or something. The teacher goes on with the lecture. Reproduction, mutations, evolution. Noah thinks of his little cousin, Milena. Took her to the museum of Natural History in August. She's French, hardly speaks English, but knows the word dinosaur. From a blob of molecules to these huge guys in a few million years. Then to crocodiles and birds... A voice in the back of the room interferes with Noah's stray thoughts and the teacher's speech.

"Guys, I think you should come see this. There is smoke coming out of the towers."

So they go to the windows and watch. The tower's face seems to sprout a black curly beard or afro haircut. They remember a bomb blew up in '93. The teacher lets them move to the next room, where there is a TV set. They turn to CNN. It seems a plane hit the World Trade Center. Noah hopes it was an accident. He wants it to be an accident. The students are nervous. The usual jokers do not joke. They don't want to study anymore. The teacher stops teaching.

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The American Airlines Boeing 767 leaves Boston at 9:59. After flying westwards towards Los Angeles for twenty minutes, it derails above Albany. It ceases to answer the Boston flight controllers. Cutters slit carotids. Blood spurts in parabolic plumes.

“Quick, need more paper towels,” one of the men says.

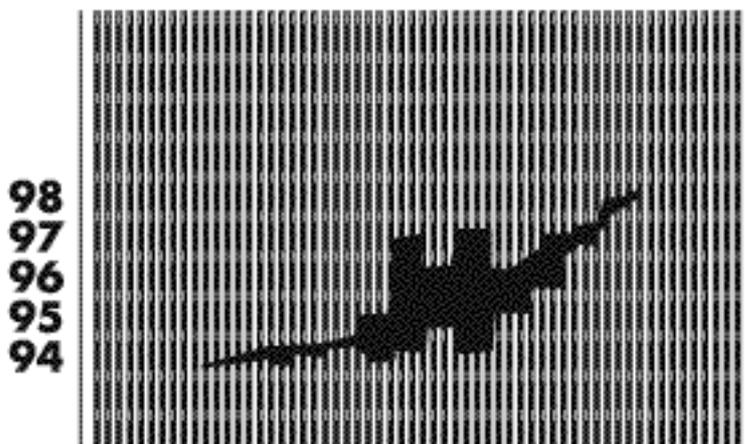
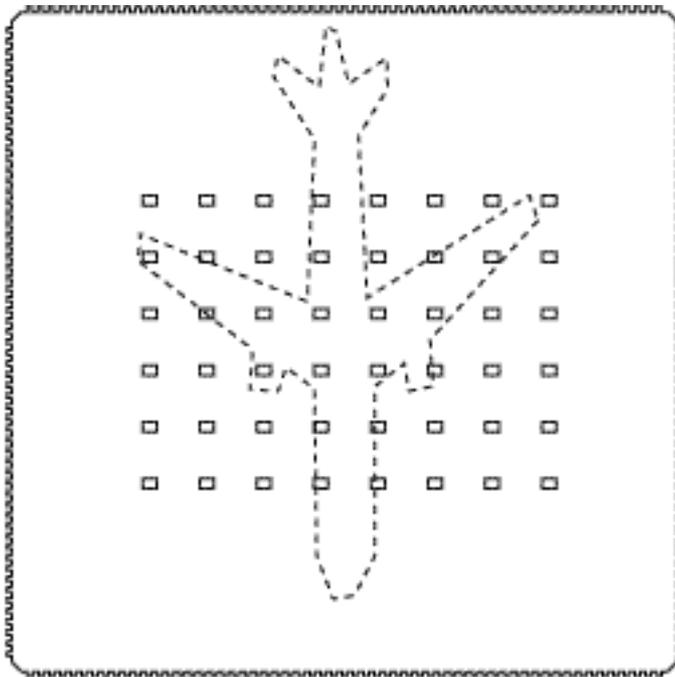
“Is it the blue button to talk to the passengers?”

As the men punch the wrong button, the ground controllers overhear the following announcement: “Nobody move, please. We are going back to the airport. Don’t try to make any stupid moves.” The plane is flying over Manhattan from North to South. A stewardess calls an American flight-service manager in Boston on her cell phone. She gives the terrorists’ seat numbers, so they can be identified. She says they have killed a passenger and two stewardesses. She tries to keep her voice low, but she can’t avoid screaming in the end:

“I see water and buildings... Oh my God ! Oh my God !”

The Boeing hits the north tower of the World Trade Center at 470 miles per hour. It banks a few degrees. The tip of the left wing enters the 94th story, the body enters the 96th, the tip of the right wing enters the 98th. In the University of Columbia, seismographs record a small tremor, 0.9 on the standard scale. Thus we know the exact time of the impact: 8:46:26.

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If the third little pig decided to build a fifty-story stone high rise, the big bad wolf wouldn't even need to puff and huff. The skyscraper would fall down by itself at the first windstorm! That's why skyscrapers aren't held by stone or brick walls, like traditional houses, but by steel skeletons. A network of vertical columns and horizontal beams makes up the "load-carrying" structure of the building. The beams carry the concrete floors, as well as "curtain-wall" façades. These façades do not belong to the structure. They're the skyscraper's skin.

When the big bad wind puffs and huffs, the building doesn't tumble down like a house of cards but sways slightly, like a gigantic tree.

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The architect (Yamasaki, an American of Japanese ancestry) and engineers who built the World Trade Center discarded the usual forest of columns. They were afraid the wind would play nasty games with the huge façades. On a surface 209 feet wide by 1365 feet high, the push of a New York storm can reach 13 million pounds. So they conceived a double load-bearing structure. A central core of forty-eight steel columns contains the elevator shafts and three emergency stairwells. The four faces are not fragile skins, but sturdy shells. Sixty fourteen-inch box columns, braced by horizontal plates, cover each façade like a gigantic palisade. Between the central core and this exoskeleton, column-free floors let tenants design cubicles any way they like.

To lighten the structure, “bar-joist trusses” made of thin criss-crossed steel bars replace the heavy horizontal beams. They are connected to the central and external columns by bolted consoles or “angle clips”.

The airplane weighs some 135 tons. When you know its speed, you can calculate its energy. It loses 6% of this energy when it slices through the façade¹. Shorn trusses, torn concrete floors, exploded cubicles absorb 25% of the energy. The remaining energy breaks at most half of the forty-eight mighty columns of the central core. That’s why the plane stops inside the tower. Under the shock, the 10,000 gallons of kerosene in the plane’s tanks ignite, setting aflame floors 94 to 98.

¹ According to a commission of twenty-two engineers who tried to explain why the towers collapsed.

This is so cool

Nikita has a free period from 8:45 to 9:30. Just what I need to work on my history assignment, he thinks. He goes to the library. He notices people crowding near the library's window. Someone shouts:

"Look outside!"

"What? What?" Nikita asks.

He sees smoke escaping from a gash in the upper floors of the north tower. Oh my God... Igor! he thinks. He runs downstairs and rushes to a pay phone in the lobby. He calls Igor's cell phone.

"Hello... Igor?"

"Nikita? Don't worry. I'm Okay. I'm in the street. I had gone downstairs for a coffee when it happened. I don't know whether it's a bomb or what. They're evacuating the whole tower."

"Seen from here, it appears to be above your office."

"At least fifteen stories higher. The firefighters are coming in already. They'll put the fire down and everything will be all right."



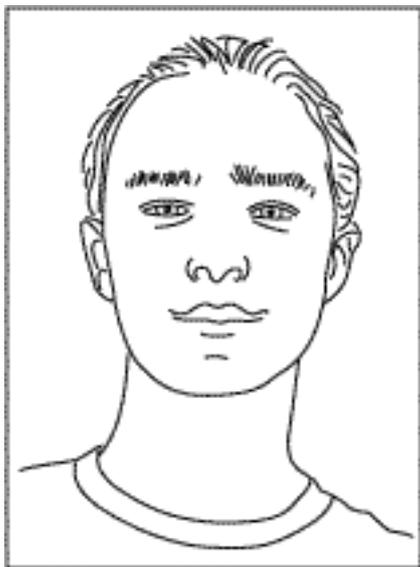
Laura wonders whether the math team will take her this year. She hasn't solved the problems as fast as Nikita. She's kind of late, actually. She climbs the stairs from the fourth floor to the tenth in a hurry. Going to architecture class. Geez, she thinks, they'll have started already. No, they haven't. Instead of sitting down, they stand near the windows. She recognizes the tall figure of Lex above the others. He calls her with a hand sign:

"Come quick, Laura... Take a look at this!"

"Wow! This is so cool... How do they do that?"

From the tenth floor, you have a clear view of the north tower. A wide slanting grin across the face of the building is belching flames and black smoke. Laura remember seeing something similar in Disneyworld. Special effects. Fireworks.

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Lex is no Mickey Mouse fan.

“Maybe some kind of heater blew up,” he says. “Or else it’s a bomb.”

The architecture teacher lurches from the window to the desk and picks up the extension phone. “This is horrible,” he mutters. “Horrible...” He’s as pale as if he had spent six months in a cave. His eyes have grown to twice their usual diameter. “Yes, yes, no, yes...” he mumbles into the phone.

“They say... Back to your seats... Stay away from window... Going to do the lesson...”

“We could turn the TV on, sir. Then we’ll know what it’s all about.”

“No, no... They said do the lesson...”

He speaks about the obligations and responsibilities of the architect. Laura find it hard to listen.

“Do you think it was a bomb, Lex?”

“Did you see the flames? A very big one, I’d say.”

“The architect...” the teacher says. “Politically aware... While he works for this or that client, his buildings impact society at large...”

“I heard it was a plane,” a student says.

“When he built pyramids and temples in Egypt... Big palaces in Europe... There was a specific purpose, but it was also part of a grand scheme...”

“A plane? How could it be a plane?”

“It has to be: the building is not blown out, it is blown in.”

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Andrew's new math teacher looks like Harry Potter: round glasses, red hair. Miss Avid. Maybe she wore round glasses before Harry Potter. If I was her, Andrew thinks, I'd change them anyway. She doesn't seem cruel or anything. Then why this math test on the second day? Check what you learned last year, she says. She should say: check what you remember. Not much, Andrew thinks. She's pulled the shades down so the bright blue sky doesn't distract the students. This reminds Andrew of a physics teacher who used to do it too.

The test begins at 8:45. One minute later, they hear a loud crash.

"What was that?" the students ask.

"Maybe a truck dropped a dumpster outside. You go on with your test. You only have forty minutes."

"This sounds more like two trucks banging into each other."

"Or a crane falling down."

"Okay. You'll see when you go out."

Andrew scans the sheet. Factor $x^2 + 10x + 25$. Yeah, can do. What's the limit of $\sin x/x$ when $x \neq 0$? I've known that. I wonder whether I still know it...

A student comes in late. I know this kid, Andrew thinks. Ken Something. He was in my Spanish class last year. He is awake by mid-afternoon, so you can't expect him to come to school on time. The teacher knows him too.

"Well, Ken, I see you stick to your good old ways. Nipping one third of the test time will have unfortunate consequences on your score, you know."

"But a plane hit the World Trade Center, miss Avid!"

"If only you spent as much energy solving math problems as making up excuses!"

"No, miss Avid, I swear it's true."

Andrew imagines a small plane bouncing off the side of the tower. Unless it got stuck in the façade's grating like a fly in a spider's web. He feels sorry for the pilot. Maybe had a heart attack. He doesn't worry about the towers. Nothing can hurt them, of course. The steel monstrosities will stand there forever.

But then: Oh shit! My mother... Her office so close to the towers... Suppose the plane broke. Pieces and parts may have hit her building. He feels his cell phone in his pocket. Should

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I try to call her? This has to be a very stealthy move, otherwise miss Avid will say I'm cheating. Calling an accomplice to ask him the limit of $\sin x/x$.

One hundred and twenty people work in Alfreda's architecture office, on the third and fourth floor (out of twenty-two) of 90 West Street. This building rises directly south of the World Trade Center, across a parking lot. From her office, on the fourth floor, Alfreda can see the bottom of the south tower and part of the north tower. A small Greek orthodox church, Saint Nicholas, stands in the parking lot. It is said they wanted to move it away stone by stone when they built the World Trade Center. "What about the church's soul?" the popes asked. "Are you going to move it too?" I should photograph the tiny church in front of the gigantic towers, Alfreda thinks.

She photographed her two sons, Andrew and Peter, during the summer vacations. She brought some slides she wants to send out to get prints. Several nice ones on the shore of a lake in the Adirondacks, with the playful light of the sunset jumping on the water and turning her sons' faces into rosy lanterns. The luminous quality of the slides will be lost in the prints, she thinks. As she crosses the building's lobby, she drops the envelope with the slides into a mailbox. She notices the postman comes at 8:30. She looks at her watch. Just in time! she rejoices.

She is sitting at her window, typing a report. She doesn't hear anything, but she feels a vibration. The whole building seems to be shaking. What is it? she wonders. She remembers '93. It's a bomb, she thinks.

She sees sheets of papers dancing in the morning light. What does it mean? She isn't sitting close enough to the window to see the upper part of the towers. Then debris come flying. Most look like small rocks. Pieces of gypsum or concrete, maybe. Do they come from the top of my own building? she wonders. I hope not.

She calls her husband. She leaves a message on his answering machine: "There's been a bomb at the World Trade Center."

She's afraid to stay near the window, so she moves away. Other people are gathering in the office.

"Another bomb at the World Trade Center," she says.

Somebody walks to the window.

"That wasn't a bomb, that was a plane."

"A plane? Are you serious?"

"Come here."

Alfreda hesitates. Debris can break the window, send shards... She approaches cautiously. She looks down in the parking lot. A spidery monster has crushed some cars, which are beginning to burn. She recognizes a jet's landing gear—its big black tires, its rods and springs—intertwined in a torn section of a tower's façade. Sticking her nose to the window and looking upwards, she can see flames and smoke near the top of the north tower.

What should we do? she wonders. Is this an accident?

As a safety feature, the building's management can talk to the whole building by public address.

"Don't panic!" they say.

Alfreda and her colleagues are puzzled. Are they quoting the joke at the beginning of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? The voice doesn't seem to be joking.

Alfreda calls her husband again. He is in his office.

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“Go home, he says. Walk home. Don’t take the subway.”

Five minutes later, the voice in the loudspeakers talks again.

“We’re evacuating the building.”

Only twenty people have already arrived in the office. Architects tend to come late and work late. Nobody seemed prepared to take the lead and decide a course of action, so they are relieved that the voice tells them what to do.

Someone looking outside on the West Street side says:

“There are body parts...”



Charlene plays the clarinet, and actually people call her “Clarinet.” From 8 to 9:25, she has band class in a windowless room on Stuyvesant’s first floor. She sees nothing. She hears nothing—except the music. Until the deep gravelly voice of Reiter, the school principal, grinds over the loudspeakers: “A plane crashed into the World Trade Center.”

With his grating voice, any stupid announcement sounds like the worst calamity: “Please pay attention. The meeting of the sophomores won’t take place in the library, but in the auditorium. I repeat... The sophomore meeting is moved from the library to the auditorium. Same time.” Can’t know whether this plane thing is serious. Everybody imagines a small plane breaking the tower’s antenna. They think about the rock star Aaliyah, whose chartered jet crashed three weeks earlier in the Bahamas.

“It’s Britney Spears,” they joke.

“Or another Kennedy...”

“It must be terrorists!”

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Eleanore is ten years old. She is Charlene's sister. She's beginning her last year in PS 234¹. In this primary school, parents drop their children around 8:30 or 8:35. At 8:40, the kids enter the classrooms. Class starts at 8:45.

Just when Maggie, the teacher, sits at her desk, Eleanore sees that her friends are looking out the window. What are they looking at? Eleanore doesn't go, because she's unpacking her stuff.

Maggie asks Joshua to read the "poem of the week." It is William Blake's poem, *The Tyger* :

*Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the nights,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

While Joshua is reading, Melinda's mother enters the classroom and takes her daughter out. I guess she has a doctor's appointment, Eleanore thinks. Doesn't make much sense, though, to get her five minutes after class begins. Then four or five other parents take their kids away. This is weird—all these kids having doctors' appointments. Also, why are their parents crying?

The voice of Anna, the school's principal, in the loudspeakers: "Shades should be pulled down in all classrooms on the south side." This is us, Eleanore thinks. The pupils pull the shades down.

Another hysterical mother. Maggie goes outside with her. Eleanore starts talking with her neighbors.

¹ This school is also called *Independance School*.

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Dana teaches arts in PS234. Art classes don't start until the following day, so she helps other teachers. She takes kids to the yards while the teacher tidies up the classroom, etc.

What a gorgeous September day! she thinks. No painting will ever give you such an overwhelming feeling of blueness as today's sky.

Before school begins, she stops for a coffee in the teachers' room. Her friend Maggie is drinking one too.

"Are you getting ready for the big day, Dana?"

"In six weeks. I've chosen a dress. I'm going tomorrow to get measured."

"Then you watch what you eat, so you don't change your waistline! What about the invitations?"

"I followed your advice and asked Eleanore's parents. I just saw the printer's proofs. They look okay. You'll receive yours pretty soon!"

She finds a note in her box: "Cynthia's help is not coming today. Can you replace her?" Who is Cynthia? Oh yeah, the new kindergarten teacher—a big middle-aged lady.

Dana and Cynthia pick up the kids at 8:40 and lead them to the classroom. Dana helps them hang their clothes and put away their lunchboxes. She sees Cynthia run across the room and pick up the phone.

"Is anything wrong?"

"A parent told me a plane just hit the World Trade Center! I'm calling the office."

Dana goes to the window. She sees a black gash spewing red dollops of fire near the top of the tower. The kids haven't noticed anything. They're still struggling with their morning tasks.

"Dana, da hook is way too high!"

"My zipper is stuck again."

"Barney pulled my laces but I dunno how to tie dem..."

Cynthia hangs up the phone.

"Nobody answers," she says.

"Let me go to the office and find out," Dana suggests.

She leaves the class. The lobby is full of parents. As they've just dropped their children a few minutes ago, they're all coming back. Dana doesn't understand why they need to shout so much.

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“My husband has a breakfast meeting there!”

“Harry’s mother works in the building!”

She tries to reason a hysterical father.

“My son, my son! I want my son!”

“It’s just an accident. Why would you take him away?”

“He scares easily. He gets nightmares. I don’t want him to see this!”

She pushes through the crowd and reaches the office. Anna, the principal, is making an announcement: “The 4th- and 5th-graders should go to the auditorium, the 2nd- and 3rd-graders to the Gym, the kindergartners to the cafeteria.” She tells Dana she’s afraid debris might break into the classrooms.

Dana walks across the lobby again to go and help Cynthia. Buzzing, hissing and shrieking parents rush in and out like crazy hornets. The kids have never seen them in such strange states. Have they lost their minds? Can anybody understand such unprecedented behaviour? The scared kids add their cries and tears to their parents’.

As soon as the children step outside, a wondrous sight turns their mood around:

“Look, Pa, a fire truck!”

“Yes, a fire engine.”

“Pa, anoda fire truck! And anoda! Wheeee!”

“Too many fire trucks for me. Let’s move.”

“Look, Pa, da people jump from da towa!”

“Of course not. Hurry up.”

“Me, I saw da people jump.”

Inside the school, the teachers bring the small kids to the cafeteria. Anna was careful to pull down all the shades, but the children peek and look at the burning building.

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Floors 94 to 98 of the north tower are aflame. Several hundred people have died already: 92 airplane passengers; more than 250 employees of Marsh & McLennan, world leader in insurance services for businesses, main tenant of floors 94 to 99; and even people in the street, hit by debris under the towers. Burning kerosene cascades down the façades. A woman waiting for the bus on West Street catches fire.

Shattered by the shock, the light gypsum drywall that encloses the stairwells crumbles and seals the stairways at the level of the 92nd floor. Close to one thousand persons are condemned to death: people working on the 92nd and 93rd floors, including 69 employees of the brokerage company Carr Futures; 658 employees of the securities broker Cantor Fitzgerald, tenant of floors 100 to 105 (that is, about two thirds of the company's entire personnel); 100 people eating breakfast or attending a conference in the Windows of the World restaurant on the 106th and 107th floor, and 73 restaurant employees.

Smoke and heat climb along the façades and inside the chimney-like elevator shafts. The air thickens. The prisoners of the north tower's last floors break windows with computers or heavy office chairs, then lean outside to breathe.

Chris Young is a temp working for Marsh & McLennan. After installing a video projector for a conference in an office on the 99th floor, he takes a local elevator to the 78th floor Sky Lobby. At 8:45, he enters one of the huge express elevators and presses the 1st floor button. This is wild, he thinks. All by myself in this interplanetary spaceship! Hoping to enjoy a zero gravity effect, he jumps around—but is sorry to discover that he doesn't stay aloft.

This big baby is so sophisticated that Chris Young doesn't really feel anything until it slows down at the end of its one-minute journey. Chris is expecting the cabin to stop smoothly in a few seconds. Then the doors will open and I'll step out... Well, sometimes the unexpected happens. The cabin stops suddenly, jerking and bouncing slightly. The doors do not open. Strands of white dust fall through the roof.

Chris Young punches the red alarm button. A man's voice comes over the intercom:

"Yeah, we seem to have a problem. What elevator number is this?"

"Number seven."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Near the bottom, I think."

"Right. Someone will come and get you."

Five to seven thousand persons have already started work at this early hour. While descending elevators can be empty at 8:46, big crowds fill up the ascending cabins. The plane cuts elevator cables when it slices through the 96th floor. Local cabins belonging to the tower's upper third are hurled in free fall towards the 78th floor. The laws of physics are tough: when an elevator crashes to the bottom of its shaft after a ten-story free fall, the passengers hit the elevator's floor as if they had fallen themselves from the tenth story. To avoid such an unpleasant outcome, an emergency brake system is supposed to slow down the elevator at the last

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moment by clamping a special cable. Some elevators crash because the special cable was sectioned with the others. Other elevators stop near a landing, but their doors do not open as they should. Or they're stalled and doused by burning kerosene.

Many passengers are stuck in local or express elevators below the 78th floor, like Chris Young. Their cabin just stops in mid-air. They probably imagine some kind of mechanical failure and hope to be rescued. Most of them are doomed. Instead of rescuers, grim death will come and crush them in their steel coffins.

The World Trade Center belongs to an administration called *Port Authority of New York and New Jersey*, founded in the twenties to dig tunnels across the Hudson. This powerful organization owns most of New York's airports, tunnels and bridges, plus great patches of prime real estate. In the sixties, it decided to build the World Trade Center on some of its land, hoping to revitalize downtown Manhattan.

For the last twenty years or so, many banks and brokers have moved to the World Trade Center, which is conveniently located near Wall Street. In the seventies, when the towers opened for business, America had not fallen in love with stocks and finance yet. Whole floors remained empty for years. The Port Authority put its own offices in the north tower, so it had at least one tenant.

Alphie O'Roe supervises a Port Authority service on the 64th floor—people sitting in front of computers and entering data all day long. When it swallows the plane, the big building sways for ten to twenty seconds. Alphie feels his chair wants to roll away, so he grips his desk firmly. Then entire floors of the tower seem to fall in front of his windows in bits and pieces. He orders evacuation:

"Get your stuff and let's get out of here," he yells.

Rosa Lopez catches the sleeve of her colleague Vivienne Groeniz.

"Wait for me, Viv... I must call my sister. She was supposed to come for lunch. I'll tell her we're leaving the office."

"Then I'll call my boyfriend..."

"Bob?"

"Otherwise he'll try to reach me and he'll worry."

When the two friends hang up, they find that most of their colleagues have left. Fourteen other people, who stayed behind to phone or go to the bathroom, remain on the 64th floor.

"We should go down."

"Better wait until they tell us what to do."

"Alphie told us."

"Are you sure? Where is he?"

"I'll call personnel and ask them."

"So what?"

"No answer."

Vivienne has been filling up Excel spreadsheets for nine months. She arrived from Jamaica three years earlier. She's overstayed her tourism visa, so she is an illegal alien. She must behave as a perfect employee if she doesn't want to be

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found out and deported. She needs her salary not only for herself, but also for her young son, whom her parents raise in Kingston.

Rosa Lopez and the other computer operators do not want to lose their jobs either. They know how easy it is to replace them. They must obey the boss. They'd rather wait for clear instructions.

They still have power, anyway. The phone works. Vivienne calls her fiancé again. "Bob?"

"Viv? Say, I saw it on TV. They say it's a plane... It's really something. Where are you?"

"Well, in my office."

"What? Are you crazy? You must get out. Right away. Viv, the tower is burning."

"I can't go by myself. I'm scared. I'll do what the others do."

"I hear a noise. What is it?"

"The fire alarm. It won't stop. Oh, God, I'm so scared..."

"Leave now. Please, honey. Please!"

"Okay. I'll take the stairs."

"That's a good girl. I'll meet you at Century 21."

She would prefer her friend Rosa to come with her.

"I promised Bob I'd go. He's waiting for me at Century 21."

"The others say there's too much smoke in the stairs. They're sealing the doors with tape and wet jackets. Hey, give me your jacket: I'll go to the bathroom and soak it."

The south tower is 120 feet away from its north twin. Two thousand persons are already at work above the floors that the second plane will ram into in sixteen minutes. Fourteen hundred will leave before the impact and live, six hundred will stay (or leave and return) and die.

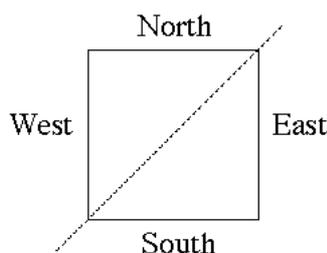
A fatal diagonal cuts across the south tower. People who can see the other building are lucky. They don't have to think. Their survival instinct orders them to go. They haven't seen the plane, since it entered the far side of the first tower, but they see thick twirls of black smoke. They see jagged holes where the landing gear and reactors—which didn't stop with the rest of the plane, but went on straight ahead—ripped pieces of the façade. They see bright red balloons of fire licking the tower, jumping and swelling, threatening to come pay a visit. They see human beings diving to their death.

The employees of the Fiduciary Trust bank, on the 97th floor, can feel the heat of the fire. Randy Cole just entered the cubicle of his pal Nat Bensiger to chatter. Nat is talking on the phone. They both rush to the elevator. Nat doesn't hang up his phone. Randy doesn't stop by his own cubicle, where he left his wedding ring near his computer keyboard.

Some engineering consultants have offices in the south tower. They understand two things instantly. One: you can't discount the risk that the other tower might fall down or explode. Two: because of item one, staying so close would be extremely foolish. They pick up their things and flee without looking back.

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North
Tower



People working on the eastern or southern side do not see the other tower. Some are gathered inside windowless conference rooms. They feel a slight tremor, but they do not know its cause. They obey their boss or the person in charge of security, who tells them to leave or stay. Various authorities may give conflicting orders. In small companies, some ordinary employee has been issued a red cap, a flashlight and a whistle. This so-called fire warden wonders whether he (or she) should whistle. My colleagues will laugh at me. There is no fire... Thus, many people are just left to themselves.

In 1993, a van full of explosives had blown up in the underground parking lot, killing six people and wounding a thousand. The evacuation had lasted four hours. People were stuck in the elevators for ten hours. Some veteran supervisors, who remember a dreadful chaos, give firm evacuation orders and save everybody in their company.

Groups following a boss or a security warden walk down the stairs of the south tower. Some of the individuals who fend for themselves choose the elevator. They'd rather reach the ground in one minute than in one hour. They take a local cabin to a Sky Lobby on the 78th or 44th floor. While they're waiting for the express elevator or trekking briskly downwards, the tower's security staff uses the public-address system installed in '93 to make an announcement: "There is a problem in tower one. Tower two is safe. I repeat, tower two is safe. Please go back to your offices and wait for further instructions." Security guards intercept people when they step out of the elevators in the first floor lobby:

"Go back up! Go back up!"

They're afraid to let people walk out under a hailstorm of concrete pellets and burning debris. They prefer to keep them inside.

The security staff may be somewhat adrift on September 11. They've had a new boss for just twenty-four hours—a former FBI man who's been crying wolf for years. He's sure the terrorists will try to better the '93 attack, so he intends to review and improve the towers' protection.

In the 78th floor's Sky Lobby, a noisy human gridlock begs for traffic cops. Some people want to go back to their offices. They step out of the twelve express

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elevators coming from the first floor and cross the lobby toward the twenty local cabins. More people want to go down in spite of the security staff's announcement. They cross the lobby from the local side to the express side. They jostle to enter the big cabins, which can evacuate two hundred and fifty persons per minute. A man pushes back two pushy women:

"Ladies, this ain't the Titanic. Ain't women and children first."

Kelly Regher decides to go back up. Too many people, he thinks. I'll try again later. He works on the 100th floor for Aon, the number two insurance services provider—Marsh & McLennan's great rival. He knows about disasters. Fire may jump from one building to another, then you have a claims conflict and a lawsuit. He doesn't want to linger. On the other hand, he remembers '93. Couldn't go back to the office for weeks. He wants to get his Palm Pilot, which contains his schedules, address book, data about insurance contracts.

Several employees of the New York state tax department return to their office on the 86th floor to avoid trouble. A few years ago, they have gone home during a blackout. The tax department asked them to come on a week-end to catch up for the lost hours. They had to go to the union for help.

The brokers and traders who work for financial companies in the south tower are relieved that the security staff lets them return to their desks. They don't want to miss the opening of the stock exchange at 9 O'clock. They labor like galley slaves. It is said they don't go to the bathroom as long as the exchange is open. They tape plastic pockets to their thighs, like astronauts. They wouldn't miss a day. Especially today. The fire in the north tower will influence the markets. They talk in the upwards elevator:

"I heard it's a plane. I'll sell my airlines."

"Insurance stocks will plunge. They'll have to refund billions."

"Time to buy gold. Any crisis sends it skywards."

While too many people go back up to play the markets or obey a mistaken boss, some are there because they haven't left yet: punctilious executives and security supervisors verify that all their people are gone, help a handicapped employee to reach the elevator, explore hidden offices to check they're empty. They find technicians in a computer room.

"Got to go, you guys. We're evacuating the whole floor."

"Just a minute, man. The program is almost upgraded. Downloading two more patches. If we stop, we lose hours of work."

"No, no, it doesn't matter. Got to go."

The Morgan Stanley bank is the main tenant of the south tower. It rents floors 44 to 74. Rick Rescorla, the bank's vice president in charge of security, is one of the great heroes of September 11. If all the companies in the tower had put their security in the hands of people as sharp and tough as Rick Rescorla, several hundred human beings would have escaped death.

He is a retired army colonel, aged 62. A nasty guy. A former soldier of fortune, who fought all over the planet. Born in Cornwall, he became a paratrooper in the English army, then a Scotland Yard detective. He moved to America because he wanted to fight in Vietnam. He attacked Vietcong hordes all by himself, performed

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amazing feats (reported in many books about the war), received all kinds of medals: silver star, bronze star, tin star. Then he studied literature and law in an American university. He taught law. He found it boring. He needed action. In 1990, he got a job as security chief for the Dean Witter bank, so he could fight mobsters and terrorists. The bank (later bought by Morgan Stanley) rented several floors of the World Trade Center. Rick Rescorla studied the building carefully. He delivered his conclusions to the Port Authority security office:

“You’ve got a pretty weak spot in the underground parking. Someone could drive a truck full of dynamite down the ramp, walk out and light it off.”

“Did we ask you for a risk assessment? You worry about your floors and we’ll take care of the rest of the building.”

After the '93 attack, he warned his new bosses at Morgan Stanley:

“They caught some foot soldiers. The masterminds will try again. Next time, they’ll hit the towers with an air-cargo plane loaded with explosives. Or they might fill the plane with chemical or biological weapons. The anthrax spore, for example, is a deadly poison when inhaled. There is no known protection. We must move to some quiet location in New Jersey. Manhattan has too few bridges and tunnels. They can cut it off easily. ”

“Okay, Rick. We’ll move in 2006, at the end of our lease.”

In the meantime, he perfected an evacuation drill that all the Morgan Stanley employees had to go through every six months.

“In Vietnam, my men used to say they were more afraid of me than of the enemy. Nevertheless, they knew they had a better chance of staying alive with me than with other officers. I haven’t lost many, let me tell you. We relied on the eight P’s: *Proper prior planning and preparation prevent piss-poor performance*. Now listen... I have paired people who work in the same office or close by. You must remember who your partner is. You’ll march downstairs in twos. If one of you stumbles or feels faint, the other one can help or call for help. The people on the 74th floor come down first. When the last pair reaches the 73rd, then the people of the 73rd, who were waiting in front of the staircase’s door, start marching, and so on.”

The finance wizards who work for Morgan Stanley hated to lose an hour twice a year to walk down in pairs.

“At least he doesn’t ask us to hold hands.”

“To him, we’re wimps who never fought in the jungle. He would like us to salute him and shout Yes, sir! like marines.”

On September 11 at 8:46, two thousand seven hundred Morgan Stanley employees are already sitting at their desks in the south tower (as well as one thousand in another building, World Trade Center 7): brokers and traders, who often come in at 7:30; and whoever is supposed to be in front of a screen when the stock exchange opens. This represents one third of the full personnel. Parents of young children are coming later. This is only the second day in primary schools, so they still go with their kids. Some good citizens are voting in the primary elections for the New York mayor.

The World Trade Center really fills up after 9. Forty thousand people work in the twin towers. Tourists climbing to the observation deck on the 107th floor of the south tower can be even more numerous. The observation deck opens at 9:30.

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Rick Rescorla orders evacuation as soon as he sees fire in the north tower.

“Everything above where that plane hit is going to collapse, and it’s going to take the whole building with it,” he tells his assistants. “There will be trouble in this tower too.”

At 8:55, while most Morgan Stanley employees are already walking down the stairs, the public address system says people should return to their offices. Rick Rescorla becomes quite angry:

“Piss off, you son of a bitch!”

He escorts his troops. To keep their spirits up, he sings Cornish songs:

Men of Cornwall stop your dreaming;

Can’t you see their spearpoints gleaming?

He goes up and down in the staircase, shouting in his bullhorn:

“Stay calm! Keep moving! Remember the drills! I’m getting you the fuck out of here!”

Climbing down seventy-two flights of stairs is hard work, the more so if you keep going up again all the time. He is somewhat out of shape—slightly puffed up from a chemotherapy treatment for prostate cancer. Although he runs every day after work, he hasn’t regained his full warrior’s stamina. He has to stop and rest every few minutes.

Having left Boston at 8:15, the United Airlines Boeing 767 avoids New York, then turns back over New Jersey to approach Manhattan from the Southwest. At 9:02:54, it dives into the south tower.

The two planes took off sixteen minutes apart and crashed sixteen minutes apart. Some people think that the terrorists planned the time gap to let TV cameras rush to the spot and record the second attack. It might as well be supposed that media-savvy terrorists would prefer the greater impact of simultaneous crashes. A long delay threatens the whole plot. Because the last plane will take off late, passengers calling their families will know what to expect and refuse their fate.

A plane flying at 586 mph covers a mile in six seconds. Aiming at a two-hundred foot wide tower isn’t easy. A plane approaching a runway flies much slower. The terrorists accelerate to boost the power of the shock. As the tower rushes towards them, the copilot shrieks:

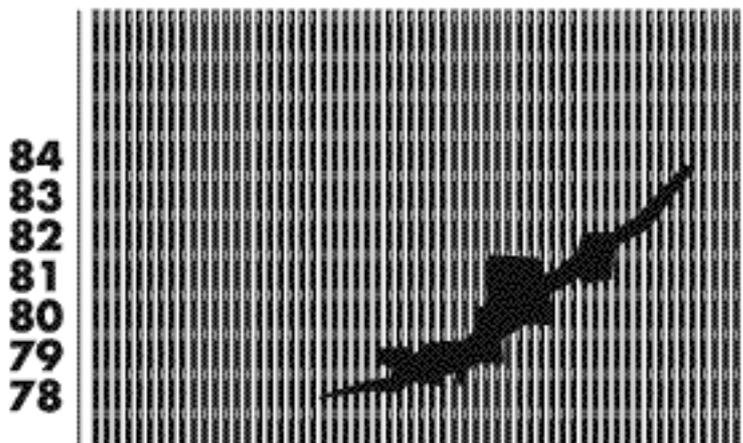
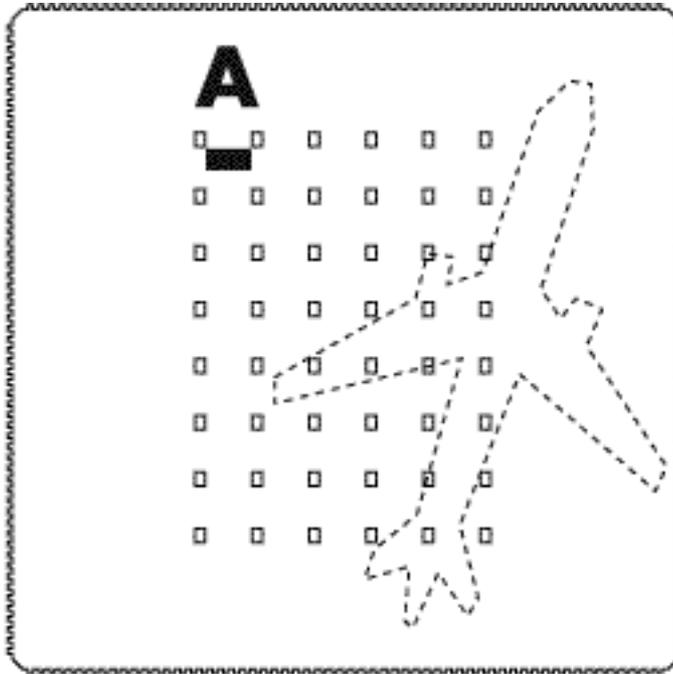
“You’ll miss it... Turn left! Left!”

“I’m doing my best... Allah u Akbar !”

The big jet banks and turns at the last moment. It doesn’t fly straight into the middle of a floor, like the first plane, but hits the right side of the south façade. The body enters the 81st floor as if it was aiming at the northeast corner. The tip of the left wing tears into the 78th floor, the tip of the right wing into the 84th floor. The offsetting of the impact towards the eastern half of the building spares the northwest corner of the stricken floors. On the 81st floor, a Fuji Bank employee sees a stunning scene: a wing, a plane’s nose, a fireball glide fifty feet away—crushing and scorching cubicles, furniture and people. More luck: the plane destroys only two stairways out of three. It so happens that stairways A and C detour from the 76th to the 82nd floor around the huge hoists that sit on the 81st floor to pull the express elevators. In the north tower, all three stairways, grouped in

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the core of the building, were sectioned by the first plane. In the south tower, stairway A stays safely out of reach in the northwest corner.



Not a video game

After calling his brother, Nikita returns to the library. He goes to the window. The second plane is darting towards the south tower. This is a typical Stanley Kubrik moment, Nikita feels. He expects the music to start like at the end of *Dr Strangelove*. He can't believe what he is seeing.

Someone says:

"Look how it turns so that the area it hits is greater. They want to do as much damage as they can."

"Man, I'm glad it didn't miss."

"Are you nuts? You're glad they succeeded? This is not a video game, man."

"Okay, so what happens if the tower doesn't stop it? It comes right upon us!"

"Guys, these towers are going to fall."

"Come on, they can't fall. They were designed to take it."

When he saw the smoke on the first tower, Nikita thought there was an accident. Now he knows it was an attack. He sits at a computer and tries to log onto the Internet, but he can't get a connection.

The advanced biology students are watching TV with their teacher. They hear another loud sound outside. The TV says a second plane hit the World Trade Center. Noah turns towards a friend:

"It might be some kind of air traffic mistake."

"Noah, this is no accident."

"May I use your cell phone? My mother works for the Wall Street Journal, just across the street from the World Trade Center. I hope she's okay."

"I've tried to call already. It doesn't work. They say the network is saturated."

The teacher says:

"When I see this, I think back to when I was a little boy in Rochester. German planes bombed London. On the way back, if they had some bombs left, they'd drop them on our city. It was very scary."

Reiter's voice in the school's loudspeakers:

"Planes struck the World Trade Center. You should stay inside your classroom. Try to go on with your work."

The students sneer, the teacher shrugs. They go on watching TV.

Something strange happens in architecture class: the phone becomes crazy. It rings and rings, but there is no one at the other end. The antenna on top of the World Trade Center must be sending wild waves all over the place because of the heat. The teacher also seems crazy. He dashes to the phone, lifts the receiver, hangs up, then repeats the whole procedure. After a while, he unhooks the plug.

Tall Lex is sitting near the window. Now and then, he pushes the blinds aside to peek.

"Hey, Laura, did you hear?"

"No, what?"

"A kind of explosion. There are more flames. The fire must be spreading."

She hears Reiter's announcement: "Two planes hit the World Trade Center..."

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This is no accident, she thinks. A planned attack. She feels guilty at having enjoyed the show when she arrived in architecture class and saw the first tower on fire: "Wow! What an amazing sight! Not something you see everyday." She couldn't take her eyes away. She wondered how many people might be dying. Like when you hear about a hurricane in Florida that killed thousands. Maybe I know people in these towers, actually.

Several girls start crying. What's wrong with them? Laura wonders.

When rusty Reiter mentions a second plane, the virtuosi in the orchestra class do not laugh anymore. Not Britney Spears twice, Charlene thinks.

Ten bars of Mozart later, another low voice booms in the loudspeakers. It is Reiter's assistant, a whale of a man who works in Stuy because it's the only school with escalators.

"We don't know what happened, but we think you'd better stay inside for lunch."

Charlene hates the school cafeteria. She likes to buy a pizza on Chambers Street and eat it on the banks of the Hudson. A pilot pulled his stick too hard, or two pilots. This is not our fault. Why do they punish us?

She remembers reading about Aaliyah's accident in a magazine. The pilot was drunk and full of cocaine. He didn't have the proper permit for the plane. He took nine people on board, whereas the limit was eight.

The 9:25 bell ends the band practice. Charlene goes to the second floor for a history class. When she crosses the entrance lobby, she sees a crowd of strange people, dishevelled and out of breath. They fight over the public phones, they shout, they cry. Who let them in? Usually, security doesn't let anybody enter the school.

She climbs up the big marble staircase. Lots of kids are massed on the landing, near the tall windows, looking outside. She recognizes a kid she knows from her home room. She's never seen such a thing: he is shaking like Jell-O.

"Hi, Clarinet. This is horrible... I was on the 9th floor. I saw everything... People jumping..."

She walks into the classroom. The teacher seems upset, but tries to compose himself. Reiter, the famous radio announcer: "Please stay seated. Go on with your day..." The teacher, with a somewhat ironic tone:

"Well, I guess we'll have to do that."

Joey, a friend of Charlene, sits down at her side. He is crying and shaking. His father is a firefighter.

"I've called my mother several times... I wish I knew where my father was... And now, I don't even find my cell phone anymore... Oh my God, is he really going on with the lesson? I can't believe it."

In her PS234 classroom, Eleanore notices that a girl sitting near the window is crying. She knows the boy sitting next to her.

"Hey, Zak, why is she crying?"

"Her dad is flying to Florida."

So her dad is flying to Florida. Why should this worry her?

Anna, the principal, gives instructions on the public-address system:

"All 5th-graders go to the auditorium, 2nd- and 3rd-graders to the gym, kindergartners to the cafeteria. Go straight down. Do this like a fire drill. Do not bring backpacks or lunchboxes."

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In the staircase, Eleanore hears that a plane crashed into the World Trade Center. She begins to worry. She sees a mother and her daughter in the lobby. The mother bleats like a goat.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?” the girls asks.

Gosh, this is terrible. When she didn’t know what was happening, Eleanore already felt bad. Now that she knows, she feels worse.

Maggie takes them to the auditorium. Eleanore sees Kevin, a mean and stupid boy. She can’t stand the repulsive brat. While she has never seen him even look sad, now he is crying and hugging his pal. This is so unsettling that she begins to cry herself. Then all the other kids start crying too.

PS234 pupils do not come from Brooklyn or from the Bronx like Stuyvesant’s. They live near the school, in Battery Park City apartment buildings or in Tribeca lofts. Their parents often work in the twin towers or nearby. Maggie runs around to comfort them. Thirty-two children crying at the same time!

This is insane, Eleanore thinks. Why am I crying, actually? So she stops crying and helps Maggie comfort the others. Then she sees her father right there in the auditorium.

“I’m picking you up, he says. We’re going to the studio.”

Charlene and Eleanore’s parents are designers and printers. They use an old-fashioned press to print limited-edition artists’ books, wedding invitations, etc.

As soon as she steps out of the school, Eleanore sees the towers with their fiery collars. Blake’s poem comes to her mind: *Tower, tower, burning bright...* And then, this strange phrase: *thy fearful symmetry...*

She tries to remember... I’ve seen a fire before. Yeah, but where? Her brain feels sluggish, as if someone had hit her on the head with a heavy hammer. She trembles, shakes and shivers. She’s hot and cold. Her skin tingles, her hair stands on end.

They reach the studio on Hudson Street, a few blocks from the school. A neighbor invites her to her place:

“I’ll give you some tea, Eleanore. You look like a cartoon character who inserted a couple fingers in a power plug. A nice cup of tea is just what you need to calm down.”

In the cafeteria, teachers and children move the tables and chairs away from the windows on the south side. Some kids complain:

“Am cold, Cynthia.”

“The air conditioning is too strong. Did you have a jacket today?”

“I’ll go back up and get their coats,” Dana says.

Just as she enters the classroom, she sees a huge explosion on top of the south tower. It looks like special effects in a movie. The streets are full of people running away, fleeing a snowstorm of debris. Our school is only three blocks north of the World Trade Center, Dana thinks. What if underground gas pipes break and explode? We’d better leave.

She meets her friend Maggie outside the classroom.

“I’m afraid they’re going to fall,” Maggie says.

“No way. They’re so huge... How could they fall?”

Dana walks into the cafeteria with the kids’ coats. Cynthia’s son has come to inform his mother. He is a policeman. You might even say two policemen, he is so huge.

“Both towers are on fire. Both hit by planes. It is a terrorist attack. They say other planes are still in the air. They want to attack the White House and the Pentagon.”

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Anna comes running into the cafeteria.

“We’ll move all the children to the gym, away from the south side windows.”

The parents have picked up nine out of ten children. Seventy kids are left, out of seven hundred. The gym is big enough. There are no chairs, of course, so they must sit on the floor.

Reiter, the principal of Stuyvesant High School, calls the City of New York board of education. Their office is in Brooklyn, but they watch TV. “Keep the students inside,” they advise. “The walls will protect them against the debris.”

Police officers are visiting the school to assess its potential as a triage center for injured people. Reiter asks a FBI agent what are the chances of the towers coming down.

“Zero,” the agent answers.

Andrew finishes his math test in a bad mood. All wrong, he thinks. They’ll kick me out of Stuy. I should still get a better score than Ken Whatshisname. Tripped me with his plane crash yarn. His fault. Couldn’t concentrate.

He climbs to the tenth floor. English class. The students are glued to the windows like flies. Several are crying. What’s wrong with them? Hey, Noah...

“Is it the plane thing?”

“Two planes. A terrorist attack. Look, both towers are burning.”

Andrew feels his bones are getting mushy. I’d better sit down, he thinks. He worries about his mother. Part of a tower could fall and flatten the 90 West Street building. He tries to call her. The cell phone works, but a message says all the circuits are busy. He punches the redial button every thirty seconds, but he always gets the same message. The English teacher doesn’t try to teach.

“Some of my colleagues do not want the students to watch this. I’m not sure... This is history in the making, after all, so you should probably see it.”

She turns the TV on. Some invisible magician seems to be playing a joke: “And now, see this airplane disappear into this tower!” CNN punches the repeat button every thirty seconds, like Andrew.

Noah notices that a girl he knows, Heather, is shivering as if she suffered from a tropical fever.

“What’s wrong, Heather?”

“My uncle and my cousin work in the towers. I can’t help thinking about them. Are they going to die?”

“I’m sure they evacuated everybody as soon as the first plane hit. They should be all right.”

He hopes this goes for his mother at the Wall Street Journal as well.



Georgette leaves home at 8:30. The Wall Street Journal is not a 9 to 5 company. More like 10 to 6 on most days and 10 to 10 now and then. She likes to take Alexa to school. We leave at the same time and start in the same direction, so why not. Then she walks down Broadway to the 72nd Street subway station, where she can get a downtown express train. She thinks about her children. Next year, Alexa will go to high school. She'll want to walk alone or with her friends. She doesn't let me hold her hand anymore. Noah will be in college. He'll live three hundred miles from New York City. If Cornell takes him. They'll consider his good marks. They know Stuyvesant has the best students.

The old 72nd Street station is really too small. They're building a new one just beside it, with a beautiful glass roof. They say some robbers came in the middle of the night and took stained glass panels worth thousands of dollars. What will they do with them? Georgette wonders. Ransom them, perhaps.

She meets Inez, a neighbor who works in the City Department of Health, near City Hall. They take the train together. They talk about rats and mosquitoes. Also, their children. Inez has two daughters who go to college already.

After 34th Street, Georgette notices a very nervous woman at the other end of the subway car. She's talking and talking. She's trying to grab the attention of the other passengers. What is this about? Georgette hears the word "plane" several times. Something wrong with a plane? Maybe a small plane.

The train slows down—as if it was exhausted, all of a sudden. It stops repeatedly in the tunnels. Inez consults her watch.

"Darn it. I've got a meeting at 10."

"Yeah, me too. Also at 10. I'm meeting Dwight, one of my colleagues, to discuss a new project."

The driver's voice comes over the loudspeakers:

"There is no local service south of Chambers Street, due to police action at Cortlandt Street."

Police action can mean anything: someone jumped on the tracks, a passenger had a heart attack, pickpockets snatched a purse. Georgette and Inez shrug and sigh. People protest:

"Not again!"

"Shit, I'll be late."

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“The motherfuckers always commit suicide on my line!”

The driver again:

“If you’re going to the World Trade Center, take this train to Park Place, the next express stop after Chambers Street. This is not too far from Cortlandt Street.”

Good enough, Georgette thinks. Usually, she transfers to a local train at Chambers Street and gets off at Cortlandt Street, the station under the World Trade Center. Then she walks through the underground shopping center to Liberty Street and takes the overpass across West Street to the Wall Street Journal building. Park Place is the subway station in front of the Woolworth Building. I’ll walk five more minutes, but I don’t have to transfer and wait for the local train, so it makes no difference.

They reach Chambers Street at 9:30. Inez steps off.

“We’ll both be on time after all... Have a good day, Georgette!”

The most annoying thing about this, Georgette thinks, is that I went all the way to the front of the train like every morning, but in Park Place I need to use the Church Street exit at the back of the platform.

She takes the escalator up. She walks across the part of the station called the mezzanine—the hall that contains the turnstiles and the ticket booth—towards the street exit. But then a crowd of people running down the stairs in a panic forces her back.

“A plane crashed into the World Trade Center,” someone shouts.

She climbs slowly against the stream. The street looks like the set of a disaster movie: fire engines, police cars, barricades, policemen and firefighters running everywhere, sirens and whistles. Somehow, it doesn’t seem real.

Raising her eyes, Georgette sees a big black gap near the top of the north tower. Smoke and flames shoot out of it as if it were a volcano’s crater. The south tower is also ringed with smoke.

Georgette approaches a policewoman guarding a barricade.

“You can’t go farther south, Ma’m.”

“What happened?”

“When the second plane hit, they labelled it a terrorist attack.”

“I’m a journalist. I must go to my office. Do you know whether they evacuated the Wall Street Journal building? It’s part of the World Financial Center, just on the other side.”

“I don’t know. I have my orders. Nobody goes through.”

Georgette tries to go around the World Trade Center. Another police officer stops her.

“This street is closed. You can’t go any further.”

“I need to go to work, officer.”

“Lady, you can go to work tomorrow. Just get out of here!”

I must call Max, she thinks. Tell him I’m safe... Swarms of people mob the street phones. She stands on line for twenty minutes. Just forgot to take my cell phone today. They don’t work anyway, people say.

Her husband answers the phone.

“Max? It’s me. I’m okay.”

“Yeah, I figured it out. Knew you were in the subway.”

“Have you heard from Noah? Did you listen to the radio? Did they say anything about Stuyvesant?”

“I’m sure they’re taking care of the kids.”

“I can’t go to my office. I don’t know whether to go home or to Stuyvesant.”

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“Don’t worry. The kids will be okay.”

She calls the Wall Street Journal. An answering service says to report to work in the New Jersey office.

People are gathering in the middle of the streets. They need to talk. They say the subway is shut down. The bridges and tunnels are closed. Georgette wonders how she can cross the river to New Jersey. I walk to Pennsylvania Station. Suppose I find a train and go to the office. Then I might be stuck over there for days. If they close all the links to Manhattan. Max says Noah isn’t exposed to danger. I hope they evacuated Stuyvesant. She feels torn... He doesn’t need me. I wouldn’t be able to find him in this chaos. She’s always been worried something might happen to her kids. A drunk driver doesn’t stop when they walk across the street, a sailboat sinks in summer camp... Calamities have a way of appearing out of nowhere. What can I do? Not as if I had to give my life to save his. A kind of numb longing pushes her towards Stuyvesant, but her reason tells her to walk towards the North. Terrorists... Maybe they plan to attack other targets. I’ll walk to the Hudson, then follow the river. Better stay as far as possible from the Empire State Building and Times Square.



Dwight walks by the towers to go to the Wall Street Journal. People are looking up. A woman is talking into her cell phone:

“A Boeing 747 just crashed into the World Trade Center.”

Bullshit, he thinks. Any commercial pilot would dive into the river rather than hit a building. Maybe some small plane.

Just then, several floors of the south tower seem to explode. Dwight didn’t see the plane, which came from the other side. Must be a bomb, he thinks. Okay, I’ll see it later on TV. He has a busy day at work. This will make it even busier. Must review the report on the financial shenanigans in the tobacco industry. Meet Georgette at 10 for the new project. I’d better walk around the World Trade Center, he thinks. I’ll be late, I guess. Police are already closing streets. A wide enough detour should do it. He walks southwards along Broadway.

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Pages covered with numbers, black-bordered and smoking, litter the streets. Others flutter in the wind, like dead leaves in a burning forest. Dwight walks on bills, insurance policies, financial reports, expense accounts, spreadsheets, machine manuals.

Police officers stand guard in front of the Wall Street Journal.

“This building was evacuated,” they say. “Nobody goes in.”

They’re setting up an emergency triage station in front of the building. One of them is listening to his two-way radio:

“A third plane is coming!”

“Everybody move towards the river! Hurry up...”

“No, this one is ours... An airforce fighter jet.”

Dwight runs into an editor and several reporters.

“Do you know our office in New Jersey?” the editor asks. “Nick and Betty, you find a boat or ferry and cross over. We’re setting up a temporary news room in our bureau there. I also need reporters on the scene right here. Dwight? Okay. You stay and interview eyewitnesses. Then you phone your copy. Here’s the number...”

Dwight prepares his notepad. He finds a man who shakes like a delirious drunkard.

“I work on top the south tower. A phone company. I stop before steppin’ in, cause my sister is talkin’ to me on my cell phone... Listen, sis, I say, must go in. Can’t talk in the elevator. Got to hang up. You tell me about it later... But she won’t let go. That’s my sister for you. Then I hear an engine noise... I see the first plane plunge into the north tower. Man, I don’t feel like goin’ up anymore... So I don’t work today, and why not. I hesitate... Then the second fuckin’ plane... Not far from my office, man. Oh shit!”

Debris fall from the towers. Airplane parts. Pieces of glass, steel, concrete. Things. Bodies... Thrown away by the explosion, Dwight thinks. Dead already? But no... Is this possible? They’re jumping! Each in turn, like paratroopers from a plane. Men in dark suits and ties; women with floating scarves, long legs, high heels. Some head first. Others on their back. Did the wind turn them over? They fling their arms as if they wanted to flip. Dwight hears the loud thud that marks the end of their fall, but doesn’t dare look... He imagines the cruel choice: jump or burn.

In the 90 West Street building, Alfreda calls the elevator. As she’s stepping into the cabin with her colleagues, the building shudders again.

“Everybody out of the elevator!” Alfreda shouts.

They walk down—only two flights of stairs. Emergency workers are taking care of wounded people in the lobby. Two airplanes, they say. Amazing, Alfreda thinks, that these emergency people could come so fast... They’ve closed the entrance on Cedar Street, towards the towers. In West Street, they’ve covered the body parts. But Alfreda can see small pieces of human flesh mixed with the debris covering the ground. She’s wearing sandals. Gosh, icky!

West Street is not just another New York street, but a ten-lane highway. The sidewalk is too narrow for pedestrians, not to mention crowds. Alfreda meets Tom, a rotund bow-tied colleague who worked in the Middle-East.

“This is dangerous, he says. People are standing there and gaping like fools, as if this was some kind of attraction park. No sense of self-preservation. We must go away as fast as possible, leave West Street, avoid large avenues and other exposed places. We should expect more attacks.”

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“I know a passage to the river promenade, Alfreda says. I have just done a study of the Battery Park City underground parking. They want to renovate it. I know where to cut through.”

They reach the Hudson shore. Alfreda sees a fireman with blood gushing from his head. Young executives of both sexes, Wall Street types, are moving as if in slow motion. They seem stunned, distraught. Lost the high ground, Alfreda thinks. These stocks-and-bonds samurai walked proudly into the towers. They couldn't guess that before the morning was over they would stop caring about the Dow Jones average and the rate of the yen.

Tom and Alfreda start walking towards the North along the Hudson. Sometimes, the promenade widens into a garden or plaza.

“Too exposed,” Tom says.

They run to the other side, trying to keep a piece of wall between themselves and the World Trade Center.

A helicopter has landed in the park in front of Stuyvesant. Tom is becoming paranoid:

“We shouldn't go near the helicopter. There could be an accident... The rotor could fall off!”

They stay as far as possible from the helicopter. Oh my God, Alfreda thinks, this is wrong. I should go over there, on the contrary, and get Andrew... Yeah, but they wouldn't let me enter. Reiter and his bulky assistant run the place like a prison. Nobody goes in. Very tight security. Even tighter in this situation, I guess... Stuyvesant is far enough from the towers. He'll be okay. Old enough to know what to do. He's been trying to establish his independence for a while, she thinks. He leaves at 7, even 6:30. Comes back at 7:30. He goes to rehearsals. The school choir, the year-end musical. Sings and dances with Noah, Tierney and the others.

Alfreda and Tom avoid the helicopter and the school. We were so proud when they accepted him in Stuyvesant. His marks just good enough. He would have gone to Bronx Science and been safe... She feels like crying. I should have tried. I'm his mother.

They cross West Street towards Tribeca. There is no more traffic.

“Holy cow,” Tom screams. “People are jumping!”

I don't want to look, Alfreda thinks. They walk to Greenwich Street. Alfreda lives on this very street. Although she knows it is quite foolish, she feels safer. All I have to do is walk two miles north and I'm home.

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North tower. In the fifteen upper floors, 1,344 people are dead or doomed. Two hundred have jumped. At least one man, witnesses say, tried to climb down along an external column. He didn't go far. Too slippery? Too hot?

Chris Young, the Marsh & McLennan temp, is singing in his stopped elevator. He likes musicals. He knows dozens of tunes. In this slightly stressful situation, he only remembers one, Don Quixote's *Quest* song in *Man of La Mancha*.

*To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go.*

*To right the unrightable wrong,
To love, pure and chaste, from afar,
To try, when your arms are too weary,
To reach the unreachable star!*

*This is my quest, to follow that star,
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far,
To fight for the right without question or pause,
To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause!*

*And I know, if only I'll be true to this glorious quest,
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest.*

*And the world will be better for this,
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove, with his last ounce of courage,
To reach the unreachable stars.*

The elevator's light is still working. Chris Young looks at his watch. 9:15. Half an hour already. He punches the red button again. Another voice asks him to give his elevator's number and his location.

"We've got people working on it. We'll get you out soon."

"Should I try to get out myself?"

"Better not. You might jam the security system, then we wouldn't be able to open the doors."

Jan Demczur is a window washer in the north tower. After taking an express elevator from the bottom to the 44th floor, he crosses the Sky Lobby to get a local. There are four banks of local elevators, which stop on floors 45 to 54, 55 to 61, 62 to 67, 68 to 74. A few seconds before 8:46, Jan Demczur boards a 68-74 cabin with five other men. Before coming to the first landing, the car shakes, stops, then starts falling. One of the men punches the emergency stop button. Now they're stalled and wondering what to do. At the very beginning, a voice on the intercom said:

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“There’s been an explosion,” but the intercom doesn’t seem to be working anymore. They can’t just wait there, because smoke seeping into the cabin is making life unpleasant. They try to open the doors. They pry them apart a few inches, but as soon as they release them they snap back.

“There’s some kind of spring or piston,” one man says. “I’m a Port Authority engineer. This is a security device controlled by an electric motor. I remember they installed them some years ago.”

Jan Demczur pulls his squeegee out of his bucket.

“Open once more. I stick squeegee handle so it not close.”

Using the handle as a lever, pulling the doors apart with all their strength, they succeed in opening them. They face a blank wall, inscribed with the number 50.

“This must be the 50th floor, the engineer says. The elevator doesn’t stop here, so there’s no door.”

Jan Demczur scratches the wall with his nail.

“This here sheetrock. When I come to America, I’m mason. Sheetrock can cut with knife.”

Sheetrock is made of two-inch thick gypsum panels. Nobody has a knife, so Jan Demczur carves a 12 by 18 inches rectangle with the metal edge of his squeegee. Then they take turns cutting into the sheetrock.

South tower. Hundreds of people are waiting for an elevator in the 78th floor Sky Lobby—either to go down to the ground or go back up to their offices. The plane’s left wing tip shears through at 500 mph. People are cut into pieces, hurled onto the walls, speared with glass shards and steel beams, crushed under concrete ceiling slabs. Most of those who are only wounded will die when the tower crumbles. Twelve survivors will make it to the ground. They were waiting for the elevator in the northwest corner of the Sky Lobby, near staircase A. Among them is Kelly Regher, who wanted to get his Palm Pilot. He had just stepped into a local elevator, but the door hadn’t closed yet.

When the plane rips through floors 79 to 84, the explosion of its kerosene kills up to two hundred people. On the west side of the 84th floor, seven employees of finance company Euro Brokers stay alive. They start walking down stairway A. As they reach the 81st floor, they meet a thin man and a fat lady coming up from below.

“Stop, stop,” the fat lady says. “You can’t go on. There’s too much smoke down there. And flames. You’ve got to go up.”

They begin to argue.

“In ’93, helicopters landed on the terrace.”

“You’re right. I was there. You couldn’t use the stairs because of the smoke.”

“Most of the people who died, the smoke killed them.”

They vote and decide to go up. Two brave Euro Brokers employees grab the elbows of the fat lady to help her, because she can’t carry her huge frame all the way to the terrace. Brian Clark, a vice-president of Euro Brokers, follows them half-heartedly. If there was really fire and brimstone down there, her dress would burn. Just then, he hears a call:

“Help! I’m buried. I can’t breathe. Is anybody there?”

He seizes the sleeve of a colleague, Ronnie DiFrancesco.

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“Come on, Ronnie. Let’s help this guy.”

It seems the plane’s impact has twisted the building somewhat. Some doors popped out of their frame, others are stuck to the frame so that you can’t open them anymore. Brian and Ronnie try in vain to open the door leading from the stairwell to the 81st floor.

“Look, the wall is broken here,” Brian says.

They widen the opening by kicking around it. They walk towards the voice through a white dusty haze. Ronnie turns back because he can’t breathe, but Brian goes on over a tangle of steel, wood, concrete, cables, furniture.

“Where are you?”

“Here. Can you see my hand?”

Brian sees a hand sticking out of a steel and concrete mound.

“Okay, see you now...”

“Praise the Lord, I’ve been saved!”

“I’m Brian. Who are you?”

“I’m Stanley. I work at Fuji Bank.”

“Nice to meet you, Stan. Now let’s get out of here.”

“One thing I’ve got to know first, Brian. Do you know Jesus?”

This is Stanley’s lucky day. Brian doesn’t say: “I don’t know from Jesus. Would Moses be okay? What about Buddha? Vishnu?”

“I go to church every Sunday,” he says.

He climbs to the top of the mound on his hands and knees, grabs Stanley’s hand and pulls him out with superhuman strength. They tumble down together, embracing and laughing.

“Halleluyah!” Stanley shouts. “Praise Jesus!”

They go back to staircase A. Brian has forgotten about ascending to the terrace. They walk down. The first few floors are tricky because of debris made slippery by sprinkler water. There is some smoke. They do see small fires poking at them through cracks in the wall, but nothing to really worry about.

Stanley hurries down the stairs.

“Hey, let’s not go too fast,” Brian says. “I’d hate to break an ankle and still have to walk down thirty floors.”

They take their time. They visit an empty floor and phone home. They reach the building’s lobby after fifty minutes or so. They look at the debris-covered plaza and decide to go down one more level, to the shopping center. A policewoman there tells them how to leave the building:

“Go down the hall to the Victoria’s Secret store, then turn right and go out by Sam Goody.”

They come out at the corner of Liberty Street and Church Street. They run south and east to escape falling debris. They see ministers in front of Trinity Church. Stanley begins to cry.

“This man saved my life,” he tells the ministers.

“I think you saved my life, too,” Brian says. “I was ready to go up when I heard your voice. If you hadn’t called, I would still be in the tower.”

They both cry.

“Why don’t you come in and pray?” the ministers ask.

“Yes, let’s do that.”

Later, as they try to escape the collapsed tower’s dust cloud by running towards the East River, they lose sight of each other in the crowd. For a brief moment, Brian has a strange feeling that Stanley was actually an angel sent on a special mission by God Almighty: “Go ye and keep this guy Brian Clark alive!” Then he feels a small cardboard rectangle in his pocket: Stan’s business card. This makes him human, I guess. An angel’s business card would fetch a good price on eBay...

In a way, Stanley the unwitting angel saved two people. When he turned back on the 81st floor because he couldn’t breathe, Ronnie DiFrancesco decided to follow his colleagues to the terrace. He catches up with them on the 91st floor. They’re sitting down and resting. I’ll do that too, he thinks. He sits on the stairs and drifts into sleep. No, no, shouldn’t sleep... He feels that something’s wrong and forces himself to wake up. He takes a better look at his companions. They’re resting too peacefully... They’re not sleeping. Carbon monoxide knocked them off. They’re dying. They look quite happy. A pleasant way to die. I wouldn’t have to do anything—just fall asleep... But then he thinks about his wife and kids. I want to see them. I’ll make it out. He gets up and starts walking down.

At least two hundred people are gathered on the 105th floor in front of a locked door leading to the terrace.

“Anybody got the key?”

“It’s an automatic lock. The security staff controls it.”

“Where are they?”

“They have an office downstairs somewhere.”

“Oh shit!”

In ’93, when the basement burned, helicopters landed on the terrace. Police helicopter are flying above the towers, but the flames licking the top of the buildings keep them away. If the security staff unlocked the door, the 105th floor castaways would discover it doesn’t open on salvation, but on a dead end.

People on floors 85 to 105 can still use the office phones. For more than half an hour, they talk to their loved ones. Some leave messages on answering machines or services. These last-minute immaterial mementoes, as well as the calls by the four planes’ passengers and attendants on their cell phones, give a new dimension to the September 11 tragedy. It is the first time a historical event leaves so many traces of this kind. Sometimes, the last message was recorded before the horror: “Say, Poochie, don’t you forget to get my white shirt from the laundry. I need it tonight.” Many bereaved people will take care not to erase a vanished voice: “This is Brad Morrow’s answering machine. Please leave a message after the beep. Thanks.”

The south tower *morituri* and their families call 911.

“What should we do?” they ask.

The emergency services tell them what to do in a crisp computer voice:

“Call again later.”

Or when they talk to an actual human being:

“I’m sorry. We can’t reach the firefighters’ command post...”

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In the command post, nobody knows where the commander's gone. Nobody utters a sentence that could save several hundred lives: "Stairway A is open from top to bottom."

Eighteen people walk down stairway A from the 78th floor and above: the twelve Sky Lobby survivors; Brian Clark, Ronnie and two more Euro Brokers employees (84th floor); Stanley and another Fuji Bank employee (81st floor). One badly-burned person will die within five days.

The twelve Sky Lobby survivors look like a squad of black ghosts. They tell their story to emergency workers who help them climb into an ambulance.

"We were waiting for the elevator. Then, all of a sudden... The loudest noise I've ever heard... The wing mowed people like a huge scythe..."

"We should be dead. A few feet..."

"The man with the red scarf saved our lives."

"He tied a scarf like a cowboy to breathe despite the smoke."

"He helped the wounded to get up. He shouted: Stand up! Stand up! Go to the stairs and walk down!"

"He took us to the stairs. Follow me, follow me! he shouted."

"I was unconscious. He carried me on his back twelve floors down, where I could breathe better. Then he went back up to help the other ones."

"He pulled me out of the flames. He went down fifteen floors with me. I'm going back upstairs to help, he said."

"He recruited assistants to organize a rescue team."

"Where is he, this man with the red scarf?" the emergency workers ask.

"Well, up there."

Where is Rick Rescorla, the Cornish warrior? Up there, too. After getting his people the fuck out of the tower, he went back up to check he hadn't forgotten anyone.

The man with the red scarf and the Cornish warrior haven't decided to give up their lives. They shouldn't be compared to brave soldiers who charge under a hail of bullets—or to the nineteen terrorists. They do not know that the tower will fall. They just act like decent human beings.

Stand back from the windows

Nikita has gym at 9:30. The gym teacher isn't even there. At least I don't have to change to my gym shorts. Nikita goes to a computer room with a friend. He wants to try the Internet again. A radio says a third plane crashed on the Pentagon. The lights flicker. A short power failure resets the computers. Nikita thinks about Igor's servers. The surge protector should bridge the gap. Maybe the violin salesman will lose another client.

Someone shouts:

"Let's get out! This place is not safe..."

Noah and Andrew are watching TV in English class. They hear another loud rumble. It startles the building, which shakes nervously. The lights and the TV go out. The lights come back after a second—but there is no more picture on the TV screen, only fluttering snow. They look outside. The balloon of smoke that topped the south tower is swelling as if some crazy giant was blowing it up. It spills into the streets. This reminds Andrew of old sci-fi movies. The atomic cloud swallows the hero and turns him into a nasty mutant creature. Thinking of the mutant, or looking at the cloud, gives Andrew goose bumps. How will the movie end? Strangely, he feels more curious about the storyline than about the fate of the main character.

"I think the top of the south tower has fallen down," Noah says.

"We can't really see. The other tower hides it."

The students seem stunned. Then Heather and others begin to cry. Noah tries to comfort Heather.

"Stand back from the windows," Reiter says in the loudspeakers.

This is the real thing, Noah thinks. We're in danger. He's surprised that he's not panicking, crying and screaming. He feels quite composed. He hopes things will turn out okay somehow. He wonders what the tower will look like without its top. Will they repair it? This is surreal, like a dream. Not something he expected to ever see. It belongs to the world that appears in my head when I sleep or to the fake world projected on a movie screen—not to the real world. There is no music, though, so it must be real. No fancy camera angles, no close-ups, no *Die Hard* Bruce Willis saving the world.

Reiter: "Two planes crashed into the World Trade Center. Similar events took place in Washington. You're to go to your home room and wait for further instructions."

Andrew to Noah:

"My home room is on the ninth floor, on the north side."

"Mine is the library."

"I won't see the darn towers. Won't know what happens. Way too high, too. I mean, suppose we need to evacuate in a hurry... This Reiter has a pea-sized brain. We should be on the ground floor. The auditorium or wherever..."

Andrew feels as edgy as the day he got his driving licence. Hearing Reiter's croaking voice doesn't improve his mood. Sounds like Kermit the frog, just not as funny. The seniors have fond memories of Mrs Perullo, the former principal, who retired after one hundred years of rectitude. Andrew tries to call his mother. Circuits still busy.

Noah knows someone in his home room: good old Nikita. They sit in the library, far from the window, waiting for further instructions.

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“Are you okay, Noah?”

“The Wall Street Journal is real close to the towers. I still haven’t heard from my mother.”

“Igor told me they evacuated everybody right away. You haven’t heard from her because communications are out.”

“This destruction over a turf dispute is so stupid.”

He thinks about the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The architecture teacher goes on mumbling a course to heedless students. The room quakes, the lights blink, Laura starts.

“Now I’m really scared.”

“It will be all right,” Lex says.

The fire is spreading, he thinks, and things explode. He does feel uneasy when he looks outside. A tidal wave of ashes is rushing forward, ready to break...

At last Reiter puts an end to this mock-course by sending the students to their home rooms. Laura grumbles:

“So make up your mind. First it’s *Stay in your class, no one in the hall*, then it’s *Everyone go to your home room!*”

She knows only one student in her home room: Charlene, with her clarinet in a black case.

“I was rehearsing in the music room. We heard Reiter over the loudspeakers. We thought it was a small plane like Aaliyah’s. People joked: It’s Britney Spears!”

“I saw flames. I said: Wow! I thought they were shooting a movie.”

“Say, you got yourself a nice tan.”

“I spent the month of August in Martha’s Vineyard. I found a summer job in an English bakery. I gained a few more pounds... You seem worried, Clarinet.”

“I think about my sister—You know her: Eleanore. Her school is very close to the towers.”

The phone rings. Charlene has this strange feeling: it has to do with me... The home room teacher calls her:

“Charlene, someone’s here to pick you up. In the intendant’s office downstairs.”

Now I don’t know anyone in my home room, Laura thinks.

Lex looks at the students in his home room. So serious and tense. You’d think they’re doing three-digit multiplications in their heads. One whimpering kid seems on the verge of becoming quite hysterical. Lex pulls his pack of cards out of his bag.

“Hey, guys, let’s play Hearts!” he says.

It helps pass the time. Some people need a pack of cigarettes to calm down. Lex prefers a pack of cards.

Lex’s mother works at home in Brooklyn. She cuts and sews ball dresses for dolls, then she sells them on the Internet. Five hundred dollars for a doll and her low-necked embroidered dress. These dolls are two feet high. She dresses Barbie dolls only by special order. You must work under a magnifying glass, so she’d rather not.

She listens to the radio. Three miles away from the World Trade Center, she hears the second plane’s explosion. She thinks it’s the thunder. She turns the TV on. When the tower crumbles, a dust cloud covers the whole southern part of Manhattan. She yells. She’s afraid the disaster destroyed Stuyvesant High School and everything else. For years, the only luck

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she knew was bad luck—until she found in sunny Lex a knight-servant capable of brightening the gloom of her life. And now, this...

The seventy kids left in PS234 are sitting on the floor of the gym. They hear something that sounds like the roar of a far-away lion. The fire alarm wails. The lights, the school and Dana tremble.

Anna, the principal, keeps her cool.

“We’re perfectly safe here, but we’re going to make it even safer. Let’s go to the basement!”

This is difficult, Dana thinks. The children have never gone to the basement. It’s very hot down there, and not so big. It will feel crowded...

Anna calls her.

“Dana, we need to get lists of all the kids left. You ask the teachers to give you their names for each class.”

Dana goes from teacher to teacher inside the basement and starts writing the lists. Parents keep coming down to fetch their kids, so she crosses names over as soon as she writes them. This is quite confusing. Do I go on or do I wait? she wonders. A quiet voice answers her question.

“We’re evacuating the school. I repeat: we’re evacuating the school now.”

She recognizes the voice of Mr Brahms, the president of the PTA. He is standing near the door of the basement. When he goes out, everybody follows him. Then the situation becomes rather chaotic. At the top of the stairs, some teachers turn left and take their children to the school’s exit. Others are so panicked that they turn right into a corridor that goes nowhere. Dana runs to the office to see Anna.

“Should I photocopy the lists?” she asks.

“We don’t have time. Let’s stick them on the door. If parents come, they’ll know that their children are with us.”

Mr Brahms has seen them.

“Listen: put everything down. Stop what you’re doing. Just get out of the building!”

Dana holds a purple magic marker that she used to underline the names of the teachers. She steps into the street with her magic marker. Weird: it’s night outside already. How long did we stay in the basement? she wonders. We didn’t spend the whole day there. Very foggy, too. Police officers hold the door open and scream:

“Get out, get out! Run as fast as you can. Run! Run!”

Georgette is walking towards the North. Suddenly, the ground heaves as if an underground dragon was turning in his sleep. A bomb, she thinks. What should you do when a bomb blows up? In case of an earthquake, they tell you to stand in a doorway. She enters a small office building. Five or six people have already sought refuge there. A TV reporter is gesturing to a cameraman who darts in and out of the building. At the same time, the reporter is talking into the reception counter’s phone:

“The south tower just fell!”

At least it wasn’t a bomb, Georgette thinks. She feels relieved. If terrorists had planted bombs everywhere, it would really be awful.

The building’s security guard tells them to leave.

“The police is evacuating everybody. Nobody stays.”

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As she goes out, she sees that people are running like cattle on a stampede. What are they running from? she wonders. Then she turns and sees a lint ball several stories tall rolling along the street. She walks as fast as she can. If only I'd known, she thinks. The very worst day to try on my new shoes. Heels too high. Very tight. They already hurt when I walk, so how could I run? Thousands of people pass her. The ball is going to gobble her...

Running away from danger: a new experience for New Yorkers. Memories come to her mind. Not hers. Stories her mother used to tell her. In the Warsaw ghetto...

Running away from a roundup. The Germans! The Germans! They take the Jews to Umschlagplatz¹. Cram them into boxcars for a one-way journey to the end of the line. They've taken her brother and mother, then her father and sister. They bring her to Umschlagplatz, but she manages to hide inside a small kiosk. If the murderers weren't shouting insults at the Jews, they would hear the loud clang of her poor heart. They catch her again a few days later. She pleads: "I'm young. I can work." She can't hope for a third miracle. She has nothing to lose, so she tries the impossible: in January, 1943, she escapes to the Christian side—where she works as a maid for Christian friends until the end of the war. Later, she meets an officer in the Polish army who spent five years in a prisoners' camp. They marry, then cross the ocean to escape memories of the nightmare. And now, sixty years later, the nightmare also crosses the ocean. I'm glad Dad doesn't see all this. Died four months ago, aged 93. He would have watched TV and worried about Noah's school and my office.

Georgette can't breathe, doesn't see much. Soot covers her glasses, seeps into her eyes. She takes off her jacket to cover her face. She hears shouts and sobs. Someone grabs her arm. She recognizes a policeman's uniform under the gray dust.

"Go down these stairs. Hold the hand-rail. This is the Franklin Street subway station. Wait for the dust to settle."

If the smoke follows me down there, I'm dead, she thinks. I won't even be able to find the exit. But the cloud doesn't want to go underground. Georgette discovers that she loves to breathe. Crowds of powdered specters wait in silence in the mezzanine. After ten minutes or ten hours, police officers call them:

"You can come out. Go north. Just keep walking."

The dust isn't so thick anymore. More like fog. The outline of cars or people becomes visible before you bump into them. She has a strange feeling that she's trapped in a slightly out-of-focus black and white movie. A silent movie, or an old film with a muffled soundtrack. There's police everywhere.

"Keep walking, keep walking!" they say.

"Has Stuyvesant High School been evacuated, officer?" Georgette asks. "Can I go there?"

"Walk north, lady. Can't turn round."

Better get out of the cloud, she thinks. Must trust the school with the kids. She's afraid for her own life. She sees a shadow carrying a backpack like a high school student.

"Excuse me. Do you go to Stuyvesant? Do you know whether it was evacuated?"

"Sorry, ma'm. I come from BMCC²."

She sees a few more. They all come from BMCC. Just across the street from Stuyvesant, she thinks. I should take this as a good sign.

¹ Transfer square.

² Borough of Manhattan Community College.

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Then she sees buildings. I've made it out of that cloud. Where am I? She feels that she knows this neighborhood. Must gather my spirits... Not the Warsaw ghetto... Canal Street! 10:20. She looks for a public phone. The lines are much longer than before. The people look like the guys who pretend to be marble statues in Times Square and other tourist traps. Some talk in a hushed voice, some cry, some comfort the criers.

A picture drifts into her mind: her hairdresser, four blocks away. But of course! she thinks. If they're open, they'll let me use their phone.

After interviewing several survivors, Dwight is back in front of the Wall Street Journal building, at the corner of Liberty Street and West Street. I didn't know there were so many FBI agents in New York, he thinks. They are all over the place, sifting through debris, looking for evidence, marking pieces.

"Don't stop here," a policeman says.

"I'm with the press. It's okay."

"No, you can't stay. We don't want anybody to stay. What if the buildings fall down?"

The man is crazy, Dwight thinks. As if the things could fall down. They're so massive... He walks about five steps towards the river, then he hears the rumble of a million trucks rolling on a corrugated iron road. He turns back... The top of the south tower topples, then disintegrates, turns to powder, becomes a cloud of debris that grows up and flows into the valley of the street like an avalanche... I should have gone to New Jersey, Dwight thinks.

He runs to escape the avalanche. He does some mental maths: how far would one hundred stories fall? When he looks at the cloud, he notices specks of metal foil that shimmer in the sun—fragments of the aluminium skin which covered the outer columns of the tower.

"It falls down! It falls down!" the radio sets of the policemen shriek.

He runs across Battery Park City to the river. A large crowd is trying to embark on a boat over a gangway. Not the smart thing to do, Dwight thinks. I don't need your gangway. A two-foot high wall, topped by a one-foot high railing, borders the quay. I'll walk along the top of the wall to position myself above the boat, then I'll drop onto the boat's deck. He climbs upon the wall. A woman wants to follow his example. He grabs her hand to pull her up. Moist hands, dust-gloved hands... Dwight can't hold her. He loses his balance, tilts backwards over the railing, falls into the river—a twelve feet dive.

Shit! I escaped the falling tower and now I'll drown... I hadn't imagined I'd die in the middle of the Hudson river, he thinks. First thing to do is move away from the boat... If it starts its engine, I'll be sucked into the propellers. But wait a minute: where is the bloody boat? A thick mist crawls upon the waters. He sees neither boat nor bank. He would like to breathe, but the air is turning solid. The rest of the world seems to have vanished, like during a heavy snowstorm. He starts swimming. Away from the boat, he hopes. His clothes bother him. He removes his pants and shoes. He loses his wallet, his ID., his keys.

He comes to a wall. This must be the hull of the boat, he thinks. It moves, doesn't it? He grips a seam. They'll pull me out of this hell.

No such luck. This is the stupid pier. Back to the starting line. Bad day. If anyone had told me what would happen this morning... An incredible mishmash of mishaps. Every moment darker than the preceding one. How could the tower tumble? Maybe there was a bomb beside the plane. Could it worsen yet?

The most urgent thing to do is breathe, obviously. If I swim south, I might get out of the cloud. He follows the bank towards Battery Park. He sees another swimmer.

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“Are you okay?”

Without saying anything, the ghost disappears into the hazy twilight.

Dwight hears the drumbeat of an engine, then discerns the vague shape of a vessel. A yellow light flashes. A police boat? A voice rents the silence:

“Is anybody in the water?”

Dwight feels overcome by a crazy paralysis. He can’t gather the will to answer. The boat is so close now that he sees police divers wearing scuba gear.

“Oh! Oh! I’m here!” he shouts.

“Stay where you are. I’ll jump and get you.”

“Don’t bother. Just send a rope.”

They pull him aboard. He tells them he’s seen someone else. They move downstream, they call, but they don’t find the ghost. They go to the shore, pick up injured police and firefighters, then rush to New Jersey.

Alfreda and her colleague Tom are walking towards the north on Greenwich Street. Life is frozen. Cars do not move. They’re parked along the sidewalk, useless except for their radios. Around each car, a group of grave-looking people is listening to the news. Alfreda and Tom do not stop.

As they’re crossing Houston Street, they hear the crowd gasp.

“What’s going on?” they ask.

“The World Trade Center collapsed.”

“No way. It can’t. We’re architects, we should know.”

From where they stand, the north tower hides its twin, so it’s hard to see whether it’s still there.

But the people:

“Oh yes, oh yes, it collapsed.”

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The pieces of steel that make up the towers' skeleton can't escape their fate. Each one reacts according to its nature. In the neighborhood of the burning floors, the horizontal bar-joist trusses complain it's getting too hot:

"Man, they're turning that joint into an oven! I feel so limp..."

"Seems to me that you're expanding, my dear."

"Just stretching a little, maybe. What bothers me is that the lousy concrete floor is getting heavier all the time."

"Of course! We're the only ones left to carry it. I wonder what happened to the other guys..."

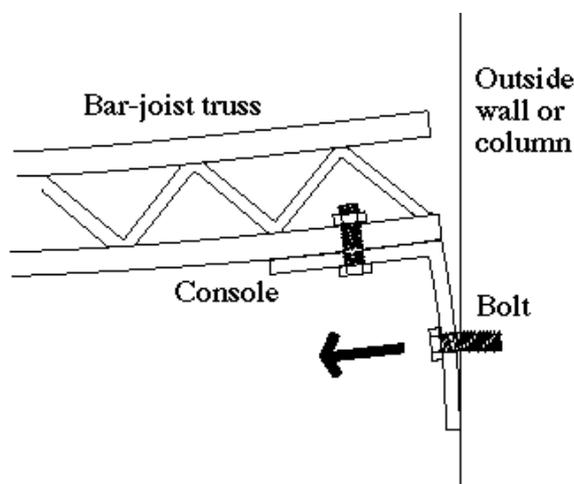
When the heat dilates them, the floor trusses sag and hang like clothes-lines. They begin to tug on the weakest links of the whole structure: the bolted consoles or angle-clips that tie them to the inner and outer columns. The one-inch bolts holding the consoles cry in pain:

"Ouch! Stop pulling me back! Are you trying to tear out my head or what?"

"I've been clasping this bloody clip for thirty years. We've done a pretty good job together, I think. I'm sure we can hug the wall for eternity. But if they remove me, the clip will quit, you bet."

"They couldn't leave well enough alone. Ow! I'm already half unscrewed. I don't know what's wrong with them."

"I see a bad end to this, let me tell you. Bye bye, old clip... I'm sorry I can't hold you any longer. Please forgive me..."



Meanwhile, the proud façades do not seem to mind their wounds.

"A mere scratch!" they say.

The horizontal steel plates above and under the holes act like lintels to hold the external columns together and distribute the stress. The remaining columns must only carry a little more weight.

"What, me worry?" they ask. "As long as the floor trusses brace me and keep me from buckling, I'll stand strong."

At 9:59, in the southeast corner of the south tower's stricken floors, the bolts start popping like champagne corks. The angle clips dangle and flip. The floors and the

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eastern façade separate like pieces of fabric unzipping. The unmoored external columns bend, buckle and snap. The top of the tower tilts. It can't break like a pencil and tip over. Many intact inner and outer columns still hold it. What's more, its center of gravity stays above its base, because no lateral force pushes it aside. When it swallowed the plane, the tower swayed slightly; less than on a stormy day.

The columns succumb in successive bursts. The unsupported thirty upper floors can't keep in mid-air: they have to go down. The huge mass busts all the consoles and floor trusses. As it falls down, it peels the outer shell like a banana skin.

Enormous façade patches fall on the Marriott hotel and the Bankers Trust building.

A Wall Street Journal reporter remains in his office. He describes what he sees for a TV channel:

"One after the other, from top to bottom, the floors blow to pieces, spewing glass and metal outward. It looks like perfectly synchronized explosions. Debris are pelting my windows, breaking them, flying like spears inside. I crouch on the floor and hide under a desk deeper in the office. The room fills with ash, concrete dust, smoke. I choke, I squint... I must go out. I feel around, trying to find a wall, to orient myself in the dark. Ah, here's the wall... I crawl along it, hoping to reach the door. Something's very wrong: there's no door anymore. Oh, here it is! I think of the poor people of Pompeii after the eruption of the Vesuvius. I'd better hurry and move out before this building also crumbles."

The north tower is still standing.

Jan Demczur the window-washer and his five companions have cut a rectangle through three layers of gypsum with the steel part of their squeegee. They come upon white tiles, which they kick away. They squirm through the opening and emerge under a sink, in a 50th floor bathroom, around 9:30. They meet some astonished firefighters:

"Where do you come from? The tower was evacuated long ago. Go down and get out! As fast as you can!"

At 9:59, as they've walked down to the 15th floor, they hear one million drums rolling. Now we're dead, they think.

Chris Young is singing *To dream the impossible dream* for the twentieth time when his elevator shakes like a car driving over a pothole. Chris punches the intercom button again. A recording answers him.

"Your call has been registered. We will get back to you in a minute."

Vivienne Groeniz and the fifteen Port Authority employees, huddled on the north side of the 64th floor, do not see the south tower vanish into thick air. At 9:59, the ceiling of their office crackles as if a herd of kangaroos was having a jumping contest on the floor above. A thin gray dust appears out of nowhere. This is too much for Pasquale Buzzelli, a Port Authority engineer. He starts removing the tapes that seal the door of stairway B.

"We can't wait any longer, he says. Got to go. Look: there is no smoke in the staircase."

One of his colleagues disagrees:

"We should stay here until we receive instructions."

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They discuss for a few minutes. At 10:08, they decide to leave. The staircase is empty all the way to the 45th floor. There, they run into firefighters going up. They carry heavy loads: hundreds of feet of hoses, oxygen and compressed air bottles, axes to break through debris. At least one hundred pounds each. The fastest can climb one story per minute, but they must stop often to rest and wait for their slower comrades. In 1993, it took the firefighters four hours to reach the 80th floor.

Cops shouldn't cry

Charlene goes to the intendant's office. Why did they call me? she wonders. For the first time, she gets really upset. Is somebody hurt? These towers loom large in her life. Her home seven blocks away, the studio six blocks. Her sister's school. Her mother's bank in the south tower: Morgan Stanley, on the 73rd floor. Charlene went there with her once. To look at the view, like a tourist. She tries to remember: did Mom mention the bank this morning?

When she enters the office, Charlene sees her mother. She bursts into tears. Her mother hugs her.

"Oh, Mom... Is everyone all right?"

"Why, yes."

"I thought something terrible had happened."

"Something terrible did happen, Clarinet. The World Trade Center blew up."

"I mean, something terrible to us."

Other parents are waiting in the hall or in front of the school. People who live close¹. A small bunch. Most kids come from far away. A mother carrying a baby in her arms pats Charlene's back to comfort her. I don't even know her, Charlene thinks. Just as she is stepping into the street, she hears Radio-Reiter for the last time:

"At this moment, there are no trains and no buses in lower Manhattan. So, leaving the building, you can't go home. There's nowhere to go and I think it's dangerous in the streets because of falling debris. Stay in the building. Stay away from the windows on the south side. Those are the windows near the Statue of Liberty."

Charlene and her mother cross West Street on the Tribeca bridge—which all the students call the Stuy bridge, actually. Dusty haggard people stand here and there like characters in a strange theater play. An old Chinese woman is sitting on the overpass stairs and crying. Charlene turns her head towards the World Trade Center. She hadn't really seen it yet. The lone remaining tower resembles a gigantic cobra, rising to its full height before striking. From its gaping muzzle shoots a flaming tongue. Charlene, fascinated, can't stop looking. The tongue sticks in and out, the head sways... Oh shit, it's going to fall! Charlene remembers a stupid fact she read in a magazine: the twin towers are so tall that if they fell like trees they'd reach Canal Street². I'm too close, she thinks, much too close... It'll fall on me! She begins to shriek and run. The only path away from the tower is the ramp going to BMCC. Her mother follows her at a distance. The ramp turns into a lane that winds around the college. They come to a huge crowd.

"Can't go through," someone says.

A fifteen-foot high fence blocks the way. Several athletic types are climbing over.

"It would be easier if you wore pants, Mom!"

"My little summer dress... I didn't know I would have to play Spiderwoman!"

A handyman opens a passage through the fence with heavy-duty wire cutters. They come to Hudson Street. The way is blocked again: a police barrier.

¹ Including Art Spiegelman (author of *Maus*) and his wife, who came to pick up their daughter Nadja—as can be seen in his story *In the shadow of no tower*.

² In fact, Canal Street is one mile away from the towers. Having just left Stuyvesant High School, Charlene is at least 700 yards away already.

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“This block is closed,” the police officers say.

“We’re meeting my husband. My studio is on the other side of this street.”

“Okay.”

They see people running past them, putting on FBI jackets. Pretty young women, too. Suddenly, Charlene screams.

“Mom, mom!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I left my clarinet in my homeroom!”

Eleanore is munching cookies while the neighbor prepares some tea. This lady is quite worried because her son, who works near the towers, hasn’t called her. Why is she telling me about it? Eleanore wonders. Not the best way to calm me down. She looks out of the window. A smoke Godzilla is trampling Battery Park City just south of Stuyvesant... Eleanore screams like a child seeing a werewolf in a horror movie. Oh God! I hope nothing happened to Charlene!

Her father calls her.

“Eleanore ? Stella and Charlene are here.”

She runs down the stairs. Charlene runs towards her. The two sisters hug each other. Then Eleanore kisses her mother.

Reiter calls the higher authorities again, consults his assistant. When the south tower’s dust cloud settles, he orders the evacuation of Stuyvesant High School.

“Use the north exit. Follow fire drill procedure.”

Noah wonders how they’ll get three thousand students and several hundred teachers through the north exit, which consists in two apartment doors. Tougher than a camel through the eye of a needle. He remembers jovial jokers turning fire alerts into crazy chaos. He leaves the library with his friend Nikita. The building shakes yet again. Nikita looks at his watch: 10:29. The hall is crowded, but there is no panic. Reiter’s mighty assistant, other administration personnel, police officers, control the evacuation. They form groups of thirty students, which they send through the doors one at a time.

“Walk north to 23rd Street,” they say.

Just before walking through the eye of the needle, Noah regresses to a remote past. He is a child stepping into the unknown. What’s beyond the door? He would feel safer if he could hold his mother’s hand.

“Look, Nik, this may seem strange, but could you hold my hand?”

Nikita looks at him.

“Sure. That’s fine.”

They hold hands for a few minutes. Noah feels foolish, because he’s about twice as tall as Nikita. He remembers holding the hand of the little girl, Milena, in the museum. Dinosaurs couldn’t hold hands. His brother and his parents are tiny too. When people emigrate to America, they grow up after a generation or two. Maybe everybody is short in his country. Actually, in Pushkin or wherever, there is a Little Russia.

“Say, Nik, what does Belarus mean?”

“White Russia.”

“This is bad, for your brother.”

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“The computers have gone to computer paradise. The clients are supposed to have copies of some files, so it’s not a total disaster. We also have backup copies at home. We’ll have to begin all over again, though. I liked to go to this office in the morning before school. Also read books in Borders. Laura will be sad: she loved that bookstore.”

Laura leaves Stuyvesant with a bunch of unknown students. Policemen or firemen wearing gas masks lead them towards the North.

Someone shouts:

“Stuy is burning!”

A dust cloud hides the school. You don’t really see much. Suddenly, the policemen tell some students: “Go back to the school,” and others: “Run, run!” The adults are losing their marbles, Laura thinks. Hey, come on, make up your mind! Already Reiter seemed to change tack every five minutes. The firemen and policemen who should guide us have gone haywire. She even sees a sobbing policeman. This is the scariest thing so far. Cops should not cry. There must be terrorists all over the place. Someone mentions a gas leak. Don’t anybody strike a match! Now her group is running south against a stream of people running north. What a mess. Then they all turn around and run north. She’s desperately searching for a familiar face. She hears a rumor that the towers collapsed. They mean the top of the towers, obviously. Will they rebuild them? Of course, since only the top is destroyed.

She wants to believe that everything is okay, that nobody got hurt. Like in the movies.

If the towers should fall in one piece... Thirteen hundred feet. Am I already thirteen hundred feet away?

The students are walking north along the Hudson, looking for each other. A disordered exodus. You see such pathetic flights on TV news. In Africa, in countries at war, not in America. A heavy mist covers the river. Laura remembers rainy and foggy mornings in Martha’s Vineyard. As late as ten days ago, things were so simple, she thinks. Muffins and crumpets, dunes and waves. Next year, I’d better find a college in a small town, far from this craziness.

At last, she sees someone she knows: Helena, who was in her English class last year. Then she spots the tall figure of Lex.

Andrew feels trapped in his ninth floor home room. Still waiting for “further instructions.” Shit, Reiter, you’re killing us. Murder, murder! We should have gone away long ago. I’ll study law, then I can sue stupid stooges like you. All circuits still busy.

The dork eventually orders evacuation. The ninth floor students come behind all the others. To liven the show, the stairs start rattling to the sound of a billion-watt amplifier while they’re hopping down. They step out into a cloud of ash and dust. I bet the other tower fell down, Andrew thinks. His long hair is soon covered with grime. I’ll need a whole bottle of shampoo to get them back, I’m sure.

Either Andrew walks out of the cloud, or it subsides. He sees Lex in the distance. A seven-foot tall string bean—the highest skyscraper in New York now that the towers are gone.

Alfreda reaches her home, with her colleague Tom still in tow. She calls her husband.

“We’re safe. I just got home.”

“You should go pick up Peter.”

“Your younger son?” Tom asks.

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“He’s thirteen. His school is quite close.”

She takes her camera. She photographs the still-standing, smoke-crowned north tower. She drops Tom at a bus stop, since he doesn’t trust the subway, then walks to the school. Peter is the last child in his class. As she holds his warm body against hers, the accumulated tension breaks the dam that blocked her tears. She can’t stop crying. When they walk out of the school, the north tower has vanished.

Noah now looks like a hurried bear. He is glad to move, to go somewhere. Before, he was caught up in a nightmare. Witnessing events without being able to do anything.

These explosions, these earthquakes, this destruction... He thinks about God’s wrath. Everybody condemned to death except old Noah. The Bible’s boring genealogies: A begat B, who lived 645 years, who begat C. Yeah, so when the flood wiped them out, Methuselah still had 235 years to live or something. Maybe Noah prepared a small cabin for him in the hold, between the kangaroos and the gnus.

They walk north along the Hudson promenade. Someone shouts: “Gas leak!” Everybody runs. Noah doesn’t smell anything. They stop running. Some Stuyvesant students are walking towards the south.

“Where are you going, you guys?” they ask Noah and Nikita.

“Uptown. It’ll be safer.”

“What if another plane hits? Nowhere is safe. There might be plenty more suicide planes in the air.”

People are watching the dust mushrooms that replace the towers. Other people are photographing the people who watch.

Noah and Nikita see Lex’s head above the crowd. Hey, Laura and Andrew, too!

“Why don’t you come to my place,” Andrew says. “Greenwich Street and 10th Street. Twenty minutes. I often walk home.”

“Reiter said go at least to 23rd Street.”

“Reiter is a ridiculous rodent. You’ll be able to call your parents. It’s close enough to reach by foot and far enough to be safe. We need to rest. Fearing for your life is rather stressful, I found out today. If we feel there’s too much dust, we can always go farther north later.”

They accept. Andrew notices that Noah’s face is as white as a sheet. He talks to him to cheer him up.

“Look, this is the pier where I used to meet you last year when I walked to school. With your binoculars. And that tall woman who counted seagulls.”

“Rebecca.”

“One of your girlfriends?” Laura asks.

“A bird specialist. My teacher introduced me to her so I could get a taste of field biology. We didn’t count only gulls, but also ducks and cormorants. We needed to set up a baseline. The riverfront promenade is supposed to become more park-like. In a few years, we’ll be able to check whether new birds live in the park.”

“Are you going to watch them again this year?”

“You know what? I had an appointment with Rebecca day after tomorrow at the World Trade Center for a new project. She wanted to collect birds after dawn at the base of the towers. Lots of small birds bump into skyscrapers: ovenbirds, white-throated sparrows, red-eyed vireos, American woodcocks. I planned to go every morning before school, around 6:15. Leaving home at 5:45.”

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“Are you sure?” Nikita asks. “I spent several nights in my brother’s office. No red-eyed birdie ever crashed into the window.”

“Yeah, but consider the number of windows, man¹... Rebecca wanted to convince the companies to turn off the lights in the evening. She needed data to convince them. She told me of a similar program in Toronto. They send the dead bodies to a research lab. When they’re only injured, they go to a wildlife rehabilitation center, so maybe they can recuperate and fly off.”

“The towers killed so many birds,” Andrew remarks, “that two big steel birds came and avenged their comrades. The FBI will pick up their corpses, or what’s left of them, and send them to a lab, like Rebecca.”

Noah wonders whether his namesake’s Ark contained birds. Not so many birds can fly for a long time without landing. Pigeons and sparrows spend more time on the ground than in the air. They’d have to stay on the Ark. Others would land now and then to rest and peck. What about flightless birds? Ostriches. Walked all the way from South Africa. Kangaroos jumped from island to island.

Charlene, her sister Eleanore and their parents leave the studio and begin to walk uptown. It snows cinder flakes. Charlene sees people filming the World Trade Center cloud with video cameras. She imagines what they’re thinking: “Wow! A once-in a-lifetime event! We must get this on tape.” She’s too scared to turn back and look.

They try to avoid obvious targets. A boy with earphones says:

“The Empire State Building’s been hit.”

Charlene’s father:

“The radio also mentioned the White House and the Pentagon.”

“Look, Dad, the Empire State Building is still there. Some info is just not true.”

They run into Charlene’s math teacher. He lives in Connecticut.

“How are you going to go home?”

“Walk to Grand Central and try to find a train.”

“What happened in Stuyvesant?”

“Weren’t you there, Clarinet?”

“My mother picked me up.”

“They evacuated everybody in the end. It was rather messy. They told the students to just walk north. I don’t know whether it was such a good idea to leave the kids to themselves. You’re lucky your mother came.”

They reach the big Chelsea market.

“Let’s buy some food,” Charlene’s mother says. “We must eat. We still have a long day ahead of us.”

She buys bread. She stops in front of an Italian place.

“Do you have mozzarella?”

“Sorry, Signora. It not come in yet. It come everyday from Italy by airplane. Today is late, I not know why.”

“From Italy? I don’t think it will come in today.”

Charlene wonders whether her parents want to walk to Albany. Eleanore’s judicious intervention interrupts their trek.

¹ 21,800 per tower.

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“Look, Mom, Mary’s house.”

“Your trumpet teacher... Eleanore, you’re wonderful! If she’s there, we’ll be able to phone.”

“I could drink a glass of water, too.”

They spend the afternoon at Mary’s. They watch TV. For the first time, they see the plane slice into the tower like a knife into butter. And also for the second time, the third time, and so on to one thousand.

After the third time, Eleanore gets up and goes to the kitchen. Enough already.

Charlene wishes she had watched more of the real thing. Once in a lifetime indeed. A thousand times on TV—not the same.

Dana runs northwards, away from PS234. She’s still holding her purple magic marker. She turns around... Oh my God! The school has disappeared under a ten-story high coal-black cloud. Anna and several classes are still inside. A policeman pushed them back when the cloud came: “You’ll be safer there.”

After running for a few blocks, Dana sees some teachers she knows, each with a rump of a class—five kids at most. Cynthia has only one child left. By and by, all the teachers and pupils of the school gather into a large group.

“Are you okay?” they ask each other.

Dana finds it difficult to get a good grip on reality. What happened lies beyond the horizon of usual and possible events. The ghostly crowd flowing north resembles a bizarre burial procession. She tries to remember... In antiquity, the Greeks, or was it the Jews, used to cover themselves with ashes to mark their grief. All these people are crying. The dust in their eyes, Dana thinks. Some stop and vomit.

Cynthia still wants to hope.

“Maybe the second one is still there, but we can’t see it because of the smoke.”

“No, no,” Dana says. “I know how high it is.”

Cynthia’s son, the huge policeman, catches up with them.

“You’ve got to take the kids to PS41, on 11th Street.”

They cover the mile and a half to PS41 in more than one hour. The small ones are grumbling and whining.

“Am tired.”

“You walkin’ too fast, Sasha.”

“My new shoes, dey hurt!”

Several parents are waiting for them in front of PS41.

“They said it on radio: if you have children at PS234, you can get them at PS41.”

They settle in the school’s auditorium. More parents come. And also Anna and the missing teachers and children.

Dana is waiting in a long line to use a PS41 public phone. Anna takes her apart:

“Come to the office. There’s another phone.”

She calls her fiancé’s parents and says she’s okay. Then she calls her sister in Nashville. She hears her sister’s voice on the answering machine. Until then, Dana’s been working. She helped the teachers take care of the children, she made lists, she had to stay calm and be efficient. When she hears her sister’s voice, reality hits her. I’ve witnessed a terrible tragedy. It could have been much worse: gas mains exploding, flaming debris falling on the school and

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setting fire to it. She held fast in the middle of what was happening. When she thinks of what might have happened, she breaks down and cries.

She lives uptown. Her friend Maggie too. The school's psychologist gives them a lift.

"I wasn't working today. When I heard the news, I wanted to go to PS234 and help, but the subway was stopped already. They said you were relocating to PS41, so I took my car and came here."

He's taking along two other teachers, who live in Staten Island and can't go home. While the four women stay silent, he doesn't.

"The year is hardly beginning, but I guess I'll be pretty busy... I'll create support groups for kids, teachers and parents. I'll talk to Anna about it. Got to do that right away... I'll have group meetings and also one-to-one meetings, if people prefer it. So they can express what they feel. Tell me, Dana, you have someone at home?"

"Well... My fiancé is attending a symposium in Chicago. He's coming back on Friday."

"Then you don't go home. You shouldn't be alone tonight. Maggie, can you accommodate them? You should stay together."

Georgette's hairdressing salon is open. The receptionist has a good eye for faces: she recognizes this customer under her heavy plaster and soot make-up.

"Georgette! Are you all right?"

"Could be worse. May I use your phone?"

"Of course."

A woman is already talking on the phone. Two other women are telling the receptionist what happened to them:

"We work in the south tower, on the 42nd floor. We heard an explosion."

"Some of our colleagues were there in '93, when there was a bomb. They look out, they see flames, they shout: Let's get out of here!"

"They were afraid of being stuck in the elevators, so we walked downstairs."

"We're walking down. The public address system says: This tower is safe. You can go back to your office. Our colleagues: No way!"

"We got out just in time."

The woman who was on the phone hangs up.

"The second tower just came down," she says.

Georgette calls her husband.

"I am at the hairdresser's," she says.

"At the hairdresser's?"

"Not for a shampoo. Although it wouldn't hurt me to get one. I came to use their phone. The lines for the public phones are too long. Any news from Noah?"

"Not yet. If he's in the street, he can't find a public phone either. Don't worry."

"I'll try to go home."

She washes her face in the hairdresser's bathroom. She brushes her hair and her clothes. She takes off her shoes. Can I walk barefoot all the way to 78th Street? she wonders. That's four or five miles...

As she's walking through Greenwich Village, she sees more teenagers with backpacks.

"Hi there. Where do you go to school?"

"Stuyvesant."

"So it was evacuated?"

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“Yeah... If you want to know more about it, look at this guy over there at the phone: he’s one of the teachers.”

She waits until the teacher finishes his call. With his powdered hair, he resembles a young actor playing the part of an old man. He’s nervous. He looks right and left, as if to check the sky for more airplanes.

“All the students left the school. We didn’t know what to do. We told them to walk north as far as 23rd Street. We couldn’t help them. We were failing them as teachers and as adults. No one prepared us for this. We couldn’t answer their questions. How could we explain something that we didn’t understand ourselves? I felt so powerless...”

Georgette walks north on 7th Avenue. She passes the big intersection in front of Saint Vincent Hospital, between 11th and 12th Street. Ambulances and fire trucks are rushing in and out as if someone had pushed a fast-forward button. She questions a policeman directing traffic:

“Excuse me, officer...”

“Get out of the way!”

“Do you know if the subway is still out? What about buses?”

“Someone told me there are buses on 14th Street. Don’t stay here!”

She goes to 14th Street. She does see one hundred thousand downtown office workers waiting for a bus. Longest line in the world. It moves quite fast, actually. Herds of buses come and go. MTA employees are filling them to capacity. They push the people like Japanese subway attendants. Around 11:30, Georgette steps into a very crowded bus. She’s wedged next to two men who’ve just crossed the Sahara desert during a sandstorm—or so it seems when you see their suits.

“We work as telemarketers near the World Trade Center.”

“We call people and offer them fucking gifts.”

“If they accept to try a new kind of investment.”

“Not so new, in fact.”

“Today, the gift was frequent flyer miles!”

“We wonder if the winners will use their miles. They might not feel like flying, all of a sudden.”

“Tomorrow, we’ll offer free train miles!”

The bus is rushing up 10th Avenue. It doesn’t stop much. The passengers do not know where it’s going.

“I live in the Bronx. I’ll go to the end of the line. Then I’ll see what I do.”

“You can hitchhike today. People will pick you up.”

Just as the police boat drops Dwight on the New Jersey shore, a new geyser of dust and debris rises over Manhattan: the north tower is collapsing. He spent twenty minutes in the water.

He’s just a couple of blocks from the Wall Street Journal’s New Jersey office. He walks there barefoot, in his boxer shorts. The building is empty: evacuated. Dwight comes back to the pier. Emergency teams have turned the sidewalk outside the Datek Online company into a triage center. An ambulance guy gives Dwight a bed sheet, which he ties around his waist sarong-like. He asks the building’s guard for paper and a pen. His only thought: back to work!

He starts interviewing people in the triage center. The boats keep bringing out injured people. Lots of burns, broken bones. Hit by debris in surrounding buildings or in the streets

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when the towers collapsed. A man in a trader's jacket has a fractured femur. He is hurting so obviously that Dwight can't come close. I couldn't have been a doctor, he thinks. The back of a fireman's skull is crushed. He's still alive, but it doesn't look good.

Dwight interviews some firefighters.

"I am a reporter for the Wall Street Journal. What happened to you?"

They don't seem to mind his sarong, his bare feet, his ash-coated hair and eyebrows. Nothing can surprise them anymore.

"We come from Brooklyn. We saw the second plane fly low over our heads while we were still in Brooklyn."

"When we arrived near the towers, they asked us to pick up body parts in Liberty Street. That was the worst thing I've ever done. I hope never to see that again. When bodies fall from so high, the head and the limbs are torn away from the body..."

Mothers with dusty babies cross over from Battery Park City. The Datek security guard brings them water and food. He finds blue work pants for Dwight. He lets him go to an office with a phone. The Wall Street Journal moved to another New Jersey office. They haven't been able to inform everybody. An editor and several reporters are missing.

A fireman is calling his mother:

"My whole company was killed. I was out to get a crowbar in the truck when the tower fell..."

He is carrying his helmet in his hand. He is crying.

"I'll never put that helmet on again, Mom. For me, it's over..."

Later, Dwight sees him with his helmet on, embarking on the boat to go back.

Two other journalists—New York Times, Washington Post—enter the office. They wear clean suits. Dwight feels foolish in his dirty shirt, work pants, bare feet.

"I was in Philadelphia," the Washington Post guy says. "When I heard the news on the radio, I jumped into my car and came straight here."

They say that planes have hit the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department. The whole country is under attack.

Dwight stays there until evening. A colleague who lives in New Jersey lets him spend the night at her place.

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At 10:07, a few minutes after the south tower's collapse, police helicopters predict the north tower will follow:

"About fifteen floors down from the top, it looks like it's glowing red... This second building doesn't have much longer to go. I would evacuate all people within the area."

Police officers who linger in the tower or nearby escape quickly.

More than one hundred firefighters died when the south tower collapsed. At least one hundred and twenty more will die in the north tower. No evacuation order will reach them. They don't even know that the other tower fell. They climb to their fate in windowless staircases.

The commanders try to call their men back, but the Fire Department's radio system works erratically in the towers. The inner steel columns, or the outer steel palisade, block the signals' transmission. This became obvious in 1993. When the World Trade Center was bombed, the commanders had to use messengers to communicate with their men. The Fire Department bought a new "digital" system using higher frequencies. They received it in January 2001 and sent it back in March, since it didn't work any better than the antique "analog" system.

The firefighters don't understand why the Department doesn't buy the same radios as the cops, who are quite satisfied with their system. "It's a no-brainer: get us what they're using", says a firefighter quoted by the New York Times. Actually, the police's system is designed for use in the streets and cars. Inside buildings, it's not much better than the Fire Department's. It would make sense to give the cops and the firefighters the same radios, though: at least, their commanders could talk to each other.

After the 1993 explosion, the city created an Office of Emergency Management. It spent \$25 million to co-ordinate emergency response. It conducted a "theoretical" alert by gathering some police officers and firefighters around a table, but no real-life emergency drill. On September 11, the Fire Department and the police establish command posts three blocks apart.

According to evaluation commissions mandated after the attacks, the police lacks a well-defined command structure, so that police officers are often left to themselves. Superior officers take personal risks instead of commanding their men. The police does use technology well, however. Most fire chiefs run their companies like families. In fact, Fire Department jobs run in families. Some chiefs do not understand their responsibilities, don't know how to lead a team, have no idea that you might seek information or try to plan before taking a decision. The Fire Department has always resisted progress. Firefighters refused horse-drawn carts because they were used to pulling the carts by hand. Then they wanted to keep their horses when motor engines appeared. Their radios work neither in towers nor in tunnels and subway.

When the first plane dived into the north tower, more than one thousand firefighters rushed downtown in complete disorder. Most came with their company. Others were not in service. They took the subway, buses, taxis—or even got rides on police cars. They entered the towers and climbed the stairs on their own. Out of

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343 dead firefighters, 60 were off-duty. The confusion was so great that even on-duty companies bypassed the command post.

Thus, around 10:15, while the north tower is still standing, nobody knows how many firefighters are inside, where they are or how to reach them.

Some clever commanders didn't even consider fighting such a fire.

"No need to carry your heavy equipment," they told their men. "Find working elevators, go as high as you can and help with the evacuation."

A company of firefighters is exploring the north tower to check that all offices are empty. They see the other tower go. The commander shouts:

"Mayday! Mayday! We're leaving..."

He convinces ascending companies to turn back. He sees exhausted firemen on the 19th floor. They sit here and there, their backs to the cubicle partitions.

Mayday ! Mayday !

"Yeah, they say. We're coming..."

"Give us five more minutes, guys."

One of them shows the dust ghouls that rise where the other tower used to:

"We can't escape. It's all over..."

At 10:23, Jan Demczur and his squeegee boys step out of the north tower. One minute later, the transformers that let power into the tower decide to give up.

"The end is nigh," the transformers say. "We might as well unplug the big booby."

When the light in his elevator fades and dies, Chris Young the temp worker doesn't feel like singing anymore. He tries to open the door once again. Hey, it works! The electric lock is powerless. *To dream the impossible dream...* Chris then discovers he's spent one hundred minutes half a foot from the ground.

He might as well have taken an intergalactic elevator to another planet. When he entered the cabin, the first attack hadn't taken place yet. Having time-traveled over a mere two-hour gap, he can't find any rational explanation for the fantastic scene he discovers: a deserted lobby soaked in a strange gray fog, a plaza covered with debris, a burning fire truck, shadows that look vaguely like human beings. How could he guess that a quixotic Arab, willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause, has succeeded in tilting the two giant windmills?

At 10:28, the sixteen Port Authority employees who stayed in their office because nobody told them to go, then left it much too late—Vivienne Groeniz, her friend Rosa Lopez, Pasquale Buzzelli the engineer and others—have reached the 12th floor. They hear a train rushing toward them at 200 mph. A train in a staircase? Pasquale Buzzelli knows what it means: In five seconds, I'll be dead. Then he wakes up. He doesn't remember falling asleep. Where am I? This happens, sometimes. You need to rack your brains for a few seconds, in the morning, before you remember how you came to be in that particular bed or room. But he just can't match his new surroundings to his last memories. He had been inching down toward death, step after similar step, for ages—and now, he sees a luminous blue sky above him. This must be paradise, he thinks. An angel will come and greet me. He feels a sharp pain above his foot. You're alive, man, the pain says. I broke my ankle, he

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thinks. I fell in the stairs and passed out... He is sitting on a huge mountain of rubble. What is this place? he wonders. I must try to regain my wits...

Vivienne doesn't see the sky. She is sandwiched between two concrete slabs in a pitch-black space. She can move neither her right leg nor her head. She hears a man's voice: "Help! Help!" After a while, the voice dies down.

Soccer shoes with cleats

11:30. Nikita, Laura, Lex and Andrew leave Noah at the corner of 10th Street and West Street.

“I’ll come and replace you in five minutes,” Andrew says. “Don’t miss Tierney.”

“Or Miranda,” Lex adds.

“I’m sure I’ll see others, too,” Noah says.

Lex loves Andrew’s apartment. If this place doesn’t incite you to study architecture, I don’t know what will. The partitions stop two feet under the ceiling, so light can flow through. Is this a great idea or what? The flashy colors are fun. I just wonder whether they wouldn’t get on my nerves, after a while...

Alfreda is relieved to have her two sons at home.

“I was near the school... A helicopter had landed... I thought they wouldn’t let me in...”

“I worried for you, Mom. An airplane part might have fallen on your office.”

“A landing gear fell right under our nose. In the parking, you know, where the small church is. We were at a loss what to do, but the security people in the building saved our lives: they ordered us to evacuate immediately.”

“It took Reiter hours, but in the end he let us go.”

“You can go and wash in the bathroom. You must be thirsty. I’ve got some Coke.”

“I’ll replace Noah at his lookout. He is trying to intercept others we may have missed. He also worries for his mother.”

Laura drops a message on her mother’s answering machine. Nikita talks to his parents. Lex calls his mother.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Alex?”

She begins to cry.

“I’m okay. I am at Andrew’s place in the Village. I’ll call you back later.”

He hangs up. Weird, he thinks. I’d thought talking to her would comfort me... He knows what would comfort him: Miranda. An intense desire to hold Miranda in his arms, to kiss Miranda, overwhelms him.

“You all called your parents?” Alfreda asks. “You know what I’ll do? Order pizza for everybody.”

Someone rings the street door buzzer. Lex starts. Miranda! He looks at the monitor linked to the camera near the door. Bah, it’s Noah... He opens the door. One minute later, the buzzer rings again. He starts again. He looks at the screen. Hurrah! Miranda!

He rushes to the stairs and jumps down the three stories. He takes her into his arms, he covers her with kisses. Marvelous Miranda! She is with Tierney, Andrew’s girlfriend.

“Is he up there?” she asks.

“No, he went back to West Street to look for you.”

“They’re talking of a gas leak again. We have to go further north.”

“Let’s tell the others.”

They get into the elevator to go back up.

While Lex was kissing Miranda, the building’s superintendant called Alfreda: gas alert—everybody must leave. To season a well-filled day, a silly sitcom act: Alfreda, her

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younger son Peter, Laura, Noah and Nikita walk downstairs while Lex, Miranda and Tierney are going up in the elevator.

Andrew, having found three Stuyvesant students on West Street, brings these stray sheep to his home. He meets his mother and his pals in the street. They are talking with a pizza delivery girl.

“The building is evacuated. Gas leak. We’re going to eat our pizzas near the Hudson.”

Alex, Miranda and Tierney knock at the apartment’s door. Can you believe this? No one answers.

“Maybe they haven’t heard. Knock again...”

“There’s no noise at all. They’ve gone. Somebody else must’ve told them about the gas leak.”

“We would have seen them.”

“They were in the stairs while we were going up in the elevator.”

“Then you come to my place,” Tierney suggests.

“On 76th Street?”

“Three small miles. One hour, one hour and a half.”

“Houston, we have a problem: I’ve left my bag and my shoes in the apartment.”

“Geez, Lex, you’re barefoot! I hadn’t even noticed. You know what you should do: just imagine you’re a caveman or a bushman, whatever.”

They walk north. All the parked cars seem to be blaring news. Lex hears something amazing.

“Both towers collapsed?”

“The second one just as we were leaving school,” Miranda says.

“They were so tall and strong. I thought they’d stand up forever...”

“You’ll be able to rebuild them.”

“I won’t be an architect before another ten years. I’d rather design architecture on a human scale—small houses where families would live happily ever after.”

People in the street are talking together, commenting what they hear on the radio, spreading rumors. More planes are on the way. The island of Manhattan is cut from the world. President Bush has vanished. Lex is beginning to feel scared. Is the attack over, or just beginning? What else will happen? He’s read, or seen in the movies... A whole city burns, several hundred thousand people die. Maybe this is my last day on earth... The main thing, actually, is that his feet are killing him.

They find a bus stop on 14th Street.

“Hey, you guys, have you ever seen such a line?”

“Look, the buses are lined up too. This doesn’t make sense. With a better organization, people would fill all the buses at once.”

In the bus, they’re pressed like French fries in a paper cone. I dreamt of being close to Miranda, Lex thinks, so I shouldn’t complain. If only this other guy didn’t stick his elbow into my back! He can hardly breathe. He feels unwell. This is probably what they call claustrophobia, he thinks.

“Girls, I’ve got to get off. I can’t stand it anymore.”

They get off at 46th Street. One mile and a half more. They find a small shoe store—Chinese guys watching TV.

“Excuse me. I need some shoes. Do you have anything under ten dollars?”

“Ten dolla? Not possible. Also, yo feet too big. I’ll see what have...”

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He brings back some soccer shoes with cleats.

“All I have. Ten dolla.”

“Okay, I’ll take them.”

After half a mile, Lex’s feet have turned into mash. He throws his brand new shoes away and goes on barefoot. Downtown, people were running around, policemen were shouting, soldiers carried mean-looking arms. In the Upper West Side, life as usual. When he looks at the people carrying on with their everyday activities, Lex can’t help seeing at the same time chaos and destruction. I’ve witnessed one of the worst terrorist attacks ever, he thinks.

A crowd of Stuy students welcomes them in Tierney’s apartment.

“Here she is,” they shout. “At last!”

“Where do these guys come from?” Lex asks.

“I told everybody they could go to my place. When we were walking along the river.”

They settle in the apartment. After a general kissing and hugging session, Tierney and Lex go out to buy pizza, potato chips and Coke. Then Lex calls his mother again.

“... So I asked them: What do you have for ten dollars? I bought soccer shoes with cleats, but they hurt even more than barefoot... In this neighborhood, you’d be amazed, it is as if nothing had happened...”

“I’d like you to come home.”

“Listen, Mom, it might be easier for me to stay here. Everyone’s here.”

“I really want you to come home. I’m serious.”

“How would I get to Brooklyn? The entire subway system is stopped. They also closed the bridges. I have to wait an hour or two, at least.”

He feels quite safe with his friends. As more arrive, it gets even better. They’ve known each other for a long time. Now that they’ve gone through this together, they feel still closer. Today, Lex realized that big buildings do not last forever. Their friendship will not collapse, though. It will last as long as they want.

Georgette gets off the bus at 74th Street. There is quite a crowd in Fairway, as usual. People buy fruit, vegetables, fish, date-and-nut rye bread. They try clothes at Gap. They eat and talk in the outdoor restaurants.

Nobody home. 12:30. She calls Max’s medical office, but she gets the answering service. At this time, he picks up Alexa at school. No message from Noah.

Gosh, Georgette thinks, I should have thought about it earlier: Andrew, his friend who lives in the Village.

“Hello, Andrew?”

“His brother.”

“This is Georgette. Tell me, would Noah be at your place, by any chance?”

“Sure. You want to talk to him? Noah! Your mother on the phone!”

“Noah? Oh, I’m so glad I’ve found you at last.”

“Are you okay, Mom? Where are you?”

“At home.”

“I was worried. Did they evacuate the Wall Street Journal?”

“I didn’t even have the time to get there.”

“I came to Andrew’s place to call you or call Dad, but there was a gas alert so we went out again. I just came back...”

As soon as Noah hangs up, Andrew calls Tierney, his girlfriend.

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“So where were you? I’ve been looking for you for hours...”

“Me? I was at your place! Lex told us you were playing traffic cop on West Street.”

“What’s the noise? You have company over there?”

“About twenty people.”

“I have only seven.”

“We win on points. You all come here.”

“Okay.”

“Wait, I’ve got a message from Lex. Can you bring his shoes? Gray Nike... You’ll know them from their smell!”

On the way back to the room where his friends are gathered, Andrew meets his mother. She is laughing.

“What’s so funny, Mom?”

“Listen to this... When he heard of a gas leak, the super panicked: he closed a sealed valve that only firefighters are allowed to touch. Now the gas company refuses to let us have gas. They say technicians must inspect the whole building’s installation. It will take six weeks.”

“No gas before six weeks?”

“We’ll eat cold food, my dear. It will cost 45,000 dollars, too.”

Noah and Nikita are watching TV. The plane dives into the building like a seagull into the ocean, Noah thinks. It doesn’t find any fish, so it dives again. And again, and again, and again. They can show it as many time as they want, Nikita thinks, I still can’t believe it. Outside, a heavy smoke floats in front of the windows.

“Are you coming, you guys?” Andrew asks. “We’re going to Tierney’s place.”

Nikita shakes his head.

“They say most subway lines are working again. I’ll go back to Brooklyn.”

Andrew, Noah, Laura and two of the stray sheep walk uptown. The third sheep, Anita, broke her big toe on a tennis court. Her friends push her in a shopping cart all the way to 76th Street. A two-hour trek.

There are police barriers in the neighborhood of the Empire State Building. Farther north, they enter a parallel universe where nothing happened.

In Tierney’s apartment, they collapse in front of the TV set. Exhausted. Mute. Laura can’t get the cogs of her mind to turn properly. So the towers really fell down? People really died?

She finds a subway to Brooklyn. The loudspeakers in the subway car: “This train will be skipping some stops because of incidents today.”

Sometimes, a person rambles and preaches in the subway: “I’ve been saved...” This time, a woman is screaming:

“I saw the tower spew people out of its mouth, and I saw the people cast into the bottomless pit, and they broke to shivers like the vessels of a potter... I saw others burn in the great furnace, choke in clouds under a darkened sky... Innocents sacrificed and massacred... The time is at hand. If any man have an ear, let him hear! Repent, for the day of wrath has come. Pray for your souls!”

Her father is waiting for her at home.

“I was quite worried. On TV, a great smoke cloud covered the lower part of Manhattan. Then I heard they had evacuated Stuyvesant. I wondered where you were. I wanted to walk into Manhattan to find you.”

“Find me in the middle of five million people? That’s crazy.”

Like the firefighters and the cops: this thing unhinged his mind, she thinks.

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“I didn’t know what to do. I was afraid... You often went to Borders, say when a class was canceled. You might have been there. You won’t go anymore, now.”

“Why won’t I go anymore?”

“It’s all gone. The mall is gone.”

“The mall is gone? Are you sure?”

“Laura, Borders is flattened under millions of tons of rubble now.”

She’s beginning to think that something happened for real. Not in the movies. Something has vanished from her own life. She’ll never be able to browse again. They’ve destroyed my bookstore.

Charlene and Eleanore, the two sisters, are resting with their parents in the apartment of Mary, Eleanore’s trumpet teacher. Mary and Charlene’s mother decide to donate blood at St Vincent Hospital. They come back one hour later.

“They don’t want our blood. Too many volunteers already. What they lack is injured people. The towers have been reduced to powder and the people too.”

In the evening, the girls and their parents try to go home in Tribeca. The whole neighborhood is closed. They have to convince the police officers to let them pass. At the second police barricade, Eleanore begins to cry:

“I see smoke. I don’t want to go there. It’s burning...”

They turn back. Charlene comforts her sister.

“I’ll call Lesley’s parents,” their father says. “I’m sure they’ll let us stay at their place for the night.”

Lesley is Charlene’s friend at Stuyvesant. Besides, Charlene’s parents designed a brochure for Lesley’s father. They spend the night there. They sleep on cushions on the floor. Before that, Lesley’s father prepares a nice meal. They play gin rummy for prizes. Eleanore wins every time.

Lesley’s mother says good night to Eleanore and kisses her.

“You’re an angel,” Eleanore says before falling asleep.

On the next day, Charlene and her father try to go through the police barriers again. Charlene’s father must explain where they live every time.

“We just need to get some clothes, our toothbrushes and so on. Friends have invited us to stay with them in Brooklyn until we can go back home.”

Some police officers are full of goodwill and understanding, others aren’t.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Charlene complains to her father. “We have to do this useless detour. These two cops were plain stupid.”

“Let’s say rigid.”

A thick layer of fake snow covers the parked cars, as if an artificial winter was needed for the shooting of a film. The air is turning into a dense pea soup. They try to find gas masks. People who have installed a table with food for emergency workers give them napkins, which they use as masks. They walk slowly. Strange to see tanks in my street, Charlene thinks. I hope all these soldiers with their machine guns do not mistake us for terrorists in the fog.

There is no electricity in their building. They climb twenty stories in the dark. Charlene’s father is walking ahead. Charlene holds the handrail, touches the wall. I would hate to be blind, she thinks. Breathing becomes harder. She is choking.

“Dad, wait for me!”

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They had left the apartment's windows open, because of the nice weather on Tuesday. A pleasant surprise:

"I'd thought there would be more dust inside. Can you wash your paintings, Dad?"

"Sure. It's oil painting. The cloud was too heavy to come up this high, or maybe the wind was blowing towards Brooklyn."

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At first, the World Trade Center included four small buildings around the twin towers: WTC 3 to 6. A fifty-story skyscraper, WTC 7, rose later to the North of the original perimeter. The fall of the towers destroyed the four small buildings. More than thirty firefighters died in the Marriott Hotel (WTC 3). Hit by flaming debris, WTC 7 catches fire and burns for hours. Towards the end of the afternoon, it crumbles like the towers.

In her concrete tomb, Vivienne Groeniz prays God.

“O Lord, spare the life of your servant. Give me the strength to stand this trial, O Lord. Help me get my head out of this vise... Ah, at last... Thank you, Lord. Forgive me for living in sin, Lord. I’ll marry Bob. I’ll go to church every Sunday.”

She feels a kind of mattress or sofa next to her. It’s soft, it’s covered with leather... A fireman’s corpse.

The City authorities put one of three command posts in Stuyvesant High School. The kitchen prepares one thousand meals a day for firefighters and rescue workers. Classrooms are turned into dormitories. The rescue workers, having seen too much, scream in their sleep. The school cafeteria and maintenance personnel work day and night and sleep there too. A small hospital is ready to treat injuries. The medical personnel doesn’t see any injury, but is kept busy around the clock washing ash-filled eyes.

Twenty survivors only are found in the ruins of the World Trade Center. Fourteen firefighters survive in the reinforced stairwells that rose in the middle of the six-story high lobby. Two policemen are found under debris between the two towers, three persons (one of whom is Pasquale Buzzelli) on top of the mountain that replaced the World Trade Center.

Twenty-seven hours after the collapse of the north tower, rescue workers digging the rubble see the reflecting bands of a firefighter’s jacket. As they come closer, they hear a voice:

“Hey, I’m here, I’m right here!”

“Do you see my light?”

“I see nothing.”

“Try to bang... We’ll follow the noise.”

They remove steel beams and concrete slabs very carefully. A hand rises through an opening. A rescuer grabs it. After twenty minutes, they pull Vivienne Groeniz out of her coffin.

“Oh God, thank you!” she says.

The rescue workers pull out 291 intact corpses from the tumulus. One of them wears a red scarf on his face. Having read the interviews of the 78th floor’s survivors, a woman calls the newspapers:

“He’s my son. His name is Welles Crowther. He was a trader for the Sandler O’Neill bank, on the 104th floor. He always had a red bandana in his pocket. He was twenty-four.”

Firefighter cute

For a week, the students of Stuyvesant do not go to school.

Lex doodles on pieces of paper. We might build more or less identical towers, but without the top stories. The first one would stop at the 94th floor, the second one at the 78th. Broken columns up there would be a reminder of the tragedy, like the skeleton of that building in Hiroshima.

No. A stupid idea. Better consider the towers' removal an opportunity to improve the neighborhood. When they built the World Trade Center, they fudged the traditional grid of Manhattan streets. They cut Greenwich Street, Fulton Street, Cortlandt Street. It would be nice to have the streets back. Then we'd build smaller towers, but we'd try to think of them as monuments. Instead of flat inert boxes, something more ornate: spires, prisms, helicoids. He draws two pairs of towers that rise into crossed arches to evoke hope and prayer.

He would enjoy his lazy hours at home a lot more if his mother wasn't whining all the time. Giant tears fall on the dresses she sews for the great ball in Lilliput.

"Manhattan was hidden under an atomic mushroom. I was afraid Stuyvesant had been destroyed."

"Mom, you've told me a thousand times."

Now and then, she whispers: "All right, from now on I'll stop crying," but then she cries even more. Lex goes to Miranda's every day. They call Andrew:

"Andrew? This is Lex. What's doing, man?"

"Lots of dust here."

"Seems they want to send us to another high school in Manhattan."

"I've heard Brooklyn Tech."

"Swell. I could go on my bike."

"My mother knows someone in the PTA. Brooklyn Tech doesn't have room for three thousand new students, so they're planning alternate hours or something."

"Have you seen any of the guys?"

"I just talked to Tierney. She suggests a picnic in Central Park tomorrow. Considering the pleasant weather."

"Sure. Miranda says okay too."

"You call Laura and Anita, I'll call Noah and Nik."

Nikita hesitates.

"I thought I'd take advantage of these free days to prepare my project for the Intel Science Talent Search. I must also help Igor install new servers in our garage."

"He isn't too depressed?"

"He's fine. He's got a goal. He has no choice. His clients need him. As for me, I'm okay as long as I help him, but when I want to work on the Intel project I just can't concentrate. I'm not sure what I want to do with my life. I mean, whether I get the Intel scholarship or not, what's the big difference?"

"The best thing you can do with your life is come to the picnic. It will clear your mind. We're all facing the same predicament. These events force us to reconsider everything..."

People can't eat pizza all the time, so they order Chinese food delivered on the corner of 72nd Street and Central Park West. Laura brings her world-famous cheesecake, of course.

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“Do you know what I’ve seen on TV?” Tierney asks. “My bike! They were showing the towers’ neighborhood. The reporter was in front of Stuy: *And here is a student’s bike, still hooked to the railing, covered with dust...* I’ll have to go and get it.”

“So you’re walking again, Anita? You looked like a princess in your shopping coach.”

“I can still feel the grill marks on my ass.”

“Show us, show us!”

“You remember the small Chinese deli in the World Trade Center mall? It was tastier than this.”

“You know what I liked? The free coffee at Godiva.”

“There was free coffee at Godiva? Why didn’t anybody tell me?”

“Sephora was nice. No free coffee, but you could try their makeup and perfumes.”

“I wasted my youth reading books in Borders. I had my private piece of carpet between the sci-fi and the anime departments. If I’d known, I would have stolen more of them.”

“There’s a stupid rumor on the Internet: that you should avoid shopping centers around Halloween. Supposedly, the terrorists have stolen hundreds of trucks, which they’ll fill with explosives and crash into malls.”

“Yeah, I saw it too. Like, this girl went out with an Arab guy and he vanished, but he left her a message: *Don’t fly on September 11 and avoid supermarkets on Halloween.*”

“So is it true or not?”

“It’s just a rumor. Otherwise, the FBI would be talking to that girl.”

“If you want to check, there’s a site with all the rumors. The one I prefer is this guy on top of the tower. He is a surfing champion. When the tower begins to collapse, he grabs a wooden board and surfs on the wave of debris. He ends safe and sound on top the rubble hill.”

“He could still surf to the bottom of the hill.”

“There’s a Nostradamus site, too. He predicted the whole thing, you bet. *Two proud castles on the shore will turn into sand when the Legions of the Night launch a fiery storm.*”

“Hey, Lex, you never told us why you’d left your shoes in Andrew’s apartment.”

“They were covered with soot, so I took them off when I came in. When Miranda and Tierney rang, I wanted to put them on, but, hmm, I couldn’t untie the shoelaces...”

“You mean tie the laces.”

“No, no. I took the shoes off without untying the knots. I’ve always found it difficult to tie and untie shoelaces. I pull the wrong end and I get stuck. So I have to undo the knots when I want to put the shoes on again.”

“This is logical, for a madman.”

“Your feet are too far from your head. All the basketball players have assistants who tie their shoelaces.”

“If human beings go on growing up, they’ll need a second brain, like the dinosaurs.”

“In their ass?”

They notice a wide smile on Nikita’s face.

“You find this funny, Nik?”

“Been working on an idea for Intel. There is a knot theory. A branch of topology. Some knots come loose when you pull and some tighten when you pull...”

“My shoelaces come loose even when I don’t pull.”

“That’s not a knot, that’s a link.”

“Not a knot?”

“In topology, a knot is a one-strand loop. When you have two strands, it is a link.”

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“A shoelace is only one strand, though.”

“Mathematical shoelaces are different from real-life shoelaces.”

“Hey, Nik, as a knot expert, you should come to my room and untangle my computer cables!”

At the end of the week, they go to Brooklyn Tech. They work in two shifts—the Brooklyn Tech students from 7:15 am to 1:15 PM, the Stuyvesant students from 1:30 to 6:26. The class period is lowered from 42 minutes to 37 for Brooklyn Tech, from 40 to 30, then to 26 for Stuyvesant. Good thing I got a precise watch, Nikita thinks.

“We’re more than pleased to welcome you,” the principal of Brooklyn Tech says.

In his speech, the president of the Brooklyn Tech Student Union cautions Stuyvesant students against intolerance:

“Any harassment that is shown to be religiously or ethnically based will be severely punished.”

30 out of 3,000 Stuy students are Moslem.

These Brooklyn Tech people are crazy. They call their classes 2W37 for second floor, west wing, number 37. They have separate staircases for going up and coming down.

On October 9, Stuyvesant reopens for business. The firefighters and demolition workers have moved to other locations, closer to Ground Zero. Reiter changes the rules: the students can’t go out at lunch time anymore. Their favorite restaurants and delis have vanished, anyway.

Two City sanitation specialists wearing orange jackets interrupt classes every other day to test air quality. They use a strange gizmo with a keypad and a tube. Some kind of chromatograph, maybe. They are mismatched in a Laurel and Hardy way. For Halloween, students dress like them and pretend to test the air quality.

A psychologist comes into the classroom.

“I understand you’re going through a tough time right now. You may need support. If anybody has any issues that they’d like to discuss with me, I’ll be in my office.”

Nobody goes.

New expressions appear in the students’ language. For a handsome boy: *He is firefighter cute*. For a messy room: *This is really ground zero*. For something that’s quite out of fashion: *This is so September ten*.

The PS234 pupils spend ten days in PS41. The building is smaller than PS234. There’s one chair for three kids!

Mr Brahms and the PTA keep very busy. First they go back to PS234 and pick up class pets—and also, teachers’ bags with wallets, etc. Then they find an empty school, Saint Bernard. They clean it, put new floors and new walls, paint it, get famous artists to come and decorate it. They receive donations from all over the world: brand new furniture, books, pictures, computers.

Cleaning PS234 takes much longer than Stuyvesant. The PTA doesn’t accept the City’s clean bill of health. It brings in its own experts to check that no asbestos dust has found its way into the building. The kids move back to their school in February, 2002.

Dana teaches a simple art course: color and design. Now and then, she gives her students some free time: “Just draw what you want.” They create images of the towers on fire. Or they

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show the towers the way they were, but they add big American flags on the roof. A girl covers a page with black paint:

“There will be a nuclear war, then there will be nothing left.”

Alfreda receives an envelope with her sons' pictures. The slides she had dropped in the mailbox... The mailman must have picked them up a few minutes before the disaster.

When the south tower collapsed, a piece of the façade fell on 90 West Street. The metal was hot enough to set fire to the building. Its structure stood, but the furniture, computers and papers in the offices burned. Most of the files for current architecture projects were backed up in the computers of clients and engineers, but three months worth of work in progress was lost nevertheless, as well as archives, accounting or personnel files, etc. A partner lost sketches made by his father and several original Le Corbusier drawings.

Weeks after September 11, rescue workers still find airplane parts and body parts in the offices. Rehabilitation will take years. Some projects for replacing the World Trade Center recommend that 90 West Street be torn down.

Architects all over New York lend offices and computers for Alfreda and her colleagues. Within two months, they all move to new offices very close to Alfreda's home. The place was vacated by a web design company that went under when the dot-com bubble burst. This means state-of-the-art wiring, of course. Actually, the web designers had replaced architects, but kept their special tables and furniture, so in fact the new office marks an improvement over the old one.

Two fools went back to 90 West Street although they knew the building was being evacuated. Forgot their Palm Pilot. Both perished in the fire.

Georgette works at home. She has to restart most of her jobs from scratch. She's never worked so much. Late at night, seven days a week. After about three weeks, the Wall Street Journal moves to a new location in Soho.

The original building didn't burn, but it was pelted by debris and gulped lots of dust with a high asbestos content. Management tells the journalists they'll be able to move back in one year. This makes Georgette rather nervous.

An indistinct crowd keeps running in her nightmares to flee a terrible danger.

Dwight misses the towers. He didn't like them, though. Like some spouses: when one of them dies, the other one misses him or her even if they hated each other. Dwight found them so ugly, especially when seen at close range. Their heavy seventies style didn't deserve to be called architecture. Yeah, but he spent more time there than anywhere else. Most of his spare time. He ate lunch in the shopping center's restaurants, had breakfast meetings with Wall Street people in the Marriott hotel, read books in Borders. He walked through every day. There was a subway exit right in the mall. Going across underground kept you warm in winter and cool in summer.

They were so massive. Today, the Bankers Trust building and the other ones have become skyscrapers again. When the towers rose in their midst, they looked like midgets courting two giants.

Dwight's next-door neighbor dries her wash on a clothesline in her backyard. A shirt flaps in the wind. Dwight shivers. He sees people falling, their jackets flapping in the air. At first, you thought they were just more debris... In disaster movies, people fall in a kind of limp and

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flabby manner. Dummies. You knew it wasn't a movie because the dummies were flailing their limbs.

Laura lives near Kennedy airport. For several days, airplanes do not fly over her home anymore. When the first plane roars above, she jumps. Her heart jumps even higher. It is beating much too fast, she feels.

Lex just doesn't think about September 11. While his mother has insomnia and must take pills, he sleeps like a baby.

But then, in mid-October, he has a nightmare. He sees the World Trade Center. He walks into the mall with his friends. He looks at stuff in the stores, stops for a free coffee at Godiva, reads books in Borders. Suddenly, a plane hits the tower. His friends panic and flee, but Lex doesn't know what to do. He stands there, paralyzed, while the tower falls on him. He wakes up, drenched with sweat. A sharp pain grips one half of his head. He's never known such pain. He feels he is being punished, but he doesn't understand why.

Charlene has always loved to look out of the window. From the twentieth floor, you see most of downtown Manhattan. The towers rose at the end of Greenwich Street, half a mile away. On foggy or rainy days, you didn't see them anymore. Charlene and Eleanore used to joke:

"The towers have vanished."

They would always come back, of course.

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Nobody foresaw the World Trade Center's collapse. Not the engineers; not the architects; not the firefighters, who thought they could climb inside the towers' guts for hours, as they did in 1993; not even the terrorists.

Battalions of engineers wearing gray suits and striped neckties are preparing reports for the Government or insurance companies. Some commissions also include one or two women in gray suits.

Veterans who belonged to the towers' construction team come out of retirement to help.

"We had planned for a plane. Even a Boeing. I remember we studied the Boeing 707. This was the first jet plane carrying passengers."

"A beautiful machine. Air Force One was a Boeing 707 for at least twenty years."

"They shouldn't have collapsed."

"Maybe they put bombs at well-chosen locations. Like pre-set explosives when they want to tear down old tenement buildings."

"You know who called me the other day? Loizeaux!"

"The demolition guy?"

"He pretends he phoned the Fire Department at 9:05 to tell them the towers would fall down by themselves, starting with the south one."

"Is the call recorded? Can he prove it?"

"He called 911, but the number was always busy."

"Now everybody says: I knew they'd crumble. Predicting events while looking at them in a rear-view mirror is a simple exercise. I heard a man on radio, a self-described engineer. According to that fellow, all the engineers in the land understood right away that they'd fall down. As for me, I still thought they were supposed to resist a Boeing."

"Tell you what you expected would happen with your Boeing. The same thing as in 1945, when a B-25 bomber broke its nose on the Empire State Building. Fourteen dead. The old war-horse was lost in the fog, looking for an airport. A plane flying that low, especially while on an approach to landing, doesn't move very fast. 200 mph at most. Whereas the terrorists, instead of slowing down, were trying to accelerate."

"You're right. We planned for an accident, not an attack."

"We computed the speeds recorded by video cameras: 470 and 586 mph. The automatic signal must have been blinking and screeching in the cockpit: *Overspeed, overspeed! You're flying too fast for this altitude!* With the roaring reactors and the air pressure, I bet it was terribly noisy inside."

"Okay, so you had two speedy planes. Their impact didn't kill the towers, though. They held, then they melted. I can't figure it out yet. I studied a plane crash in Denver some years ago. Ten thousand gallons of kerosene burn in four minutes. Not such a big deal."

"Allow me... I studied this precisely. The combustion of kerosene brings steel to maybe 1,500°. This is enough to soften some columns, but not to destroy the whole structure. If the towers had been empty, they'd still be standing."

"I see what you mean. They burned!"

"Exactly. They were not empty. They contained thousands of tons of fuel."

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“Of course... Carpeting, furniture, computers...”

“And above all... Can you guess what burned?”

“Holy shit! Paper!”

“Millions of pages. Filed, sorted, stapled, pressed in folders. Entire forests. The planes set fire to the lot like giant matches. My calculations show the combustion of paper heated the steel columns to 2,000°. At this temperature, they’re about as rigid as marshmallows.”

“These paper pages you’re talking about were covered with words written by human beings, some of whom burned too. Terrorists who burn paper and people belong to a long line. Books were burned in Alexandria, in Rome, in Berlin, and it’s not over.”

“Don’t forget Dresden and Hiroshima.”

“Gentlemen, please. We’ve not been asked to write a report about the political underpinnings of the towers’ destruction. Stockrise, you heated and stressed steel beams in your lab. Everybody wonders why the second tower fell first. Have you found anything about that?”

“It’s obvious. It got hit lower. Dozens of columns belonging to the inner and outer structure were sectioned around the 80th floor. The unbroken ones must carry thirty floors, weighing at least two hundred thousand tons. The load is even greater if you consider that the heat is softening the columns. The north tower columns must carry only fifteen floors, or one hundred thousand tons.”

“You’re a joker, Stockrise. Your explanation is even weaker than one of your heated columns.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Columns are thicker on the 80th floor than on the 96th. They are very thick at the bottom of the towers and they get thinner towards the top, since they carry a diminishing mass. The inner columns are as thick as redwood trunks when they start: at least five feet. The skin of the outer box-columns is four-inches thick at the bottom, a fourth of an inch at the top. At every level, even if columns are missing, the remaining ones can carry the floors above them.”

“So what’s *your* explanation, wise guy?”

“The speed, of course! This is the decisive factor. The second plane flies at 586 mph instead of 470. If you square this to apply $E = 1/2 mv^2$, you’ll find that the kinetic energy grows up 57%. If the first plane sectioned say one third of the north tower’s inner columns before stopping, the second plane could cut half of the columns. The second tower’s wound is deadlier.”

“I disagree with both you guys. The speed is a factor, certainly, but I would contest your use of the word *decisive*. Did you read about staircase A?”

“They should install intercoms in the stairways, like inside the elevators. People walking down staircase A would have called security and told them the way was clear. People stuck at the top would have called for help. Then the security office would have told them to go down staircase A.”

“This is not the reason why I’m mentioning staircase A. It left the core of the building from the 76th to the 82nd floor to dodge a dozen 24-ton elevator hoists, which pulled the express elevators from the lobby to the 78th floor. These hoists covered half the width of the 81st floor. They were the biggest in the world. They

were found in the rubble pile: people thought they were plane reactors. So what I say is that the second plane dissipates its superior energy in the 81st floor's elevator machinery. Thus, its speed is not a decisive factor."

"So we'll find that the second tower could not fall before the first one. But still it fell, as Galileo would say."

"You remember the fellow they found in 1990 in the underground parking garage with sixty bullets in his body?"

"Vaguely... The boss of the fireproofing company. Italian guy..."

"Barberini. The FBI was tapping Gotti, the Mafia Don. He said: *This will teach him not to come in when I call*. So they concluded the Mafia controlled the company and there might be some quirks in the fireproofing. They checked and found the spray-on coating on columns and beams was three fourth of an inch thick instead of one inch and a half. Starting in 1995, they thickened the beams' coating every time they removed floors to upgrade pipes and cables for a new tenant. The damaged floors of the north towers already had thicker coating, but not those of the south tower. So the beams and columns melted faster."

"The Mafia and what else? You go to the movies too often. When we built the towers, the norm was three fourth of an inch. They doubled it later."

"This spray-on fireproofing never worked, even when you made it thicker. When you built the towers, it was a new technique. In the Empire State Building and all the other skyscrapers, they fireproofed the steel columns by encasing them in concrete. Do you know why they didn't do it for the World Trade Center? The building site was so big that they could never have brought enough concrete trucks. Couldn't guarantee a regular flow, because of the traffic jams. So they decided to spray asbestos onto the columns."

"I don't know whether this Barberino bought his materials from the Mafia, but I remember very tense meetings. The coating wouldn't hold. During the first years, the site was in open air. The coating flaked off when it rained or when the steel rusted. Later, the elevator cables peeled it off when they swung and hit the columns. Barberino blamed us for choosing bar-joist trusses instead of regular H-beams. They include lots of round tubes. The coating holds, more or less, on flat surfaces, but not on round ones. When the plane hit, the mere shock wave probably dislodged the coating from all the beams and trusses."

"We'll need months of calculations and experiments to determine the relative weight of the various factors. In the meantime, let me bring my modest contribution to this discussion. I pretend that the dissymmetry of the second impact explains the difference. The first plane hits the center of the north tower. Suppose it sections twenty-four columns out of forty-eight. These columns are in the middle. Now the second plane crashes on the side of the south tower. It also cuts twenty-four columns. Okay. But these columns are on the side... The second tower is not only wounded, it is lopsided. Imagine you cut four of a spider's legs. If you cut two on each side, it can still stand. If you cut four legs on the same side, it topples. QED!"

"You know the story of the engineer who trained a frog? When he shouts: *Jump!*, it jumps. Willing to experiment for the advancement of Science, he cuts the frog's legs. He enters the following conclusion in his notebook: *When you cut the legs of a frog, it becomes deaf.*"

The Fire Department has its own engineers. Firefighting-engineers and engineer-engineers confront their opinions in yet another commission.

"We've never trusted bar-joist trusses," the firefighters say. "These things won't resist a real fire more than five or ten minutes. We've known that for forty years."

"We've had fires in the towers before. The trusses resisted."

"Ordinary office fires, yeah. You got an acre-wide floor. You start a fire in one corner, it needs an hour to reach the opposite corner. By that time, the beams or trusses in the first corner have had time to cool off. When you bring ten thousand gallons of kerosene from outside, it's something else altogether. The entire floor is weakened all at once. Your double structure, with a core of columns and a weight-bearing façade, generates large open spaces for offices but fragile floors. Your bar-joist trusses were too long. Downtown firefighters are often called to old cast-iron Soho buildings with weight-bearing façades. They know the floors collapse very fast. It is extremely dangerous. Moreover, fire spreads quickly on these open floors."

"Every structure has its advantages and its drawbacks. Yamazaki was a good architect. Robertson, our engineer in chief, is considered one of the best world-wide. The weight-bearing façades have kept the towers standing for an hour and more. Ten thousand people had time to escape. The best way to protect high-rise buildings is to keep airplanes from crashing into them."

"Hey, that's a good one! You should engrave it in the marble monument they'll build on Ground Zero. But what about WTC 7? No plane crashed into it, as far as I know. It burned nicely and crumbled. Let me tell you something: it is the first high rise in New York that fell down because it burned. The 90 West Street building stood next to the site exactly like WTC 7, and it burned exactly like WTC 7. Well, it's still there. The best way to protect skyscrapers is to coat steel columns and beams in concrete, full stop. You can't contradict me: you're building them again this way."

"Right. We've stopped using pure steel frames. We're ready to admit our mistakes. We won't group stairwells together anymore. We'll pull them apart as much as possible. If one is blocked, another one might still be open. We'll draw whatever lessons we can from this tragedy and try to build safer building. I'd like to hear you promise the same thing."

"You want the firefighters to build safer building?"

"Draw the lessons. More than two hundred people were locked inside elevators. Twenty-one got out by themselves and all the others died. It was the biggest elevator disaster in history. You haven't opened one cabin from outside."

"Elevators are very special. We didn't know how to open them, or even how to find them. We trust specialized technicians for that."

"There was a team of eighty elevator technicians in the towers. They didn't want to burn, so they went away. They haven't pledged their lives to save people. You should train your own elevator technicians. You seem to be stuck in the nineteenth century. You've got ladders on your trucks. How high can you climb on these ladders? In a city like New York, with all the high rise buildings, it doesn't make sense. You should buy helicopters."

"The police let our guys ride theirs to look at the fires from above."

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“Traffic control helicopters! You should get helicopters with water tanks, radio-guided water nozzles, fast custom winches, whatever. Jump directly from the 19th century to the 21st!”

The two leaders of insurance services, Marsh & McLennan and Aon, have lost many top executives and qualified agents. They replace them in no time to ride the great insurance boom: everybody wants to buy new flying-bomb insurance contracts.

The boom doesn't extend to the companies that insured the World Trade Center. They are quite gloomy, of course. By a strange turn of chance, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey had relinquished control of the World Trade Center six weeks before the attack. A developer, Larry Silverstein, bought a 99-year lease for \$3.25 billion. An Australian company, Westfield, leased the six-floor high retail space—the fifth shopping center in the States by sales. Silverstein won't receive any rent during the World Trade Center's rebuilding. Five years? Ten years? Rents brought in a billion dollars per year. The insurance companies say they owe Silverstein \$3.50 billion for the attack on his property.

“Whaddaya mean, the attack?” he asks. “Everybody could see on TV there were two attacks. You owe me \$7 billion.”

“The attack proved the towers were weak. The spray-on insulation didn't hold, the angle-clips weren't bolted properly. Even without the second plane, the fall of the north tower would have destroyed its twin.”

“I consulted experts. You'd be surprised how much they admire the towers' strength. They say ordinary skyscrapers would have come down instantly.”

“Yeah? Well, we also have experts...”

The insurance companies and Silverstein will fight their way to court with the help of their experts—unless they agree on some friendly settlement.

A clause in the leasing contract compels the Port Authority to rebuild ten million square feet of offices for Silverstein if the towers disappear. Westfield also wants its shopping center. New Yorkers were used to a skyline with two tall skyscrapers. Why don't you rebuild them just as they were? they ask. This would send a strong message to the terrorists: “We don't give in.” They rebuilt the Pentagon, didn't they? Ah, but the victims' families want the exact footprint of the towers to remain empty, except maybe for a memorial monument. The burial ground of our dear departed... A holy perimeter...

Is it possible to satisfy Silverstein, Westfield, the victims' families, the urbanists who think lower Manhattan needs its former street grid, the governors of New York State and New Jersey (since the Port Authority belongs to both States), and also the New Yorkers who yearn for a cityscape as grand as the World Trade Center?

The Port Authority commissions six friendly architects. Their projects amaze everybody by their dullness. The New Yorkers protest loudly:

“You can't call these tiny towers World Trade Center II. Have you got no ambition?”

“Okay, take it easy. We'll ask the best architects in the country...”

“Since we're talking grand scale renovation, why don't you bury West Street and give us a nice promenade?”

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“And don’t forget to rebuild the Greek church!”

In the spring of the year 2002, someone phones Jan Demczur.

“This is the Smithsonian Museum, in Washington. We’re preparing an exhibit about the attacks. We would like to show your squeegee in a window.”

“This museum I not know...”

Friends tell him his squeegee will be shown next to Lindbergh’s *Spirit of Saint Louis*. Jan Demczur accepts to let the museum have it.

Cosmic balance

Intel extends the Science Talent Search deadline for the Stuyvesant students. Nikita submits a research paper about knot theory. There are thousands of candidates. The forty finalists go to Washington for a week. They announce the top ten during a big banquet. Nikita is ranked sixth. He gets a \$25,000 scholarship. In September 2002, he goes to Harvard to study mathematics.

Noah and Andrew go to Cornell, Laura to Caltech, Charlene to Brown. Although several Ivy League colleges have offered him scholarships, Lex chooses an architecture school in Manhattan, so he can stay near his mother.

They all come back home for the winter vacations. Laura invites everybody to a big party.

"I went to Borders on the corner of 57th Street and Park Avenue. Not bad. I still regret our good old Borders."

"I've read it was their biggest store. Losing it made a big dent in their revenues."

"They have a special shelf for 9/11 books. I've looked at a book about the firefighters' chaplain, father Judge. He's giving last rites to a fireman who's been killed by a falling body, and then he dies himself when a steel beam falls on his head."

"They should tell the firefighters: when it's raining bodies, look up."

"They inscribed father Judge's name at the top of the fatalities' list. The firefighters say this is just where he should be, so he can welcome their dead comrades in Heaven."

"The guy who was crushed by a corpse could complain: Hey, I died first!"

"Plus, nineteen other guys were sure to go there straight to Paradise."

"Maybe it's a different Paradise."

"God was very busy on that day. Have you read the special anniversary issue of Time Magazine? That girl they found after twenty-seven hours? She spent all that time conversing with God. Now she goes to church every day. Her pastor spoke about her in a sermon: *The Lord has a special plan for this beautiful child of Christ*, he said."

"Let's say God has very special plans for Mr Smith, who made a reservation on flight 77. Knowing the plane is going to crash, God stops Mr Smith's watch. He's late and misses flight 77. But then God makes the watch of Mrs Jones go fast. She comes to the airport early and they tell her she can have a seat on flight 77 instead of 78. For every person saved by chance, there is a person doomed by chance. This is the law of cosmic balance."

"A friend of my mother was department head or something in a bank on the 100th floor of the north tower. She closes the door of her apartment, she takes the elevator down. In the lobby of her building, she looks at herself in the mirror. Oh my God, my pants are not ironed right! She's a department head, so her pants must be perfect. She goes back up to iron them herself. Instead of coming to the tower at 8:40, she arrives at 8:50. Fifty people worked for her. All dead, of course. My mother says she's in shock. Buys Prozac wholesale."

"So because she was late, according to Andrew's law of cosmic balance, some poor guy in New Jersey took an earlier train and sat down in his office at 8:40 instead of the usual 8:50. He felt real good. He decided he'd use the extra time to clear the mess on his desk..."

"And untangle his computer cables."

"The article in Time about this Vivienne was a big piece of junk. She's just a fool who remained in her office while anybody with an ounce of good sense would have fled. Instead of

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glorifying the last person who got out of there alive, they'd better celebrate whoever was clever enough to come out of the towers first."

"Really clever people left the towers after the 1993 bombing and took a job elsewhere. I mean, my grandmother escaped from the Warsaw ghetto at the last minute. After the war, she met my grandfather and they came to the States. They had some relatives here who signed affidavits for them or whatever. Well, these relatives were the clever ones: they didn't wait until the last minute. They crossed over in 1920, when they understood that staying in Poland wasn't a good idea."

"So when are you rebuilding those towers, Lex? You could at least submit a project for the memorial. You know, like the student they picked up for the Vietnam war memorial in Washington. She was your age, wasn't she?"

"Her name is Maya Lin. They already asked her to think about a memorial again. I don't know who will build the new World Trade Center, but I guess there'll be plenty of work for young architects in a few years. You know what I've been thinking about?"

"Miranda."

"Yes, but also, stairs... Above a certain height, buildings are supposed to have two staircases. The architects put three in the twin towers, so they considered them safer than safe. If the planes had hit a little later, if the offices had been filled to capacity, three staircases wouldn't have been enough to evacuate everybody. I mean, forty or fifty thousand people... Actually, stairways are not efficient at all. I've made a discovery: they're just the opposite of parachutes."

"After Andrew's law of cosmic balance, we have the Lex principle: Stairs are the opposite of parachutes!"

"Parachutes help you when you want to go down, but they're useless if you want to go up. Stairs are very helpful when you go up, but they get in the way if you need to go down fast."

"These people who jumped, I read it lasted ten seconds and they reached a speed of 150 mph. I bet they found that too fast. No stairs, no parachutes."

"So what do you suggest, Lex? Give parachutes to the people who work in high rises?"

"I suggest slides. When they evacuate planes, they use slides, not stairs."

"A twelve hundred feet slide? Wow! Better than Disneyworld... Everybody will want to try."

"I wouldn't put inflatable slides outside. When they evacuate airplanes, passengers often break a leg already. People would pick up too much speed. I imagine slides inside the building. Two stairways to walk up, two slides for evacuation. With horizontal landing-like sections so people can slow down."

"In silent movies, they sometimes had stairs that changed into a slide when someone pulled a lever."

"You know what? You should have nurses with cold cream at the bottom of the slide to treat ass burns."

"People would use small emergency carpets..."

"Hey, Lex, I've got another idea: rappelling ropes. They'd be stowed away in cupboards, tied to strong pegs. People would have rappelling harnesses and gloves under their seats, like they have lifejackets in airplanes."

"You don't have to wait until they implement this clever scheme. You can carry a rope in your backpack at all times!"

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“Or a small parachute.”

“You don’t say much, Nik.”

“In my former country and thereabout, people are not taking very good care of nuclear rockets and reactors. I’m afraid terrorists will eventually put together some kind of makeshift A-bomb. Then you’ll look rather foolish with your slides and climbing ropes. It would be better to try to understand why there is so much rage out there, and find a way to reduce it.”

“Try all you want: you’ll never understand. God orders them to defend Islam against the infidels to gain paradise. Here, some people say God wants to punish us because we have too many atheists, abortionists, feminists and homosexuals. They see in 9/11 one more sign portending the end of times. The craziest are convinced that God made us invent nukes so we can start the Apocalypse ourselves. Our fundamentalists are as crazy as their fundamentalists. The only difference is our crazies already have the bomb.”

Laura helps herself to another slice of cheesecake. *Repent, for the day of wrath has come...* Where did I hear this? *If any man have an ear, let him hear!*

Lex pulls his pack of cards out of his pocket.

“Now that Nik and Andrew have foretold our pleasant future, I suggest we take a break. What would you say about a little game of hearts? At least, this doesn’t hurt anybody.”