

City of Dreams

Up the long, long elevators. I was running late for my 8:30, 11 minutes late to be exact. What would my boss think? This was my semiannual meeting, and I was slipping up. The elevator was packed like sardines, all of us just frowning to leave. Finally, I made it to floor 91, rushing over to my desk, where I was handed a flurry of reports by my assistant. She let me know Mr. Jaime was waiting in his office. He didn't like waiting.

I hurried over, knocked, and stepped inside. "Mr. Jaime, I'm so sorry I'm late, traffic was—", Mr. Jaime frowned and motioned for me to stop. "Justin, I have some unfortunate news, your biggest client called this morning, informing me that your department messed up that last deal," he started with a sigh. "Is this true?"

My jaw tightened, was it Greg? He always was laid back with clients. Maybe April; she had a tendency to audit incorrectly. Whoever it was, I was gonna kill them for this. "Mr. Jaime, whatever happened with the client, must've been a problem with Marketing, I'll look into—", I didn't finish. We both turned our heads to the sound. A deep rumble seemed to be passing by. For a split second I thought it was the HVAC overhead. Then time slowed down. A brilliant flash tore through the office and hurled me into the wall.

A fireball swallowed the office, my lungs charred with smoke and ash seared every breath. The building rippled and shook so uncontrollably, the air was hot and thick. Walls and steel reinforcements being plucked off with cruel force.

Cracks and pockets yawned open, I tried crawling out but the hallway had collapsed. At that moment, I wanted to just let myself die. The smoke was so intense, barraging me, wave after wave. I could not escape, I perhaps would die, meeting my end in an inferno.

A ringing sound, that's all I heard, then screams and shouts. My fellow coworkers drowning in this heated hell. I was confused, I'm a sales guy, not a soldier. Was this just a nightmare? When will I wake up?

A hand caught mine, the ringing dulled. I looked up and Mr. Jaime helped me get on my feet, blood streaming down his head and arms. I got up, the adrenaline rushing in. "Justin, you need to go through that opening," he instructed with a weary voice to go through a small opening through the now shattered walls, but it was too small for him to fit through, how would he make it out?

"What about you?" I asked. A simple question in a time of chaos, he nodded his head. "I'll be right behind you, just get outta here!" Almost forcing me to escape, but what if he didn't? Saying the office was in a mess would be an understatement. The office no longer existed, just rubble and smog.

It almost felt like a crawl through a world laughing and scoffing at my suffering. I found some of my coworkers, and we tried the stairs, but the entrance was partially blocked, so we went in one by one, the debris scraping our open burns. My mind shrieked in horror and my stomach twisted.

I couldn't recognize them, they didn't look human, alien almost. The image will never leave my mind, cuts and wounds don't describe the scene, burns exposing bone.

The stairs were strangled and mutilated, pieces raining down, the ground shaking and creaking vigorously. I couldn't process all those around me, the walls seem to try to trap me. I was thirsty, the adrenaline starting to wear off. I couldn't go on, at least without some rest.

I sat down, the burns and cuts straining me, and I closed my eyes, and dreamt off. There was peace, but only for a moment, a dream. Mr. Jaime was disappointed, I had failed him, but I would fix it. It was curious, the world was so normal, so peaceful. Even the usual New York City hustle seemed soothing.

"Move to the right for the injured! Make your way down immediately!" The world snapped back, a firefighter woke me, ushering me to keep going." I eerily rose up and continued on. More firefighters passed by us, running up the stairs, perhaps their last ascent. Courage and fear mingled in their eyes. One stopped me. "Here, have some water," he offered calmly. Handing me his canteen. The water was so heavenly and delightful, an outbreak of relief.

It was short-lived, a low-frequency roar, upended the tower, people crying in fear. Was the world ending? White dust flushed through the vents, a radio for a firefighter reported that the South Tower had just collapsed, they shouted to everyone to get out now.

The air smelled like jet fuel, why did it smell like jet fuel? Suddenly the line stopped, the stairwell ahead jammed. A team of firefighters were working on getting it unstuck, but at an agonizingly slow speed. Pouring water out of broken pipes, the floor was wet and slippery. I prayed this torture would end.

Finally it was cleared, and we made our way through, the sun so clear, so close. I could feel it, the warmth finally shining through. Outside, sirens screaming while smoke washing everything. A bizarre flash, the landscape ghostly quiet, but it was over now. I had made it, why should I worry? And that's when I remembered, Mr. Jaime, did he get out? Did he make it?

Looking around, everyone covered in dust, they looked like grey ghosts, wandering the streets. They told us to walk towards St. Paul's church, and the worst had seemed to pass. We reached the chapel about when the earth shook, I turned around and saw the North Tower collapsing.

Each floor pancaking into the next, each with a loud and louder bang.

It sounded like a freight train, like a thunderous storm at work. An avalanche of smoke flew out of the tower, almost reaching us while sending a gust of wind so strong. New York City, the city of dreams, was in a cloud of smoke and sorrow. Days later I learned that the smoke I inhaled that day was not just concrete. It contained traces of human remains. Breath after breath, the horrifying realization, I was not breathing mere concrete, but...

Finally, a coworker called to break the news: the remains of Mr. Jaime were found on the street. I didn't understand how until a video surfaced of a man on the 91st floor breaking his

window, pausing, and then jumping. It was his office. The fire raging, the smoke closing in. He didn't want to burn.

He told me to go, and I lived because I listened. I felt like I had failed him. But now I understand. He died so I could live. Most people let life drag on, day after day. But my life was indebted to him. I would continue on, each day, striving to live better.

Every year, the City of Dreams honors the men and women who died. I honor their legacies by making every day matter. For him.