

S e g m e n t s

o f t h e f o l l o w i n g

n a r r a t i v e c o m e

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G u z m a n t h a t

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t h e f e a t u r e

“A D a y i n

S e p t e m b e r : I n T h e i r

O w n V o i c e s , ”

i n t h e

T i m e s

H e r a l d - R e c o r d ,

M i d d l e t o w n ,

N e w Y o r k ,

o n S e p t e m b e r 8 ,

2 0 0 2 .

ESCAPE FROM THE 85TH FLOOR



VICTOR GUZMAN, '95, HAD JUST STARTED A NEW
JOB AT ORENSTEIN AND BROWN AT 1 WORLD
TRADE CENTER ON THE 85TH FLOOR IN JUNE
2001. HE ARRIVED AT HIS OFFICE AT 8:30 A.M. ON
SEPTEMBER 11, 2001. HE WAS WORKING IN THE
NORTH TOWER—THE FIRST TOWER HIT—WHEN
THE ATTACK OCCURRED. THIS IS HIS STORY.

BY VICTOR GUZMAN

IT WAS EARLY MORNING, 5:30, AND I WAS
FIGHTING TO GET UP. I WAS STILL NOT USED
TO THE HOURS. I HAD STARTED A NEW JOB
IN JUNE AT ORENSTEIN AND BROWN AT 1
WORLD TRADE CENTER ON THE 85TH FLOOR,
AND I WAS STILL TRYING TO GET USED TO
THE COMMUTER GRIND. I USUALLY GOT TO
THE OFFICE AT 8:30. THAT DAY I REMEMBER
GOING INTO MY OFFICE AND TURNING ON THE
COMPUTER. I ENTERED MY TIME SHEET, AND
AS I PRESSED "PRINT," I FELT AN **EXPLOSION.**

I was thrown forward. I felt the building actually lean forward to the point where I had to brace myself against the wall and the desk.

At that point my heart started racing and ideas were coming into my mind, but the main idea that stayed was “Get out!” I didn’t know what had happened. I knew it wasn’t good. The funny thing is, since I’d started commuting, I had everything in my knapsack—everything. You know, bills and papers and things that I used to do on the train. So I grabbed the bag and ran out of the office.

There was an acrid smell and smoke everywhere. Things had fallen from the ceiling, books had toppled over, and people were screaming. There was one secretary outside my office, and I grabbed her and ran toward the nearest exit. I opened the door to the exit but couldn’t see anything. There was nothing but smoke. Fearing what was on the other side of that smoke, we closed the door and retreated back into the office. The office took almost the entire 85th floor, and we went around to the other side, where we met up with 10 to 15 other employees.

Stepping over things that had fallen, we got through another exit door. We all made a line: one person was in front and one stayed in back to make sure that everybody got out. The black smoke made it hard to see, hard to breathe. We went down to the main level, the 70th floor, where the stairwell stopped, and we had to find another set of stairs. No single stairwell at the World Trade Center went all the way down to the ground.

The 70th floor was chaos. It looked like the elevator had blown out. There was glass everywhere and still that perplexing acrid smell that now I attribute to gasoline.

I remember asking one of the security guards, “Where’s the nearest exit?” He had no idea and said, “I’m looking for it myself.” So I looked at the elevator, where there was always a “You Are Here” sign, and somebody saw me looking. We both went to the next stairwell and shouted to everyone, “Go out that way.”

As we went down, we had to find another stairwell every few levels. I remember standing behind a blind guy with a dog, and everybody was yelling, “Hurry up! Move! Move!” I said, “Relax. There’s a guy in front of us. He’s blind.” The last thing I wanted to do was to push him down the stairwell.

As we went down, the lower we got, the clearer the air became and the easier it

was to breathe. People from other floors started passing down wet paper towels to cover our mouths.

As we considered the cause of all this destruction, I thought about a small plane that I had seen day after day outside the World Trade windows. I thought maybe the pilot had had a heart attack and plowed into the side of the building. One thing I remember vividly is that we heard from no one above the 93rd floor.

As we were coming down, I was impressed by the calmness. Something I’ll always remember, as scary as it was—and it helped that we didn’t know what was going on—it was orderly. Nobody was pushing, nobody was shoving. The only time it got a little panicky was when the line descending downward stopped.

The stairwell was wide enough for only two people. If somebody was bigger than average, then two people couldn’t fit. It was difficult whenever it bottlenecked—you had people coming into the stairwell from every floor, so the people up above were being stopped until these people merged. People started shouting, “Hey! Hurry up! What are you doing? We gotta get out of here!” So others and myself would say, “Calm down. We’re going to make it.”

The last thing we wanted was a panic. For everybody to make it out, we had to do it in an orderly fashion. We started forming a single line to allow those who were hurt to come down before us. There was a man whose clothes were burned off—we allowed him to come down. I found out later that he made it out.

Everybody was trying to use their cell phones as we were going down, but they didn’t work. I think I was on the 39th floor when my cell phone rang. It was my wife. She was watching TV and freaking out. “Are you all right?” she asked. “For now we’re fine,” I shouted. “What’s going on?”

I was talking loudly because everybody wanted to know what was happening. “Two air buses,” I said. Astonished at my answer, they said, “What? Are you kidding me? Had to be way bigger than an Airbus.” I said,



I REMEMBER LOOKING

INTO THE EYES OF THESE HEROES.

I THOUGHT, “They’re going up, . . .
and they’re going
to take care of it.”



SIDEBAR: THE AFTERMATH I WALKED TO THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE. THE BUSES STARTED GOING OVER, WHICH WAS GREAT, BECAUSE I WAS TIRED. I FINALLY GOT TO BROOKLYN, AND I WALKED ANOTHER HALF HOUR TOWARD MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S HOUSE. I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR. SHE DIDN'T KNOW I WAS COMING—THERE WAS NO WAY OF LETTING HER KNOW. SHE GAVE ME A BIG HUG AND SAID, "YOU'VE TRULY BEEN REBORN TODAY." MY FATHER-IN-LAW DROVE ME HOME. IT TOOK TWO HOURS. WELL, YOU CAN IMAGINE, MY FAMILY DIDN'T WAIT UNTIL I GOT OUT OF THE CAR BEFORE MY KIDS WERE HUGGING ME AND MY WIFE GRABBING ME. IT WAS LIKE ONE OF THOSE SLOW-MOTION THINGS WHERE YOU LOOK INTO YOUR WIFE'S EYES AND EVERYTHING STOPS, A TIME WHEN YOU SAY I LOVE YOU, AND YOU'VE NEVER MEANT IT MORE THAN ANY OTHER TIME IN YOUR LIFE. + **THAT DAY MY ENTIRE LIFE CHANGED.** THE REASON I HAD GONE INTO THE CITY WAS FOR MORE MONEY, TO GET MORE THINGS FOR OUR HOME, AND NOW I REALIZE THAT MATERIAL THINGS ALMOST DIDN'T LET ME HAVE WHAT I REALLY NEEDED—MY FAMILY. IT'S NOT THAT I WAS NEVER AT HOME, BUT MY COMMUTE WAS TWO AND A HALF HOURS EACH WAY. I USED TO LEAVE AT 6:00 IN THE MORNING AND GET HOME BY 9:00 IN THE EVENING AND GO TO BED AND START OVER AGAIN. + SLEEPING WAS TOUGH FOR A WHILE—A COUPLE OF TIMES I HAD NIGHTMARES. + THE LAW FIRM I WAS WORKING FOR AT THE TRADE CENTER DECIDED THAT IT HAD TO GO BACK TO WORK, THAT IT WAS PROBABLY THE BEST THING TO DO. SO THEY HELD A MEETING ON A THURSDAY. AS I WAS ON THE TAPPAN ZEE BRIDGE ON THE WAY TO THE JOB, THEY CALLED MY WIFE TO HAVE HER TELL ME NOT TO COME IN. THEY HAD EVACUATED THE BUILDING WHERE THE MEETING WAS BEING HELD BECAUSE OF THREATS. + I FOUND A NEW JOB IN THE PAPER RIGHT IN MY FIELD AND SENT IN MY RÉSUMÉ. THE FIRM I'M WITH NOW IS ONLY AN HOUR COMMUTE. I'M HOME ON THE WEEKENDS AND CALL MY WIFE A FEW TIMES A DAY. I DON'T WANT TO BE COMPLACENT ANYMORE. I DON'T WANT TO GET TO THE POINT WHERE LIFE IS JUST A RIDE BACK AND FORTH ON A TRAIN. MAYBE THAT SENSE OF URGENCY IS IMPORTANT—TO LIVE EVERY DAY LIKE IT WAS YOUR LAST. THAT CLICHÉ HAS A LOT MORE MEANING NOW THAN IT DID ON SEPTEMBER 10. I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER WHAT I WAS DOING ON THAT DAY.

"Look, this is what they're telling me. I don't really know." Then we saw the grim looks on each other's faces, and it was at that point we knew the crashes must have been terrorist attacks.

I got back on the phone with my wife and told her, "Don't worry about me, I'm fine. I love you. Let me hang up before we get cut off." Getting cut off would have been worse for me than my telling her good-bye and hanging up. I don't know why, but that was the feeling I had when I got off the phone.

As we got lower, more people started getting phone calls, and we started hearing more rumors, which, I think, was probably worse than better.

That's when the Pentagon was hit, and we heard there were five or six planes. Now it was getting tense. As we were walking down, the firefighters started coming up the stairwell. People were getting asthma attacks and some couldn't breathe, so the situation was getting more dire the closer we got to the outside.

By this time my legs were rubber. From the 85th to the 30th, I was feeling it in my legs. As the emergency crew came up, everyone thanked them. They had at least 80 pounds of equipment and no way of taking an elevator. I'm thinking, well, we know the explosion happened above us, so we're on the 30th floor now, and they're going to walk up past the 85th with all that equipment—that's amazing. One thing I remember is looking into the eyes of these heroes. I thought, "They're going up, and they're going to see what this explosion is about, and they're going to take care of it."

As we got further down, the breathing became easier, but then all of a sudden there was rushing water. We didn't know where it was coming from, but there was water rushing down the staircases. We were holding on and walking slower.

We finally got to the main level, which led out to the courtyard where they had that statue—the round sphere. I saw plane parts, body parts, fire, papers flying. That was the first time we saw how bad it was. We had been sheltered, basically, inside the stairwell walls. Now reality hit us.

Everything that had been calm until that point became chaotic. We went through the revolving doors, where water was coming down, and we got a torrent of cold water drenching our bodies. People were yelling

that we should run. I became disoriented, and it got real scary.

We ran and we ran. We went up the escalator, and I still remember the line, the double line of emergency personnel making sure everybody got out in an orderly fashion. Those are the people that I remembered when the towers ultimately fell.

I got outside and turned around to see what was going on. I saw two gaping holes with flames coming out, and it hit me just how close they were to where I had been sitting. I started running. I got three blocks away and turned around again. I figured I was safe there.

At that point, World Trade No. 2 started crumbling. The noise was deafening: crunching glass, steel, a roar. I saw the tower toppling over. I started calculating: "Let me see, 110 floors. I'm only three blocks away. If it falls forward, how long will it take to get to me?" I started running.

We ran toward the Brooklyn Bridge. Pace University was off to the right, so that's where I ran. As I got to the doors, the smoke overcame me, and I got covered with soot. I looked like a ghost. I had been all in blue, but now I was all in white and gray ash.

Once the smoke started clearing, people began leaving. But I said, "I'm not going anywhere. This is the safest I've felt in the last few minutes. They're going to have to drag me out of this building to get me out."

Then, about 10 to 15 minutes later, I heard the other tower fall. That's when I had to sit down. That was the tower I had been in.

It was at that point that scenarios started going through my mind: if I'd waited 10 more minutes or rested on one of the floors, or if I hadn't run out of the building. . .

I almost died today. So, I sat, just staring at the walls.

Victor Guzman, '95, is an attorney with the Newburgh, New York, law firm of Drake Sommers Loeb Tarshis & Cantania.

PHOTO CREDITS

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