

FALLOUT

By: Joe Lunievicz

The sky is falling.

I look out my window and the sky is falling in large pieces of steel, concrete, paper, blood and bone.



It's October 11th, 2001, thirty days since my office was destroyed on the sixteenth floor of the World Trade Center, Tower Two. I stand on 23rd street and 6th Avenue, looking up at the new office building we've just moved into. I squint because the glare from the skyscrapers around me is intense.

I watch as a plane comes out of the sky and hits it.

I watch it again and again before I blink my eyes and the sky clears. I step through the front doors and into the elevators.

We've been bombing the Taliban in Afghanistan for five days. My stomach still turns to jelly when I'm outside and a loud noise assaults me -- when a car hits a large pot-hole, a siren blares, or a garbage truck releases a metal container that crashes to the earth. I resist the urge to duck but inside I flinch. My exterior is molded plastic, hard to the touch. It's easier to exist indoors where the noises are muffled.

The critical incident counselor called these images intrusive thoughts. Intrusive, as if they intrude upon a tranquil place. Inside my head, if tranquility exists, it lies behind a door, far back in the dark.



On Tuesday, September 11th I arrive at work at 8:25am, early because I'm training a four-day course called "Community HIV/AIDS Educator" and I like to get in before most of the participants do. I work at a behavioral and social sciences research and training not-for-profit, specializing in AIDS and Substance Abuse Issues. I get in early because it helps to settle my nerves before I have to get up in front of an audience.

I pass Melvin, our logistics coordinator, in the hall. He has already set up the training room with participant manuals at each chair and pencils for their pre-test questionnaires.

"Goin' for a smoke," he says. He's a black man in his late fifties, with a heart condition that has recently flared up and left him sallow-faced, hunched over and tired. He has only been back on the job for a month since his stay in the hospital.

Mary, my co-trainer, comes in as Melvin walks out and they say hello as they pass. We've been co-training together for over eight years. Some twenty-one years ago Mary recruited me for the United States Peace Corp — only we didn't know each other then.

We sit next to my desk. My desk-top is covered with training contract folders — color-coded green and yellow. My inbox is over-flowing. My computer warms up prompting me for a user password. A picture of my wife, Karen, stares back at me smiling from a street in San Francisco. "Keep that picture," she told me once. "It's the one that makes me look thin." My window faces Tower One and I turn my back to it so I can talk with Mary. We make small-talk the way two colleagues, nervous before their presentations begin, do. Mary makes me laugh. She and I always laugh when we train together. My hand shakes while I laugh so I set my almond steamed milk down on my desk so I don't spill it. It's a coffee substitute for an anxious stomach. Then I hear what I think is thunder and look up as a flash of light fills the room.

Lightning, I think, outside my window behind me. "I didn't know we were supposed to have a thunder storm today," I say and turn around to look out the window.



It's October 12th. At acting class a friend says, "Oh, you were only on the sixteenth floor. That's not that high up." He seemed almost disappointed in me. I guess compared to those who were killed on the ninety-fifth floor, he is right. Still, inside, my gut twists. Outside I smile and nod. "You're right," I say, "I was lucky."



Outside my window the sky is falling. I see paper and large objects, indistinguishable objects, fall. They whistle as they descend like flame-tailed comets. I hear the sound of glass shrieking as it cuts through the air.

"It's a bomb," I say to myself and then a voice inside my head says, "Get away from the windows and find an arch." The 'arch' is a holdover from my grade school days when I was taught to hide under an arch during a bomb drill because arches are the strongest structural

part of a building. The pieces of falling sky are so close they make my skin crawl so I jump out of my chair and moved away from the window. "Get away from the windows and get under an arch," I say. My voice is calm even though adrenaline is flowing, my heart is pounding and my fingers tingle as if the skin is stretched and ready to burst.

Mary and three participants from the training room stand nearby crowded into the hall outside my office in the training corridor. There are three, Stanley, a woman reverend and someone else whose face is hidden by the door. "Take them to the stairway by the elevator and wait there," I tell Mary. "Leave your bags. Just go." She nods and moves. They disappear into the center of the building.

I go the other way to see if anyone else on my side of the building knows what is going on. I look out my bosses' window, eight offices down, and see the wound in the side of Tower One. It is black, its edges blurred by billowing gray smoke and flames that flicker from beneath the darkness. I stare at it, unable to move.

I see Bob, our operations manager, and John, a researcher, and tell them, "We have to get out of here. There's a hole in Tower One and it looks pretty bad. Let's get everyone out." I talk over Bob. I don't know what he is saying but he stops talking and both him and John nod.

I see Mary over by the stairs. "Take them down," I say. I catch a glimpse of the stairs as they open the door and see how crowded they are -- packed but moving. We stand there a moment watching people move past us in a steady stream. I hear feet tapping the stairs and hear heavy breathing. Then the door closes and it's silent again. "Let's check the floor for others," I say.

"Right," John says. "I'll check the left side." His eyes are wide open and he's breathing fast. I wonder if I look the same.

"I'll take the right," I say. We head off in different directions.

The first door I knock on opens. Andy, the head of a research program, stands looking at me, his eyes unfocused as if he's been lost in thought.

"We've got to get off the floor," I say.

"What?" he says, still not fully present.

"This is not a drill. This is serious. It's an emergency. Stop what you're doing and get out."

He looks at me for a second, then his eyes focus and he nods. I go past Bruce's office and walk past Hillary's, shouting, "This is an emergency. This is the real thing. Everybody get to the emergency station by the elevators." I knock on closed doors then stop and think, 'Hillary always keeps his door and shades closed so maybe he didn't hear me knock.' And because he's a friend, I go back to his door and open it. His office is empty. 'Make sure nobody's hidden behind their doors,' I think, because researchers are like that. They'll hide and ignore. I go back and open all the closed doors.

A researcher steps out of one of the inner, windowless offices. "What's going on?" he asks.

"Get to the emergency station," I say. "This is not a drill. Everybody has to get off the floor." In my head I sound like the Russian submarine captain in the movie THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING when he shouts in a thick Russian accent, "Emergency, everybody to get from street."

A woman steps out of her office.

"Get off the floor. This is no bullshit. Everybody off the floor."

She looks at me, her hands aggressively on her hips, her face etched with annoyance -- but she moves and I go on checking the rest of the offices.

John comes up behind me and we head back to the stairs. The floor is clear. Bob is sending people down the stairs when we get there.

"Has anyone checked the bathrooms?" Bob asks.

"No," John says and runs to the men's room.

I run back to the window to see what else has happened to Tower One. The hole seems larger, its lips swelling. The sky is littered with floating pieces of paper like giant confetti. There is an acrid smell in the air. I have a phantom sense of smell from a nose that's been broken ten times on the rugby pitch so I know the odor must be thick for it to penetrate my nasal passages. When I return to the stairs John says the bathrooms are clear.

"Go," I say. "I'll be right behind you." I run back to my office to get my wallet, palm pilot, keys and book. Since I was a kid I've always carried a book with me as a kind of security blanket. I know I want to have ID on me if something happens and I either get killed or have to prove who I am to police. I'd spent two and a half years in Honduras as a Peace Corp Volunteer, some of it during periods of martial law, so I know the value of carrying identification. Also, my brother

was murdered twelve years ago and without identification his body lay in the morgue for almost four weeks. I don't think twice about my fencing equipment -- competitive gear I've been collecting and using since I was nineteen. The bag is four feet tall, a few feet wide, and weighs near forty pounds. It stays.

As soon as I return to the stairs the intercom comes to life for the first time and a voice rings out, "There is a fire in tower one. Tower Two is not in danger. I repeat, Tower Two is not in danger. Stay in your offices and stay on your floor."

Rich, from accounting, and I look at each other. "Let's get out of here," I say. Two women from accounting come out of opening elevator doors. I stare at them in disbelief. They laugh like they are in on some private joke, and run past me to their offices.

"We're getting our bags and purses," they say as they pass.

I stare at them, then run back to the windows one more time. When I return they are gone. Rich and I are the only ones still on the floor. I wonder if all are truly out. I wonder if we missed somebody.

"Let's go," I say.

"I'm going to stay," he says.

I look at him. "Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yes," he says.

I hesitate another second. It is a weird moment in time. I'm not really sure if there is anything else I should do. I fight the urge to run, look left then right, then hit the stairs.

It is not as crowded on the stairs as when I saw Mary go down, but there are still plenty of people walking down. I can't count them because I can only see one floor up and one floor down. I concentrate on the floor below me. I see a pair of black, women's shoes, with two-inch lifts discarded on the side of one of the platforms between floors. Two heavy women are in front of me. Their slow pace holds me up, along with those behind me. One of the women is heavy and limps slightly because of her weight. I stop myself from getting too close to them, from pushing them out of the way. Young men come down fast behind me and I feel them close at my back, breathing hard. I think, 'Why can't one of these women get in front of the other so others can go past?' and then, 'People behind us had better slow down or this is going to be a Who Concert.' After three flights of stairs the two women finally step aside. We bolt past them. I resist the urge to yell, "Slow down," and "Don't panic." Fear builds up inside of me like an animal trying to

claw its way out of my stomach. We reach a peak velocity together and just keep going down, one notch below panic. I don't know what happens to the two heavy women. I don't see them again. I beat the stairs with the soles of my feet and turn and turn as we reach each new successive landing. The numbers on the exit doors get lower and lower.

A door is open in front of me and I step out into daylight filtered through the glass that surrounds the mezzanine level of Tower Two. I'm dizzy and my head is spinning. I see the courtyard. It is like Charlton Heston's New York City in the movie THE OMEGA MAN — rubble covered by white dust. I stop with my mouth hanging open and wonder, for the first time, if there are bodies out there and if people have fallen. I don't want to see bodies but I look anyway. I have to.

Security and police yell at us to get to the escalator, "Move it. Move it," they say.

I'm still looking outside when another explosion shakes the building. The floor seems to move beneath me. I can't hear anything for a moment. Small particles of dust float down from the ceiling like snow. Everything moves in slow motion.

People are yelling and running toward the escalator, pushing past me. I start to move and then, once moving can't seem to slow myself down. I'm running by the time I reach the escalator.

"Move it! Move it! Move it!" men in uniform yell. They wave and point downstairs. My feet touch the escalator's steel and carry me three or four steps until I come up to a man who is stationary, letting the stairs take him down. He is straightening his suit jacket and adjusting his tie. His presence calms me and makes me stop. I walk past him with measured steps, in control of my body again, and follow the others to the revolving doors that lead to the mall.

Security yells, "Get out! Get out! Everybody get out!" and people run. I watch a man run into the revolving doors and push through them quickly. I follow him. They hiss as they spin and I emerge into the mall. White dust floats down, settling on top of us. More security yells at us to run and head towards the E train subway platform. I stop near Victoria's Secret and the street exit by Sam Goody.

A security man says, "You can't go out there," and waves me away.

"I know. I just want to see," I say. I stand there a second and watch as some large piece of building hits the ground outside the doors, some fifty yards away. I run a little and then slow to a fast walk. No one is panicking. Everyone is hurrying but no one is knocking anyone down or

out of the way. I figure the E train is the best place to be — underground, like in a bomb shelter. I then think, 'If I have to, I can walk out to Chambers Street that way, underground, because the tunnel is so long.' But I reach the E train platform and see a train sitting there. The image is surreal. People are packed in the first two cars, just like they are during rush hour, arms and legs spilling out of the doorways, black briefcases and backpacks protruding like small tumors. No one is in the third car or the other cars forward. I debate getting on and decide not to. I walk forward because it seems too easy to just get on and leave the area and that worries me. I think, 'What if there is something else I can do?' and, 'Is the subway train the safest place to be right now? What if the doors close and the train stays put and we all get stuck?' Then I remember the E train goes away from the World Trade Center — up town. It's the last stop south on the E line. I walk to the head of the train. I see Dave, an accountant from my organization, walking ahead of me. I want to call his name but I don't. As he steps on the train he turns back and sees me. We smile at each other and I step on just as the alarm rings for 'all aboard.'

The train pulls out.

I walk over to him and we shake hands.

Another man stands next to us. He says there was a second plane.

"What plane?" I ask.

"I saw two people jump out of Tower One and fall to the ground," he says. "It was horrible." We stand and stare at each other for a while.



It is September 12th, 2001.

Mary and I talk on the phone. "I don't know why I waited downstairs so long before I left. But I was waiting for you." She waited ten minutes for me at the top of the escalator on the mezzanine. "I still can't believe I told that trainee that we'd have training the next day."

"Do you think we'll have the training today?" a participant asks her.

"I don't think so," she says, "but I'm sure we'll be able to pick up it tomorrow."

"I'm so glad you told me to get out because I did exactly what you said. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't told me what to do."

John found her by the escalator and they went down into the mall together. They tried to leave the building by Sam Goody but that's when the second plane hit. A man was struck down by debris in front of them and they returned indoors quickly. They left by the Borders Bookstore

exit and did not look back. She walked up to 42nd Street and took the railroad home from Grand Central Station, sitting next to a man who'd been on the 96th floor of Tower One and was covered with dust and blood.



I get off at the 14th Street and 8th Avenue station because I have to call Karen and let her know I am okay. Dave nods and we say goodbye as the doors close behind me and the train pulls out. I figure 14th Street should be far enough away from the Trade Center to be safe.

Only I can't find a phone that works at the station. So I exit and head for the surface. I walk over to Sixth Avenue because I figure the E train should stop service soon and, I think, 'The F train doesn't go under the Trade Center so it will still be running.'

When I get to Sixth Avenue and 14th Street I see the towers and the two black holes and the smoke. I stare and my body shakes a little.

Three young girls laugh, and point, and I yell at them, "It's not funny. People died up there. They're dying up there. It's not funny."

I go down into the 14th Street 6th Avenue station, pass through the turnstiles and find a phone that works. I wait on line behind three other people, then call Karen. It's just past 9:30am. I sit down against the wall and wait for an F train to appear. Ten minutes later it arrives. The tracks take me home to Queens.

Karen is two months pregnant and as I ride the train I worry that she will lose the baby. The longer the ride takes, the more I worry.

"This is Roosevelt Station," the loudspeaker announces and I step off the car onto the platform.

I run the three blocks home.

Karen is at the door, crying.

"I'm okay," I say as we hold each other. "There was a train waiting for me. It's as if it was waiting just for me."

"Your father called and ... " she begins but I don't hear what she is saying.

On the television Tower Two is collapsing. It is a replay and it is being shown again and again and again. I sink to my knees on the living room floor and don't move. I can't stop staring at the screen.

Then Tower One collapses.



The sky is falling.

It's October 13th. Friends still touch me and hug me and say, "Thank God," when they see me.

People stop what they're doing when they find out I was on the sixteenth floor. "You were there?" they say. "In the Tower?"

In Pennsylvania at a reading of a short story of mine that has just been published, a whole room grows quiet when someone announces that I was in Tower Two. I feel their gazes like nervous hands lain upon my skin.



On September 17th our whole agency meets at Beth Israel Hospital. We touch each other to make sure our bodies are real. I see Melvin across the room and before I can even say hello he tells me what happened to him.

"I went out for a smoke," he says, "and I looked up to see the first plane hit. I was right next to the Trinity Church, that black fence near the subway, and I looked up and saw it. I asked a guy who passed by, 'Did you see that?' But he ignored me. 'Did you see that plane hit the tower?' I asked another guy but no one saw it. I couldn't believe the smoke and flames. I saw the whole thing. Then when the second one hit it knocked me on my ass. This woman and her boy were next to me and they got knocked over by the people running so I said, 'Let's get out of here,' and took them to City Hall. Then I walked home to Brooklyn and had a drink. Whew man. That was something."

Later, a critical incident counselor talks to us about the psychological process of dealing with trauma. He says we may get intrusive thoughts and a spectrum of feelings running from guilt and shame to jubilation. He tells us about the thirty-day rule. "If you've still got things cooking after thirty days then ... well, that's something to worry about." He says this with a look of both concern and despair etched into his face.

Our Executive Director calls several of us heroes.

Andy comes up to me and says, "I guess I should thank you for saving my life." I nod and smile. I do not feel like a hero.

All are present and accounted for from our floor. No one is missing.



It is October 26th, 2001.

The fire station on 18th Street, like all the Fire Stations in Manhattan, has a memorial in front of it. I pass it today as I go to lunch.

Daydreaming at work later, I picture the men in uniform -- security, police and fire department -- standing by the escalator, shouting, "Move it! Move it! Move it!" I'm sure they are dead. I'm sure they stayed as long as people were still coming down out of those stairs and into the light of the mezzanine.

Why was a train waiting for me and nothing was waiting for them? When all is said and done my leaving was easy. How could I look upon it as anything but easy? That is why I hesitated on the 16th floor. That is why I hesitated before I stepped onto the subway car. I asked myself, "Isn't there something else I can do?"

"Your job was to come home to me," my wife says. "Your job was to come home to us."

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*Joe Lunievicz' debut novel, **Open Wounds**, was published by WestSide Books in June 2011.*