

Things We Lost On Tuesday

by Michael Downing

REVELATIONS

Bobby Coleman hated every part of his job — not just the usual things like meaningless deadlines, unrealistic work loads, and failed expectations; Coleman was done with all of it. Too many years at his nine to five had him convinced he was wasting his life, and aside from the view ninety-three stories above lower Manhattan, the only thing he could see was that he was going nowhere. He was probably no different than most other middle management suits; he needed to find something worthwhile before his life became filled with regrets, just like his father's had. He remembered all those nights as a kid when his father would come home from work and sit at the kitchen table with a glass filled with Jack Daniels for over an hour — morose and unapproachable until the worst parts of his day faded from memory. Coleman didn't want to be that same kind of guy with the Colonial in a nice New Jersey suburb, new BMW in the driveway, and a summer house at the Shore while uncertainties and fears exploded inside — he wanted something more than a dead end job that left him with a hollow, empty feeling each night as he rushed for the PATH. He took another sip of coffee, hoping it wasn't too late when American Airlines Flight 11 slammed into his office in the North Tower.

BAILEY

On a sidewalk near Vesey Street, Bailey shook his cup and smiled at each person as he asked them for spare change. Dreadlocked and dirty, the sores on his arms covered by long sleeves, he tried hiding the shame in his eyes while ignoring the occasional taunts of “get a fucking job.” Even though he was used to it the words always hurt, almost as much as the sneers businessmen gave him and the

way women stuffed coins back in their purses, turning cold shoulders to him as if he were invisible. Inside Starbucks the Assistant Manager started towards the door to chase him away for the third time that morning; Bailey was hurrying to put his belongings back in his cart when the first plane slammed in the Tower. Within hours the neighborhood he knew had drastically changed — those same men and women now looked just like him with dazed expressions and blank stares, afraid and fearful of all they had lost. And in the horror of that day, when it all fell apart for so many, Bailey smiled as he realized that for once he wasn't alone with his fears any more.

FLY AWAY

The smoke was intense — worse than anything David Spencer could have imagined; instead of figuring out an escape route off the 83rd floor all he could think about was how badly it burned his eyes and choked off his breath. He could feel the heat from the flames below his floor and smell the thick, heavy diesel fuel blazing through the building, sending dark, black smoke pouring through the closed doors of the elevator shaft that made it impossible to see. He knew now they should have started downstairs once the first plane hit the North Tower but it wasn't until their own building was rocked by the impact of the second plane that Spencer realized how badly he had miscalculated. He had always been confident about his ability to make quick, effective decisions but with the lives of everyone in his office depending on him, he had come up short — instructing them to stay at their desks and wait for help; help that would never arrive, and now it was hopeless. He staggered through the rubble by the elevator banks and passed the lifeless body of that blonde from Accounting crushed beneath a pile of marble ceiling tiles, falling into the open doorway of the conference room, desperate for air. The impact of the plane had blown out all the glass in the room and Spencer pulled himself on his hands and knees towards the open window, deciding that he wasn't going to let himself choke to death on the carpet.

10-60

It looked like snow falling from the buildings but in reality it was raining flesh; the streets were covered in it as Fire Fighter Michael Stone rushed into the South Tower and headed up the B stairs with five others from Ladder 10/Engine 10. Over his handie-walkie radio Stone could hear "MAYDAY'S" as they joined other fire fighters and climbed the stairs, pushing past single file lines of evacuees streaming down from the lower floors. Everyone was reasonably calm considering the chaos inside the building although Stone was scared about what he would be facing — when he had entered the Tower it looked like at least fifteen floors were burning and he had never seen a fire that big; Stone didn't know how they would ever get it under control. Around the twenty-first floor they came upon a pregnant woman taking the stairs one step at a time and one of the Lieutenants from Engine 21 told Stone to get her down while the rest of Ladder 10 kept going up. Stone had the woman wrap her arms around his neck so it was easier to carry her; there was a mixture of fear and panic in her face and he gently reassured her that everything would be okay. He thought of his own wife, due with their first child in a few weeks, and wished he had called her before entering the building to let her know everything was alright so she wouldn't worry.

NO QUARTER

In a Greenwich, Connecticut house Rachel Parker stood in her kitchen with her eyes riveted to the TV and a cup clenched tightly in her hand — the coffee had been cold for more than an hour, ever since she turned on the Today show and watched in shock as United Flight 175 slammed into the second Tower. She was afraid to look away, even for a moment — her husband worked in one of those towers, like many men in their neighborhood, although Rachel was embarrassed that she didn't even know which building it was. He had created a good life for them — the kind she had sought and aspired to, but now her life that was complete in so many different ways was being ripped apart and she was helpless to do

anything about it. She kept expecting the phone to ring; to hear her husband's calm, reassuring voice telling her that everything was okay and not to worry because he made it out safely, but the call never came. All she could do was watch the events unfolding on the TV screen and listen to a narrative told by strangers who had no idea about the depth of her fears and the anguish she was feeling. When the South Tower suddenly imploded — each of the floors pancaking those beneath until there was nothing left but dust and debris that filled the TV screen and blocked the picture — Rachel screamed in horror but no sound came out of her mouth.

IN DARKNESS OF DAWN

The noise was louder than anything NYPD Officer Kevin Burke had ever heard — a thunderous roar that drowned out everything; Burke turned away from the crumbling South Tower and ran as fast as he could without looking backwards. He sprinted north on West Street but the dust and ruins from the building enveloped him in total darkness before he had gone no more than fifty yards; Burke dropped to his knees and rolled behind a FEDEX truck, gagging and choking. Something hot tore down the back of his shirt and a chunk of metal ripped into his shoulder — debris rained down around him as he buried his face in his hands; it was hard to breathe and impossible to swallow, and the minutes passed like hours until the storm finally blew past and Burke was able to stagger out from behind the truck. There was a stillness on the street — no noise nor signs of life; Burke wiped the soot and dirt from his face and looked downtown where the Towers had once dominated the Manhattan skyline, seeing a shadowy figure emerge from the swirling clouds of ash and dust. He could make out the slow moving shape of a fire fighter, covered in white dust like a ghost, holding a pregnant woman in his arms as he moved down the street. “She needs water,” he said to Burke, “and I need to borrow a phone to call my wife.”

DOWNBOUND A

Fall came early that year. The edge in the air wasn't just the cold, raw wind cutting down the street — the unity and collective embrace briefly shared after September 11th had faded. The weight from the smoldering rubble a few blocks south was still heavy as Tommy Gallagher descended into the Church Street Station.

Making his way below, collar turned up and head down, Gallagher avoided the faces and stares of those around him. The darkness of the stairway paralleled the mood of the city.

It was out of that darkness that he heard the soft wailing sound of a saxophone. Haunting and edgy with bite like something by Coltrane or Sonny Rollins, the melody stirred something deep inside. Gallagher turned the corner and slowed before finally stopping alongside others who stood unmoving, listening in rapt silence.

A tall, black musician in a well-worn tee shirt and leather jacket, with dreadlocks and a wispy goatee stood across the platform, a small leather case open at his feet. He held his sax like a dance partner, hips swaying slightly as he dipped from side to side while the notes cascaded throughout the caverns of the station. With more than the usual thirty second sound bite Gallagher was accustomed to from subway performers, this was as if the A train had paused up the tracks to let him play. Gallagher held on each note as the music carried him to a time and place where warmth and beauty found its way into his heart again. A place where hope made its presence felt.

Business executives, secretaries, students, messengers, and laborers all stood together as one. For those few minutes on the platform each of them was taken far away where they could forget about hurt, pain, and memories of friends lost in the Towers.

The A pulled into the station and Gallagher quickly joined the rush for seats, but the music continued as the doors closed and the train started down the tracks; when he turned he could still see the saxophonist moving slowly back and forth. They continued

towards Brooklyn and the musician disappeared from view as Gallagher settled back into his seat. His eyes moved from passenger to passenger, and in each expression he saw the same thing he felt inside — something that had been missing.

And for the first time in weeks, Gallagher smiled.

