A World Trade Center Story: Tuesday, September 11, 2001

*Written By: Billy Forney*

8:00 am: I arrive at the World Trade Center complex. Stop off at the bank in the tunnels below Two World Trade Center to make a deposit at the ATM.

8:15 am: arrive at the 85th floor of One WTC, where my company, SMW Trading, has its offices. I begin preparing reports for another day of trading at the NYMEX, located in a separate building 5 minutes away from the office.

8:43am: I am sitting at the table in the center of the office, my back facing the outside windows. Suddenly, a horrific explosion. An immediate change in the air pressure. A ghostly column of air shoots like a canon into the office. The front door slams shut. Papers are whipped into the air. I’m thrown off my chair and to the ground. My boss jumps out of his office a second prior to the explosion. He had watched, in horrific disbelief, the entire event as the plane narrowly missed the empire state building and set a direct course for our building. The explosion sends the tower shaking furiously, lurching back and forth with sickening vengeance for maybe five or ten seconds. I think we may die. The building may topple over, or crumble. Finally it stops. The building is still standing. Everybody stares at each other, no idea of what happened or what to say. Speculations about an explosion, a bomb. No, it was a plane, our boss says. A commercial jet.

[Losing track of time]: I immediately walk to the door. Someone screams not to open the door; the hallway is on fire. Curious, Rob “Opie” Leder and I touch the door and the handle. It’s cool. I open the door, slowly, cautiously, to see what’s out there. It’s pitch black out there, except for the office light, still on, shining off of the billowing smoke in the hall. The smell is horrible. This is no ordinary smoke. It smells of metal, jet fuel, of rancid concrete, of things unspeakable. I close the door. People are still numb, shocked, confused. Opie was the first to say it; he was getting the hell outta there. I’m with you man. I open the door again. The smoke is thinner. I see an orange glow outside the door, a fire smoldering around the corner. I hear guys in another office yelling for help or something, too scared to open their door. Nobody knows where the stairs are, not even them.
Back into the office, to grab some stuff. The black SMW jacket I wear to the trading floor. It’s full of pick cards, order tickets, my empty water bottle, Ice gum, a calculator, a pen, a halls cough drop, and trading analyzers. I put on my jacket. I decide to fill up my water bottle. Opie waits for me, ready to bolt. Almost everybody wants to leave now.
Marvin Pickrum. Where is he? When did he leave? Where did he go? Is he in the bathroom? The bathroom! Someone check the bathroom. I walk into the hallway, inhaling the noxious stench, and I walk down the hall. To the left, another hallway, three small fires burning, debris everywhere, lights out. In front of me, another office, another man peering out, more terrified people. To the right, another hallway, the bathroom, and the stairwell. I open the bathroom door, everything in pristine condition. Like nothing happened. I call out for Marvin, no answer. He’s not in the bathroom. We head down the stairs.
We move fast. Not a lot of people in the stairs yet. At 81, Opie stops to help some guy break out some fire extinguishers. We each grab an extinguisher. We get to 72. People are coming back up the stairs. What’s the problem? The door several platforms down is pinned shut. People come back upstairs from below. We walk out into the hall to find another stairwell. This floor had damage. Wires and debris everywhere. A wall blown down into the hallway. Some fires smoldering in the rubble. I cover my face and try not to look. Afraid of another explosion. We find another stairwell at the other end of the hall.
In the next stairwell, there are more people. The descent gets slower. We try to use Opie’s cell phone. It was impossible to get a connection; an occasional faint ring, then everything goes dead. The display read “service unavailable at this time.” Try again later.
At about 65, still trying to use the cell phone. Service still down. We stop on a large platform. I notice a woman rocking back and forth directly behind me. She was barefoot, holding her shoes. She asks me for a swig of water, and uses it to wet her shirt and cover her mouth against the sickening stench. She anxiously, nervously tells me that she has two children, and she has to get downstairs. We start moving again. She picks her way down quickly, passing people where she can. She makes good progress. She’s polite. She’s frantic.

At 60, cell phones still not working. I toss the investor’s business daily I’ve been carrying with me. Not exactly important stuff at the moment. I think to myself that I’m trashing the building, and I feel bad.

At 50, cell phone service still out. A man with blood covering half of his face and a bandage on his head walking down the stairs. Others pass with him, obviously in pain. People move to the right and let them pass. Everybody is calm, orderly, supportive. Nobody takes advantage of the path they clear. Such calm, such unselfishness in the face of tragedy. Quiet adrenaline. Rumors of a second plane. People are making jokes to ease the strain.

We carry the fire extinguishers all the way down to the 49th floor. I’m sweating like crazy, shirt untucked, unbuttoned, I’m wearing my jacket, still carrying the fire extinguisher.

At 45, cell phones still not working. I see a firefighter heading up the stairs. A reassuring presence, giving words of encouragement. At 35, more firefighters, serious equipment in their hands, on their backs. At 30, the door to that floor is open, firefighters have set up base camp, they’ve dropped their stuff, tended to some injured people. They’ve secured all the floors below them. They’re working their way up, trying to save the people above us. At 25, a man with a cane struggles down the stairs, another man is helping him down. After we pass these men, things start moving. Maybe he was the bottleneck. We stop less frequently now.

At 20, a woman, Juliette, is struggling to get down, tired and out of breath. We offer water and help, she accepts. We wait a few seconds for her to rest. Opie takes her purse, which is heavy, and her jacket. Opie walks in front of her, I walk behind. We tell people to pass us on our left.

Floor 15, then 10, and then 5. At 2, some light. Outside light. Close to home free. We finally exit the stairwell, into the lobby, street level, facing east, and facing a courtyard I don’t really recognize. It must be in the middle of the World Trade Center complex. In the courtyard I recognize colors. Green from a small tree, gray from buildings. Blue sky, somewhere. Black, too. Black stuff on the green, and black stuff on the ground, small puffs of smoke. It must be debris from wreckage. What looks like a person’s leg. I can’t focus, my mind is wandering. I don’t want to look.

Firefighters lead us to the escalators. They don’t work, there’s debris on them that we climb over. We go down slowly. A few people complain we’re walking too slowly. But we keep going at a snail’s pace. Some people need help. What if it were you, I think to myself.

We get down to the lower level, to the glass doors separating One World Trade Center from the shops underground. The glass is all blasted out. Firefighters are showing us the way out, through the doors. An eerie situation underground. The sprinklers are on. People are worried about their clothes. Shops are empty, deserted. Some lights above are still on. Some aren’t. Water collecting in puddles on the ground. Ceiling tiles here and there. A usually noisy, active underground is virtually silent. Firefighters are calling out to us to keep moving.

We pass a sandwich shop, Banana Republic, Gap, entrance to Two World Trade Center. The firefighters lead us northeast, around a corner. We stop. Juliette wants to rest. The firefighters urge us forward. Juliette wants a swig of water. Just then, I hear a faint noise behind us, it sounds like water rumbling. No, it’s people screaming, they’re running, a mad fury, a tidal wave before the crescendo. What are they running from?

Someone yells to start running. We start running. Part of the underground goes black. Like someone flicks off the switch. We take 3 or 4 steps; Opie slips and falls sideways to his left. People yell for us to get down. We dive to the ground. The blast is like a hurricane. I find a small corner; I ball up as fast as I can. I cover my head with both arms. I grimace, mouth open, teeth clinched. For the second time in an hour, I think I’m about to die. Things pelting me: shards of glass, pieces of debris. I wait for something to sever me in two, and then the chaos subsides. Much later, I find out the blast was 2WTC coming down.

I open my eyes. I’ve gone blind. Pitch black. Maybe I didn’t open my eyes. I close them tight, then open them again. Nothingness. I take a breath. Metal, ash, concrete. I cough, and breathe again. More ash. With each breath I take, it’s more painful. I call out for Opie and Juliette, she answers, he doesn’t. I call out again. I fear something happened to him. I call out again. Finally, a cough, and a faint response. They’re both alive. A few seconds pass. Somebody steps on me. What’s that down there? A person, dude. Oh, sorry. I gather my wits, and try to get my bearings after being stepped on.

Then, a glimmer of light from behind. A fireman’s floodlight. It’s hard to see anything at all. The air is thick with dust and ash. I begin to see silhouettes of people, I see the guy who stepped on me. I see things blown all around us. I carefully stand up. I see Opie hunched over on the ground. He coughs some more stuff up and spits it out. Opie slowly stands. The fireman starts to walk by. Others are following. I pull Juliette to her feet. I don’t want the fireman to get away. He’s not walking fast, but it gets dark quickly without the light. I grab for Opie’s hand. The group of us develop a human chain. We follow the fireman. Another floodlight turns on in front of us.

Without the firemen’s lights, we know we would be crawling, in total, pitch black. It would take forever without their help. We navigate slowly in the direction we had originally intended. Bill? Opie, is that you? It’s Jonathan, one of our firm’s partners, in from Chicago, caught underground with us. Jonathan joins our group; he knows the underground and its shops well. We walk slowly, about eighty yards. We see light, its natural light, we walk towards it. It’s upstairs, the street level. We see another escalator, we walk to it, it has more debris on it. We walk up it. We get to the top, doors in front of us to the right. Broken glass. Debris. A large rug, or mat, it’s blocking the entrance, but only slightly. We’ll have to walk over it, through the broken glass door, to the outside. We’re almost outside. We carefully step over the rug. We’re outside.

Outside, it’s a war zone. A monochromatic landscape, covered in dirt and ash. Like lint, everything meshes into one color – gray. We’re in a movie, an abandoned city. Visibility is at the most 50 feet. I never once look up. I’m still grabbing on to Juliette. I feel like I’m pulling her too much. I slow down. I’m amazed at the amount of soot on the ground. Several inches thick. The air is full of dust and ash. Just keep walking, don’t stop. We need to keep walking. Where’s Opie? He’s in front of us, I know, I just can’t see him.
We reach a street, I think it’s a street; it’s covered in ash. We keep walking across the street. Somebody comes running towards us, shouts out to us, look for bodies under cars. A four-inch layer of ash and dust covers the streets. I glance around for bodies, I don’t see any. We start to walk by a church with a graveyard. We stop. I cough up the ash in my mouth and lungs, take a drink of water, and spit out blackness. I tell Juliette to take some water and do the same. Swish it around and spit it out. She asks me where her purse and jacket are. I don’t know. Opie had them. Where is Opie? I call out for him. Now I don’t know where he is. I call out for him again, finally I see him up ahead.

We start walking again. We pass the church, we get to another street, there’s less ash on the ground, the air is better, better visibility. Juliette says she needs her purse. She has no money. She doesn’t know what to do. I’ll give you some money, don’t worry. You’re alive. Be happy you’re alive. We continue walking. We meet back up with Opie. Now about 3 blocks away from our exit, a man is standing in a store doorway. He opens the door and tells us to come in. Juliette is exhausted; she wants to stay there. She sits down on some stairs. Opie and I want to keep moving. We tell Juliette that we have to leave. We exchange numbers. Opie and I each give her money to get home. We kiss her on the forehead and wish her good luck.

We walk about ten minutes. People have lined the sidewalks, looking at the building on fire. We keep walking away. Then, a horrifying gasp, people begin crying. We turn around to look. One World Trade Center goes down. Our building. We watch it go down, floor by floor by floor.

Unbelievable. Let’s get outta here. We turn back around and keep walking. We come upon three co-workers. Thank God you’re alive. We find pay phones, with lines 20 people long. We keep walking, just trying to get away – to call somebody, let them know we’re alive. We walk about thirty minutes. We take a side street. We find a corner store. It has a pay phone. Nobody is using it. We take turns calling our wives, our parents, and our friends. We’re okay, we’re alive. We all walk home together. I walk the entire length of Manhattan to get home to the upper west side. On the way I see my sister, I go to friends’ places, I see other New Yorkers walking home. Surreal.

**Wednesday, September 12, 2001**                                                                              9:00 am.
I receive a call from Opie. Everybody made it out okay. Marvin is alive.

**Monday, September 16, 2001**                                                                                       2:01 pm.
I receive a letter from my bank. The ATM deposit went through.

**Journal Questions: Style and Voice**

1. Who is speaking (perspective)? How do you know? I think the character Bill is telling the story because… others are speaking to Bill in dialogue and he is often speaking n.

2. What stylistic techniques is the author using to capture our attention? (explain 2)

3. What is an example of descriptive language used to paint a picture in the readers mind? What sensory details are being used to do that? (Use a direct quote)

4. What is the moral of the story and do you believe after reading it that you would

be a fight, flight or freeze type of person during this kind of situation?

**Preview the Writing Task**

Central Idea (main idea/plot) = Ex. A story about courage and how people react different when they are scared.

Form (Essay, article, story etc.) = Short Story: Maybe based on true events.

Purpose (To teach, inform, entertain, clarify etc.) = To teach others/readers it is ok to react in your own way to a scary situation.

Public Audience (age, gender, interests) = People that want to learn more about…