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OPINION/VIEWPOINT

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**Just Like That:
Remembering the Insanity
That Was 9/11**

Ten years ago today former Yorker Steve McKee was across the street from the World Trade Center when the planes hit. This is what he saw and thought.

By Steve McKee

LATE THAT DAY – that day when just like that planes flew into towers, five-sided buildings and Pennsylvania earth, that day when I watched a man in a pink shirt plummet down down down, just like that, that day when from the Brooklyn Bridge I watched a 110-story building disappear, just like that – late that day this is what I thought about:

I thought about a day during my sophomore year at York Catholic High School. I was riding in like always, Jeff Flick driving, with Linda and Steve Flick and K.C. and Jeannie McEntee. Heading to YCHS down Boundary Avenue, we turned left and suddenly saw this huge lake where Vander used to be. Kids from the school were running all over, yelling and laughing and splashing. A water main had broken! School had been cancelled! And just like that an ordinary day had become something altogether not.

I hadn't thought about that water-main break in 33 years. But ten years ago, on September 11, 2001, that's what I thought about. I realize that in the real

world there can be no comparing the two. All the same, I thought about that water-main break, just like that. The just-like-that part -- the jarring, changing suddenness -- that's what I thought about, just like that.

THAT MORNING I was at the World Financial Center, across the Westside Highway from the World Trade Center, three weeks into a new assignment at The Wall Street Journal, where I'd been a copy editor since 1994. I was the inaugural writer of a new column called *The Daily Fix* – a first-generation sports “blog.” I was at my desk at 8:46 a.m. when I heard it. Or rather, what I thought I heard: some flatbed truck carrying some big load, losing it all into the street as it careened too fast around a corner. But then I heard this: Somewhere on the ninth floor a woman screaming in terror, and the sound of footsteps tearing down a hall.

The only other person on the floor stood up. Sheepishly, we glanced at each other. She looked out the window opposite and said, “Everyone in the office building over there is looking out their windows and pointing up at something behind us.” I looked: Yes, they were.

I called my wife, Noreen, in midtown. “Turn on your TV,” I said. “Something's happened. I don't know what, but something's happened. I'm out of here.”

We left immediately, down the emergency staircase, through an access tunnel and a parking garage and out a door that spit us outside seemingly in the middle of nowhere. I looked around, getting my bearings. This is what I remember best about those first disorienting seconds out in the day's crystal-blue weather: Women dressed for another day of Manhattan

work, except they were scurrying barefoot, hands clutching their heels, all the easier to run on pavement.

I walked north on South End Avenue, eavesdropping on conversations: “Plane.” ... “Trade Center.” ... “Crash.” ... “Fire.” At Liberty Street I could look up. And there it was. Nearly to the top of the WTC’s North Tower, five, six floors engulfed, enraged, consumed in fire. I can describe it best thusly: Death by “necklace.” A reporter-friend from the Journal had written from South Africa about this particularly hideous form of execution. A car tire filled with gasoline is jammed down around a person’s torso and set ablaze. Death is not instantaneous. This now was the North Tower: necklaced.

WITH THE FEW people around me, we stood transfixed. Then we saw him. He appeared from a south-facing window above the fire. He must have smashed out the glass, seeking air, and then fell. Or he jumped, out of options. The woman next to me screamed. Someone shouted: “What’s that?” I yelled: “That’s a person!” He fell face down, spread-eagled. I could see his legs flailing, his arms flapping, his movements weirdly mechanical. I see him in khaki pants, pink Oxford shirt, striped tie. Yes, I was too far away to discern such detail, but that’s how I choose to describe him. He deserves that much. It is breathtakingly unbelievable how quickly a person falls from sky to earth. Just like that.

I ran. For a pay phone, I told myself, but it is clear to me now that I was running ... away. I sprinted along the North Cove of the WFC, turned left and, in a grand bit of foolishness, ran clear down the Esplanade of the Hudson River, a long, long block to Albany

Street, where I turned left and slowed to a walk, my initial apprehensions blowing out of me in hard breaths.

I couldn't see the second plane as it cleaved the South Tower at 9:03 a.m. But I could hear it. There was no roar of jet engines, just an obliterating, mind-numbing shriek. All other sound ceased and succumbed, until suddenly there was this: a rough, roiling rumble, louder and louder, framed at the edges by the crying-gasping-screaming of the thousands of people who had just seen the unseeable: A United Airlines plane exploding into World Trade Center 2. Just like that.

I headed south, toward lower Manhattan, joining a trickle of people that quickly became a stream, a river, a flood. How far would a 110-story building reach if it toppled? I curled around the Battery, then north and up to the Brooklyn Bridge. I looked back exactly once. Both towers necklaced now, I could see more persons jumping, falling, plummeting. I still ask: *What must it have been like? What would I have done?*

A FEW WEEKS after that day I attended a funeral for a New York City firefighter, one of the 343 who died running to the Trade Center (and not, like me, away from). We New Yorkers were asked to attend these ceremonies because the department's resources were stretched too thin to bring to them what they deserved most: an overflowing congregation.

I picked him randomly, much as he had been picked for death. I searched the Daily News until I found the one I wanted: familiarly Catholic and on Staten Island -- on the way to New Jersey, where the Journal's offices had been relocated. He has a name, but really, he could've been any one of the 343: young

and married, with small kids. I learned from the eulogies that firefighters forever renovate their houses, adding decks, extensions, bathrooms. My guy was a member of elite rescue squads in the FDNY and the Coast Guard reserve. His job, his life was to do heroic things. But I never learned the particulars of his death, or gleaned any inklings of what it had been like. Perhaps it no longer matters: He ran to the towers, and because he did he died. I wanted to cry, but was afraid if I started I might not stop. When the Coast Guard contingent – all slow and reverent motions – violently snapped its American flag over the box of remains, the sound cracked through the church like a gunshot. The congregation, packed to overflowing, flinched and gasped as one.

ONCE UP ON the jam-packed Brooklyn Bridge, I could feel the insanity of this water-main day rising by the second. I ran into a friend, and yes, it was good to see a familiar face. She was heading to Manhattan, she said, to the people at her P.R. firm a few blocks from the WTC. We exchanged hurried notes and she continued on. We have since joked that when she started toward Manhattan I should have grabbed her “by the nape of the neck” and steered her back to Brooklyn. Except there is no joke: She was in her building when the first tower came down. She tried to get out, but there was so much smoke and detritus in the stairwell that she had to wait on a lower floor. Then the second tower fell. Only when it was finally light enough to see did she leave and walk back over the bridge. No, there is no joke: She has developed a persistent cough and been examined at the Mayo Clinic.

My friend gone to Manhattan, I was alone again on the bridge with thousands of others, wailing sirens filling the space around me. There came shouts that a plane had struck the Pentagon. I stood stock still and took stock: I was suspended 130-plus feet above the East River in the middle of a mile-plus span, unable any longer to suspend belief: This bridge, with all these people: What a spectacular target for another plane! I was never in any danger that day. I know that. But right then, right there, true fear welled. I pressed forward.

“Steve!” This from Marcus Brauchli. Marcus is now the executive editor of the Washington Post. On 9/11 he was the Journal’s newsroom chief, and he was on his way into the office. He implored me to return. I hesitated. He asked me: Were my wife and son safe? I had to admit, yes. “Then come to the newsroom,” he said. In the grand scheme, should the Journal not publish tomorrow it would be no *real* tragedy. Yet, in its way, it would be. I said OK.

Screaming on the bridge turned our attention back to the Trade Center. And just like that it happened. The South Tower twisted a bit on its own axis and -- slowly, simply, stupefyingly -- collapsed upon itself, swallowed whole by a monstrous cloud of dirt, dust and debris. It looked as if some giant, grasping hand had reached up from beneath the ground and pulled the tower into the Earth, reclaiming it all in a thunderous detonation.

I watched with Marcus and another Journal editor. There came more shouted reports, of an airplane crashed in Pennsylvania. “Someone, somewhere,” Marcus said, “is very happy that this has happened.” With that he launched into a journalism tutorial -- Who-What-When-Where-Why -- wanting answers. We had barely started toward Manhattan again when a call

somehow got through on his cell. Marcus's duties had changed; my services were no longer required. Tomorrow's Journal with today's story would be produced at Dow Jones's New Jersey headquarters. Marcus and I shook hands and wished each other luck. We would shake hands again the next day, him breaking from a meeting to seek me out in a crowded corridor in Jersey. He asked of my family, wife and son. I was about to ask of his when a yell came for him to get back to the confab of higher-ups. We shook hands yet again, our shared moment on the Brooklyn Bridge always with us, now behind us.

THE BURGEONING ASH cloud, thick and chalky, wafted east from Manhattan, across the river and into Brooklyn. My Cobble Hill neighborhood was in its direct path, and over the next 24 hours a thick, powdery film would settle on the trees, streets, windowsills, everything. And not just ash. Caught in the vortex and deposited in Brooklyn were thousands of pieces of paper. Intact 8½-by-11s buckshot with holes, shards with burnt edges, and every conceivable shape in between, all of them pieces of an enormous puzzle we can never put together.

The next morning I would go outside with my 11-year-old son and fill a freezer bag full of these papers. I saved the bag. The smell of death that lingered in the air for months after is gone, but the papers still have a dusty, gritty coating. The stuff sticks to your fingers and won't let go. I wish I could make a significant observation about them now, but, ten years later, the only remarkable thing about these shards and pieces is how ... not remarkable they are. A bit of an insurance form. A year-to-date account balance. A

scrap of menu (“Fish & Chips Basket: \$12.95”). A “Weekly Core Meeting” report. A still-stapled, two-page group email (“Hi, All, Attached is a schedule of...”). Two six-dollar betting slips for the trifecta at Belmont on Saturday, 9/8. I told my son we were collecting it all to honor the people who had once used these papers, touched them, held them, been alive with them. That seemed a good reason then. It still does now.

ONCE OFF THE bridge, I wasted little time getting home. I closed all the windows (ash was already settling). I filled the tub with water (really). I went to the store and bought the staples (bread, milk, eggs). I called my mother in York. She wasn’t home; I left a message. Then I called my sister, Kathy, in Fort Myers, Fla. Her husband, Pat, picked up. “Pat? Steve.” *Loooooong* pause. Then, finally from Pat, his delivery flat: “It’s good to hear your voice.” He told me about the second tower coming down, and I understood immediately his stunned monotone. He was watching on TV, where it must look like complete conflagration, the world ending. “Pat,” I said, “I gotta call Noreen.”

“STEVE!” screamed Francine, Noreen’s assistant. Once on the line Noreen said I had to get to our son. From the playground of his middle school deep in Brooklyn he had a clear view of the burning towers, she said. When he told a teacher, “My Daddy works there,” he had been brought inside where he had called my office and left a message. (Oh, just to hear that once!) By now in tears, he had then called Noreen. She at least could tell him she had talked to me that morning. Still, she said: “Go get him.”

Inside Middle School 51, there was impressive order amid the chaos outside. I waited where I was told to, in the chorus room. When he appeared in the doorway, I could see him fighting the urge to give into it all and run right over. His feigned smile was all trepidation. I was in Sister James Mary's sixth grade class at old St. Joseph Elementary on Princess Street on November 22, 1963, the loudspeaker squawking that President Kennedy had just been killed. I'll never forget. What will our sons and daughters of 9/11 remember of *their* day?

He loved the World Trade Center, our son did. He taught me how, with its ribbed outer shell, you could sort of walk right into it and become part of it, get yourself inside one of those ribs and look up up up ... into forever. A few years before the attacks he did a watercolor of the towers that is (proud dad talking) spectacular. Prescient, too. His sky is crystal blue, like that day. Three-quarters up each tower he X-ed out a couple of floors – necklaces? The buildings themselves he left unpainted, rendering the outlines into ghosts of what had been. There is also a scribbled orange-red ball of flame to the right of the towers. The sun, of course, except now it looks like devastation coming. On the one-year anniversary he placed a copy at one of the informal memorials of candles, mementos and photos that dotted the city.

WITH THE TWO of us safely ensconced back at our house, the full weight of the day settled upon us, the total water-main-break *otherness* of it all. All we could now was ... wait. But for what? For Noreen to get home. With the subways shut down, she walked the six miles from her midtown office. There are eight

million stories in the Naked City, and Noreen was one with all of them on their trek home. A lasting image, she says: Lines of people around the block at hospitals, everyone waiting patiently to donate blood when survivors arrived. Noreen got home about 5 p.m., went upstairs and changed immediately. The clothes and shoes she wore that day are in plastic bags. She has not worn them since.

NYC denizens fancy their city not as a huge metropolis but as a closely connected grouping of small towns. It's a warm and fuzzy cliché, and it isn't really true, except in those moments when it is. This was that moment, our moment. There were no strangers in the Big Apple that day, that night, those next few weeks. A small but powerful rebuttal to the large and awful power that had battered us. This was the good that came from that day, and it was very, very good. (Eerily, last month's earthquake and hurricane sparked another small-town feel – as if as reminder, ten years on.)

Meanwhile: the survivors the blood-donaters waited for? They never arrived, of course. No one “survived.” People had either gotten out or they hadn't. It would take days, weeks, months, years to accept that fact – if in fact it is accepted even now. On our block, that night Lisa didn't come home. That's how the news passed neighbor to neighbor: Lisa “didn't come home.” We couldn't, wouldn't say what had really happened: That her office had taken a direct hit: Ground Zero's Ground Zero. Saying she didn't come home left room for a hope we knew was gone.

NOREEN AND I spent the evening answering the phone from every friend we had ever made in every chapter of our lives, or so it seemed. We welcomed

every ring, every connection. And then that day, it finally became night. The world shut down. It is impossible now to conjure how totally *stopped* our town was that night -- how still, how stunned, how stricken.

Noreen watched the news into the morning. I tossed our son into his top bunk and eventually crawled into the bottom. Our water-main day was over. Any resemblance between that day at York Catholic High School and this day 9/11 – the jarring, changing suddenness – had been fully spent. The next day my sophomore year, when we rode back to YCHS and turned the corner onto Vander, we could see that everything was back to normal. Just like that. There have now been 3,652 next days since September 11, 2001. And it still isn't just like that.

Steve McKee and his family continue to live in Brooklyn. He is currently adapting his book, "My Father's Heart: A Son's Reckoning With the Legacy of Heart Disease," a memoir of his father and of York, into a one-man show. He welcomes emails at steve@steve-mckee.com.