

LAST MAN DOWN

*A Firefighter's Story of Survival and Escape
from the World Trade Center*

By
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with Daniel Paisner



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MORNING

I remember what we all remember about that morning: clear horizon, high sun, visibility stretching to forever. Looking back, I realize it was the beautiful day that killed us, because if it had been gray, or foggy, or overcast, there's no way those bastards could have flown those planes. Not on that day anyway. All up and down the East Coast, it was the same: still winds, blue skies, and not a cloud in sight. Boston, New York, Washington, D.C. . . . all dawning like a picture postcard. What are the friggin' odds of that?

September 11, 2001, started early in our house in Chester, New York, about sixty miles north of the George Washington Bridge. God's country—or anyway, a mostly blue-collar community, solidly embraced by firemen and cops and other civil ser-

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vants who couldn't afford to live in the city they served. I was scheduled for a straight tour, nine to six, which for me comes around just a few times each year. Most days, I'm working six o'clock at night until six o'clock the next night; a couple times a month, I'm on from nine in the morning until nine the next morning; and every here and there, I'll pull a night tour, a fifteen-hour shift from six at night until nine the next morning. These straight tours, though, they're pretty rare, especially when you reach chief, as I had done about nine years earlier. I'll tell you, they're always a welcome sight on the calendar. They signal a shift that puts you in synch with the rest of the nine-to-five world. Makes you forget, at least for one day, how out of whack our working lives really are, set against everyone else's.

It's about seventy miles, door to door, from my front door to the firehouse on West 100th Street. I had the drive down to a science. If I had to start at nine, I usually planned to get to work around seven-thirty, which meant leaving the house at about six. Most guys, they're looking to do the same, itching to start their shifts, to get into it, and at the other end there's guys been working twenty-fours anxious to leave a little early, so it all works out. You pull the same nine hours—or fifteen, or twenty-four—you just start a little bit ahead of the books. It's been this way as far back as I could remember, and I'd been at this job twenty-eight years. We're always looking to punch in early, and to get a jump on heading home. At the front end, there's something about the pull of the firehouse that draws us to it for the camaraderie, the bull-shitting, the shared purpose, the frat-house environment . . . it's different for each of us, I suppose.

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For me, the attraction has always been about the guys and the job. Or I should say, about the guys and the jobs—emphasis on the plural, meaning all the different fires we’ve worked over the years. I love talking about this job or that job, big or small, extraordinary or routine. Whatever fire I missed on the previous shift, I have to hear about it. Whatever fire I worked, I have to tell the tale. As chief, and now as battalion commander, I obviously have to hear about each job in order to file my necessary paperwork and stay on top of things, but it runs much deeper than that. I *have* to hear about it. I get off on listening to the guys talk about the jobs, down to the smallest detail, over and over, or talking up whatever it was that took place on our tour. It’s like lifeblood. I can hear the same story a million times if it’s a good story, and I can tell a good one of my own a million plus. There are a lot of us caught up in it the same way. It’s what we do. It’s who we are. And it’s why we’re there.

So I was looking to leave home early that Tuesday morning, same as my wife, Debbie, who works as an obstetrical nurse at St. Luke’s Hospital in Newburgh, New York, and my son, Stephen, who attends a private Catholic high school in New Jersey. My daughter, Lisa, is a senior at Pace University in lower Manhattan, living in a dorm, so she was the only one in the family sleeping in at this early hour. We were all out the door by six, six-fifteen, which meant there was no such thing as breakfast. Maybe a doughnut fisted on the fly. No such thing as small talk either. Our main thing was getting Stephen moving in time for school. He’s always ten, fifteen minutes late for everything, and that’s with his mother and me riding him. It’s funny the way two people from the same

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family, the same gene pool, can be so completely different—me racing to get to work early; Stephen being pushed along so he isn't too late. And then there's Debbie in the middle, minding us both.

On this morning, after I did my piece chasing Stephen out of bed and into the shower, I grabbed a cup of coffee in a travel mug and made to leave. We'd never been overly demonstrative with each other, me and Stephen, just kind of nodded or grunted good-bye as we got ready for the day. Two ships passing, that's how it was with our comings and goings each morning. Me and Debbie, though, we usually kissed, or hugged, and on the days we didn't think to kiss good-bye, we usually hollered something to each other on our ways out the door. Something nice. Debbie's always told me that when I go off to work there's a part of her thinking about the dangers I might face there, about the *job*, but she tries to put it out of her mind. Like the wives of most firefighters, she chooses to think I spend my days playing Ping-Pong at the firehouse, or whipping up great meals with the guys in the kitchen, and we'd fallen into this silent routine where I didn't talk about how close we came in this fire or that fire, how big the job was, or anything like that. She tells me that when I come home at night and crawl into bed alongside her, she can still smell the smoke—the fire even—coming off my body, even after I've showered, but we don't talk about it. We never talk about it. Most guys I know, they don't talk about these things with their wives either.

The unspoken fear, the unacknowledged fear, is that I might not come home, but it's a fear so ingrained it's almost unnoticeable. It's there, but it's not there, Debbie tells me—in the back of her mind, but so far back it hardly registers—and knowing this,

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we try to put our busy routines on pause long enough for a loving good-bye of some kind. This, too, we don't always think about. This, too, has become so ingrained we don't even notice it. We mean to make this loving moment of connection, but sometimes we forget, or sometimes the clock gets in the way.

That's one of the pieces of this morning's ritual that will haunt me later, the not remembering if we had a chance to hug or kiss or say something nice to each other. If it was one of those mornings when we just took each other for granted and went about our business, or if it was one of those mornings when we stopped and paid each other some warm attention. I've reworked the scene a thousand times in my head, and I've got no idea. One minute we were taking turns putting Stephen through his slow paces, and the next minute I was gone.

Gone first for bagels. One of the unwritten rules of the fire department is that the guys working the day tour are expected to bring breakfast. It's understood. Chief, captain, lieutenant, fireman . . . rank doesn't matter. Every day tour, every firehouse in New York City, there are whole units coming in, and it falls to these guys to bring cake, bagels, muffins, rolls, fruit. Whatever they want, but it's got to be something, enough for everybody, so before I hopped onto the New York State Thruway, I made a pit stop at Rockland Bakery for a bag of bagels. The bakery is a bag-your-own, self-service place, so I grabbed a couple dozen assorted, with at least one cinnamon raisin for yours truly. I didn't put much thought into what I was grabbing, I just grabbed until the bag was full. Everything else we've got at the firehouse kitchen: butter, cream cheese, coffee, milk. Every payday, we take up a collection,

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twenty dollars per man, that goes to keeping the kitchen stocked. Coffee's by far the biggest expense—we drink that stuff down like it's water—but the twenty dollars also goes to buy condiments, other staples, and toilet paper. (Actually, we do get department-issued toilet paper, but it's like sandpaper; you can still see the wood chips in each square!) The city doesn't pay for any of that stuff; it all comes from us, and it all starts with breakfast.

I drove my beat-up blue 1991 Honda Accord south to the city in no time at all. I'm usually moving against traffic, and whenever there was a tie-up there were a bunch of different back ways I could go. I'd been driving that route for so long it was like the path I'd worn out between my bedroom and the bathroom—the 160,000 miles on the odometer were the proof!—so it was never a problem making time. I knew all the snags, all the potholes, all the trouble spots. And I made good time this morning, even with the regular commuting traffic, and pulled up at the firehouse around seven-forty. Found a good spot right on the street—the police chief's, from the 24th Precinct, which is housed in the same building (I always made it a point to take their parking spaces, for chop-busting reasons)—made sure my valuables were stowed out of view in the black lawn-and-leaf bags I kept for just this purpose, grabbed the bagels, and went inside.

There wasn't much doing from the night before. There had been a couple of incidental runs, and there was some paperwork left over, reports to be filed. The chief I was relieving, Bob Holzmaier, was particularly glad to see me. He'd been on since nine the previous morning, and he took one look at me and started figuring which Long Island Rail Road train he could catch out of

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Penn Station. Bob's not one of those "minute men" you sometimes find in firehouses, those guys who watch the clock and bug out at the first opportunity, but he was anxious to get home, can't blame him for that, and he had the train schedule so burned into his memory that he didn't have to consult it for his ride home.

It had been a quiet night, nothing much to report. Once or twice a year, you'll get a night tour with no calls, but there's almost always a run or three. Sometimes, it's a run to nothing, but when you check the calls throughout the battalion, there's usually something big somewhere. As battalion commander of FDNY Battalion 11, I supervised seven companies, along with battalion chiefs John Hughes, Dennis Collopy, and Bob Holzmaier: Engine Co. 37 and Ladder Co. 40, on 125th Street in Harlem; Engine Co. 47, on 113th Street in Morningside Heights; Engine Co. 74, on 83rd Street on the Upper West Side; Ladder Co. 25 on 77th Street on the Upper West Side; and Engine Co. 76 and Ladder Co. 22, on 100th Street on the Upper West Side, where I was based. If there were no big jobs here, with our two home companies, there were surely a couple elsewhere in the battalion.

I dropped the bagels in the kitchen, grabbed my cinnamon raisin, and hopped up to the office to go over a couple of things with Bob. Things move in much the same way all over the department, all over the city, as one guy comes in to relieve another. It's like a tag team, or a relay race, the way you pass on responsibility to the next guy, bring him up to speed on what's been going on. At the change of shift, there's usually three or four guys in the kitchen, shooting the breeze, talking about the jobs, in no hurry to leave. At the end of the overnight tour in particular, guys'

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kids are already off to school, and if their wives work, they're usually gone by this time, too, so there's no rushing home.

What you've got then are all these extra hands, guys not wanting to leave for fear they'll miss out on something. Often there's nothing to do but twiddle our thumbs, sip at some coffee, pinch at a muffin or a roll, and hash over the details of our last big job like it was the seventh game of the World Series. Or sometimes, it's actually the seventh game of the World Series, or the *Monday Night Football* game from the night before. The firehouse is like a second home to most firefighters, and if our real homes are empty, there's no better place to be. Honestly, there's not a firefighter in my acquaintance who will tell you, also honestly, that he'd rather be anyplace else than chewing the fat with his brothers. Looking back on the last job, looking forward to the next. Shooting the shit.

So this was the scene on that terrifyingly beautiful morning. Business as usual, about to be shattered. I was still in my civvies when I told Bob to take off, but I figured if we got a job I could put on my bunker gear over my clothes. You're not supposed to, goes against regulation, but I'd done it before. Two minutes, I'd be dressed and good to go. There are some chiefs, they won't relieve the chief on duty until they're sitting at their desks with their ties cinched tight, like they're posing for the newspapers. Regulation says we're to wear our work duty uniform whenever we're on duty: blue pants, white collared shirt with the chief's epaulets—gold oak leaves for the chief, silver oak leaves for the battalion commander. It's like the military, silver outranks gold, but if I can't find my silver leaves I'll wear the gold ones—that is,

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if I can find those. What the hell do I care? How I dress doesn't affect my job performance, how I approach each fire, how I look after my men. If a job comes in, I'm ready; it doesn't matter what I'm wearing.

At about eight o'clock, I wandered down to the kitchen, to talk with the guys, to grab another bagel, to put a head on my coffee. In one sense, the day had officially started, with me relieving Bob, but it hadn't really gotten going. We hadn't started checking the equipment, or recharging the batteries for our radios and other gear, which for the morning tour would have to wait until precisely nine o'clock. But the entire house was already in change-of-tour mode. Guys were still trickling in, small-talking on this and that, swapping out upcoming tours. Basically, we were waiting for nine o'clock, hoping our first run could hold out until then. And if it couldn't, then that would be okay, too.

Eight-fifteen, I was back in my office, making ready. A chief's office isn't much: two desks, two chairs, two computers—one for the chief and one for the aide. (My aide, for this tour, would be Gary Sheridan, but he was joined in our rotation by Doug Robinson, Super Dave Shaughnessy, and Bobby Pyne.) We kept our family photos and other personal effects in our lockers—in mine, there's a pair of Stephen and Lisa in my chief's hat, circa 1995 or so, which I'm guessing is a fairly standard pose for the children of firefighters—but the office itself is a spartan, bare-bones scene. Nothing that isn't standard-issue, or time-shared by the four chiefs assigned to each house—or occasionally, by a chief from elsewhere in the department called in to cover. I've done time in almost every chief's office, and I can tell you that everything's pretty

much the same, and in this way we all know where everything is, and how everything works. About the only thing to distinguish them would be the view, but in some quarters you can't even catch a window.

I had some paperwork to cover, some calls to return, and some clothes to step into, so I juggled all three as the rest of my men reported to work, and in this way I passed the time until the formal change of shift. At about a quarter to nine, a call came over the "bitch box," our internal intercom, telling us to turn on the television to Channel Seven. Actually, all it said was, "Channel Seven," but we knew what the message meant. There were televisions all over the firehouse: in the chief's office, in the kitchen, in the lounge area. . . . If we were tipped to something relevant unfolding on one of the local television stations—a fire, or an interview with one of the brass—the shout was straightforward: "Channel Seven," or "Channel Four," or whatever.

It was just after eight-fifty in the morning, according to the clock on the office wall. I flipped on the television and turned to Channel Seven, and as I did a couple of the guys wandered into the office to see what was going on. And there it was. Our beautiful blue day turned to shit. Our world turned upside down and inside out and all over the place. Our lives changed forever.

I saw what everyone else saw, couldn't have been more than a minute after it happened. The north tower of the World Trade Center, smoking like crazy. Pandemonium at ground level. And I heard the uncertainty and confusion coming from the announcers. At this early point, the talk on the television was that a plane had crashed into the tower, but there was no indication of the size

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of the plane, no word on the circumstances of the crash, no accompanying video. Just this incongruous picture of a frightening blue sky, clouded with smoke on a late summer morning.

There were three or four of us in my office, and no one said a word. For the longest time, we just stood there and watched, our mouths hanging open in complete disbelief or incomprehension. We understood what we were seeing, what the implications were in terms of us firefighters, but it wasn't fully registering, if you know what I mean. Finally, I broke the silence. "Holy shit!" I stammered, and that about said it. I wasn't much for words to begin with, and here none were needed.

Right away, I knew this was no accident. I knew this in my gut, and I knew this in my heart, and I knew this in my head. Usually, I trust the first two when they're all I've got to go on, but when the head's involved, I tend to go that way first. And that way, right away, screamed terrorism. There was always the chance it could have been an intentional act by some nut-job loon with no agenda, but I knew enough about flying to realize that this kind of thing didn't happen on its own. I knew that in the history of New York City, there had only been one occasion when an airplane crashed into a skyscraper—the 1945 crash of a B-25 into the seventy-eighth and seventy-ninth floors of the Empire State Building—and that occurred on a dangerously foggy day without the benefits of the sophisticated instrument-flying technology currently in place. Back then, pilots flew by a navigational method known as "dead reckoning." They picked a spot on the horizon, and kept it in their sights until they got where they were going. But there was no longer room for this kind of accident.

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The airspace above New York City was a “no fly zone.” The only strip you were allowed to fly was up and down the waterways, east at an even altitude, west at an odd altitude. The “rules of the road” were such that there was no colliding, one plane into another, one plane into a fixed object on the ground. When a plane hits a building like that, there’s no way it’s an accident.

Remember, at this early point, there was no indication what kind of plane it was that had flown into the tower. Nothing to let us know if maybe there was some kind of bomb on board. Nothing but the sad, surreal picture of a bright, gorgeous sky, blackened by smoke, and the thought of the number of people who were surely dead as a result, and the horrible ways they’d surely died. And to a firefighter, the scene looked even more serious than it did to civilian eyes. I actually heard one of the announcers on the television report that the stock market opening would be delayed by a half hour because of the crash, and I thought to myself, What the hell are these people thinking? What are they talking about? They were talking about business-as-usual kinds of things, and here we were looking at the biggest disaster in the history of the city. Just one glance at the television, and I could see we were into an impossible situation, and if it wasn’t impossible it was damn close. There’d be no easy way to get to those office workers trapped above the impact. It could be done, mind you, but it wouldn’t be easy, and it wouldn’t do to be thinking about opening the stock market or going about the rest of our lives in the usual way. Not just yet.

I collected all of these thoughts, and a couple million more, all in the space of a few seconds, and the next thing I knew I was

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on the phone to the departmental dispatcher. I dialed 261 on our internal telephone system without fully realizing what I was doing, knowing only that those images on the television meant people were hurt and there was a fire to be put out. It was pure instinct, and as the dispatcher's voice came on at the other end, all I was thinking was rescue. How do we get those people out of there? How do we put out a fire on such a high floor? What's our next move? I thought back to an article I'd written a couple months earlier in *WNYF*, our departmental magazine, about nonroutine high-rise fires, and I figured if there was anyone in the department wanting in on something like this, it would be me.

"This is Chief Picciotto, Eleven Battalion," I barked into the phone. "I was down there for the first World Trade Center bombing in '93. I know the building. If you need my services, call me."

It wasn't much of a call, but it was a call I had to make. As chief, when there's a fire in your jurisdiction, you just go. You're "first due," which is department-speak for being first due on the scene. You don't have to wait to be dispatched. There's a "second due" company as well, and they can usually head out without a direct order, but beyond that you have to follow protocol. If every one of us went out to every fire that caught our interest, you'd have empty firehouses all over the city, so we had to follow command, and in this case command was telling us to stay put. I could live with this, for the time being. I wasn't asking in, just offering myself up, telling them of my prior knowledge, which maybe someone in charge might think would come in handy.

Of course, there were others with some of the same pieces of prior knowledge, but I figured I'd get my name in there early.

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See, back in 1993, February 26th, as a battalion chief in lower Manhattan, I was the second chief on the scene when a rented Ryder van exploded on the B-2 level of the World Trade Center parking garage. The van had been carrying a nitrourea bomb. That's a thousand pounds plus of fertilizer packed with hydrogen cylinders to add impact. The detonation took out seven stories, six of them below ground. Six people were killed, and over one thousand were injured, and the resulting rescue made it the biggest job in FDNY history. Roughly forty-five percent of the department's on-duty staff responded to the scene, including eighty-four engine companies, sixty truck companies, twenty-eight battalion chiefs, nine deputy chiefs, five rescue companies, and twenty-six other special units. The total response was the equivalent of a sixteen-alarm fire—an unfathomable amount of manpower and equipment. I was part of the team establishing a subcommand post near the entrance to the building, to direct the overwhelming flow of responding units, and felt strongly that this experience would be useful for whatever the hell was going on in the north tower at just this moment. Plus, I knew the building. I knew the stairwells, and what it was like to evacuate tens of thousands of people through such a narrow space, against an uncertain clock.

In this, I realized, I was like hundreds of other guys still on the job from 1993, but to me it was personal. I hadn't realized it until just this black moment, but I felt a connection to those towers. It was the strangest thing. There'd been hundreds of calls to the World Trade Center since it opened in 1970. Most of these were minor fires, or false alarms, but it was the bombing in 1993 that was the fixed line to where we were this morning. I'd been

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there in a time of crisis, and I felt I needed to be there during this one as well. I know it sounds crazy to put it in just this way, but it's like it was between me and the building, what was happening on these television screens. Like I said, to me it was personal.

I got off the phone and scrambled down to the kitchen, to watch the news with the other men. Remember, it was still change of tour, so there were guys at both ends of their shifts standing around the television set, wanting to be let in, just like me. Other than Bob Holzmeier, there wasn't a single other guy who had left from the night tour, so the house was pretty crowded. And all of us were just staring, rapt, taking it all in, trying to make sense of what we were seeing, when in truth it made no sense at all. Think about it: How are you supposed to piece together images like this into any kind of logical picture?

Gradually, we started to talk. We could see the amount of fire. We could see the smoke. We could see the hole at the point of impact. We knew this was bad, real bad, that the people above would surely die, if the smoke hadn't gotten to them already. There was no way to get them out. Billy Reynolds, of Engine Co. 76, mentioned that a lot of firefighters were probably going to die today, and no one could argue the point. In fact, we let his comment just hang there in the room for a while, none of us saying anything, each of us lost in our own private thoughts, wondering which of our brothers we were about to lose, if it would be one of us.

At this point, we were all thinking the smoke would be the killer. We didn't know it had been a huge jet plane, laden with fuel. We all knew how jet fuel could burn at two thousand degrees

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Fahrenheit, and how steel can begin to lose its strength at fifteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit, but we weren't thinking along these lines just yet—and even if we were, we'd remind ourselves that the steel used in the twin towers of the World Trade Center had been coated with some kind of fire retardant. All we knew for certain was what we could see, and what we could see was smoke. Lots of it. Black and billowing and out of control. And we measured what we could see against what we already knew: Ninety percent of all deaths in high-rise fires can be directly attributed to smoke inhalation, so this was a serious race against time. From the pictures we were getting on the television, it didn't even appear that the roof was offering any fresh air; that's how thick the smoke seemed to be, spilling up over the top of the building.

We all watched in horror, and as we started to talk it became clear that we all wanted to get down there, as quickly as possible. We were like racehorses, waiting to be let out of the starting gate. We belonged down there, for our own individual reasons, but at the other end of each individual reason was our shared purpose: This was what we did; this was who we were; this was why we were there.

“Chief Pitch,” I'd keep hearing, “get us down there.” (“Pitch” has been my lifelong nickname, and when we were on duty the guys always put the “Chief” out in front, mixing the formal with the informal.)

“Fuck command,” I'd also hear, “we're going.”

“They're gonna send us eventually, so we might as well go now.”

And then the second plane hit. We all saw it coming, couldn't

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believe what we were seeing. Really, it was such an inappropriate image, it took each of us a beat or two to process it. Who the hell has the tools, or the frame of reference, to understand a sight like that? It was just a beat or two, and yet it felt longer when we were in its middle. We were all silent again, and as each of us in that kitchen began to realize what had just happened, I reached again for the departmental phone. Like the first time, I did this without a clear thought. It was maybe ten seconds after the second crash. I dialed the same number—261—for the Manhattan dispatcher in Central Park. I knew they'd be swamped with calls, but I wanted to get mine in there ahead of the others. And it wasn't just departmental calls they'd be dealing with, but 911 calls from people on the scene, cell transmissions from folks trapped on one of those upper floors, nuisance calls from people simply wanting information.

I knew they'd be swamped, but I didn't care. I was just as much racehorse as the men in my command. They wanted down there, and I wanted down there, and if I waited for orders we'd never get anywhere.

"This is Chief Picciotto," I said again when the dispatcher picked up. "Eleven Battalion. A second plane just hit the second tower. Whatever alarm assignment you have, double it. I'm on my way. I know the building, and I'm going."

Surely, I initially thought, this guy already knew about this latest development, but from the moment's hesitation in his voice coming back, I started to think perhaps he didn't.

"Go," the dispatcher finally said, his voice choked with horror and disbelief and resignation. "Go."

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I wasn't asking, and I wasn't really waiting for an answer. I got an answer, but I wasn't waiting for it. If the dispatcher had told me to stay put, perhaps I wouldn't have heard him. Sometimes, in the heat of a moment like that, my hearing wasn't so good. But I heard him just fine: "Go."

I didn't know it at the time, but my daughter, Lisa, had bounded from her dormitory onto Fulton Street in Lower Manhattan, to watch these horrific events unfold firsthand, from the relative safety of a few blocks away, and as she stared in disbelief as the second plane staggered into the south tower, she realized her father was probably on the scene. She knew it in her bones. That's how a fireman's daughter thinks: You see a burning building, and you know Daddy's there somewhere, and in this case her bones weren't far off. I wasn't there yet, but I was on my way.