

A STORY OF MIRACLES AND FATE



BY: ARI SCHONBRUN



My name is **Ari Schonbrun**, and I work for a company by the name of Cantor Fitzgerald. This simple statement, which, prior to 9/11, used to be matter-of-fact, now causes people to stop in their tracks when I meet them.

On September 11, 2001, we occupied the top five floors –101 to 105–of One World Trade Center, otherwise known as the North Tower of the Twin Towers. Most people would simply think of it as the tower with big antenna. At this location, our New York headquarters, we employed 1,000 people. On that September day, the following was the roll call that changed Cantor Fitzgerald, and myself, forever—658 employees were sitting at their desks, 1 employee was in the lobby of One World Trade, 2 employees were riding elevators on their way up to the upper floors, and 1 employee was on the 78th floor sky lobby about to get on an elevator to go up to the upper floors.

On that day, the 658 of my coworkers—many of whom were also my friends—who were sitting at their desks were brutally murdered simply because of where they happened to be at that fateful moment in time. The two employees in the elevator and the employee in the lobby were so severely burned that they spent months in hospitals, at times in induced comas. I was the one employee on the 78th floor in between elevators; and, against all odds, I somehow managed to escape without a single scratch. Somebody, obviously, was watching out for me that day.

Being in that exact spot, at that precise moment in time, allowed me to remain alive—and the experience of living against all odds has changed everything about who I am and how I move forward in my life. Like any survivor, I now see my life separated into three distinct parts: before, during and after.

CHAPTER 2



September 11, 2001, was a Tuesday. It was a magnificent fall day. The sun shone brightly, and the sky was impossibly blue and clear. I remember it was warm outside, with a slight breeze. Just perfect. Had this been a normal day for me, I would've left my house at about 7:30 a.m., allowing me to get to the office at about 8:45 a.m. Yet this Tuesday was exactly a week before Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. For any religious Jew, the holidays surrounding the New Year—there are a total of five, and most of them last two days—mark a joyful, family-oriented time. They also present one with major work interruptions and scheduling challenges, since work is not permitted on these days. In 2001, all of the holidays ended up falling on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Between the holidays and the need to leave early on Fridays because of the Sabbath, I knew I'd be missing quite a lot of work. So that September I decided to make it my business to get in extra early and stay extra late—I couldn't afford to fall too far behind with my work.

At about 6:45 a.m. that Tuesday, I had my cup of coffee in one hand, my briefcase in the other, and was ready to go. I yelled upstairs to Joyce and the kids, "Goodbye, I love you!" but right as I was about to slip out the door, Joyce yelled down to me, "Did you do Baruch's book order?"

Baruch, who was eight at the time, is my third child. For anyone not familiar with the book order procedure, let me explain: teachers have a wonderful way of torturing parents. It's called the Scholastic Book Order. In class, the teacher distributes pamphlets that include lists of books and games. The children take them home, and with the help of their parents, they pick out the ones they want to buy. The parents then fill out a tear sheet and enclose a check for the children to bring back to school the next day. About three weeks later, the books and games arrive. The concept is to help the kids get into the habit of reading. It's a wonderful idea; unless, of course, you are working fourteen-hour days and have a two-and-a-half-hour roundtrip commute; then, you really don't have the time for the Scholastic Book Order.

While Joyce was the one who often took care of these kinds of things, Baruch was being very stubborn about the number of books and games that he wanted, so the whole ordering task had been turned over to me. I was supposed to do it with him the previous night, but because of the late hours I'd been keeping, he had already fallen asleep by the time I arrived home.

I was forced to admit to Joyce that I hadn't yet helped Baruch with the book order. She replied rather sternly, "Well then, you're not leaving the house until you do it." And so I put my coffee and briefcase down, went into the kitchen and proceeded to "negotiate" with my eight year-old for the next twenty minutes. By the time we were done, I had managed to whittle his list down to two book and no games, so I was feeling pretty proud of myself. Interestingly enough, the two books that he chose were from a series called "Survivor."

Three weeks later when those books arrived, I got a chill down my spine. It felt like an omen. What was more bizarre was that the book order had actually been overdue. It was supposed to be submitted on Monday, September 10, but Baruch had left the pamphlet at school on Friday, so we couldn't fill it out. On Monday, Joyce sent a note asking the teacher, Mrs. Hefetz, if Baruch could have an extra day extension. Thankfully, the teacher agreed and put the pamphlet into Baruch's knapsack on Monday so that he'd be sure to take it home. Had he brought that pamphlet home as he was supposed to on that Friday, I would've been in my office sometime between 8:00 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. on September 11, 2001—and somebody else would be writing a completely different story.

That morning, with the book order completed, I picked up my briefcase and my now-cold cup of coffee and headed out into what seemed like any ordinary Tuesday.

CHAPTER 3



Back then I used to drive from my home in Cedarhurst into Far Rockaway, park my car in the parking lot of the shopping center on Mott Avenue, then walk across the street to the elevated platform to wait for the A train. I took the A train because it left me off inside the complex of the World Trade Center. The Mott Avenue stop was the train's first stop, so I always got a seat. The ride took about an hour, and then it was only a five-minute walk underground through the mall until I reached One World Trade Center. That morning I arrived at the building at approximately 8:40 a.m.

In the main lobby of the building, there were 12 express elevators that went from the lobby straight to the 78th floor. These elevators could hold about 50 people and traveled at a speed of 27 feet per second. They could go from the ground floor to the top in less than a minute. The middle elevator actually went all the way up to the 107th floor, but that was only for people going up to the Windows of the World restaurant.

The 78th floor was designed as a sky lobby. It was where you were let out after taking the lobby elevators to transfer to a "local" elevator to take you to the higher floors. The entire 78th floor was open from one side to the other and had floor-to-ceiling windows that flooded the floor with brilliant natural light. The floor was carpeted in brown with a patchwork design. On one side of the lobby were the large elevators that came up from the lobby, and on the opposite side were the smaller local elevators that went from the 78th floor to all of the higher floors. At the far end of the floor was an escalator that went to the 79th floor. In the middle of the floor, nestled between the two banks of elevators, was a security/information station—usually manned by just one person. Opposite the security station, in between the large elevator banks, was a hallway that led to a security office behind the elevators.

Getting on the elevators at the lobby level had its own procedure. To reach them, you had to go through turnstiles; but in order to get through the turnstiles, you had to swipe through with your ID. The Windows of the World elevator was blocked on either side, and it separated the lobby elevators into two distinct areas, so if you went through the turnstiles on one side of that elevator bank, you couldn't get to the elevators on the other side. Since I was running late that morning, I decided to scope out which elevator was coming first and let that determine which turnstiles to go through. It just so happened that the first elevator to arrive was all the way on the right side of the lobby. I quickly ran over to the turnstiles by that elevator, swiped my ID, went through the turnstile and then got on the elevator. Because I'd chosen this particular elevator, when I got out on the 78th floor, I had to walk all the way back across the sky lobby to the other side since the elevator bank that I needed was all the way on the left side of the building.

I began walking across the sky lobby to the opposite side. I must have been about eight feet away from the elevator I needed to get on when all of a sudden, there was a huge explosion. It felt—and sounded—as if a bomb had exploded in the elevator in front of me. That was my first thought. The entire building shook. The lights went out, and the floor instantly filled with smoke. I am not embarrassed to admit that I screamed as I was thrown off my feet and onto the ground. I could hear people shouting about a fire in the elevator. I was petrified, scared momentarily senseless. It was eerie—like something out of *The Twilight Zone*—to hear the screaming but to not be able to see anyone.

While on the ground, I looked around and saw an emergency light shining between two banks of the large elevators. I decided to head toward that light. I remembered learning as a child that if you are in a place that has smoke you need to stay low to the ground, so I literally crawled on my stomach, like a soldier in battle, toward the light. When I got to the light, I stood up and checked myself out to make sure that I had all of my body parts. After being thrown from the explosion, I was not sure if I had been hurt or not. I thanked G-d that I seemed to be okay.

I then went behind the elevator banks, where I found the security office. I had worked in that building for eight years and had never known there was an office on that floor. As I opened the door, there was a female security guard sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, crying her eyes out. As unnerving as that was, seeing her crying like that, it gave me a certain level of comfort to know I wasn't alone.

I leaned over to her and said, "Ma'am, calm down. We're going to be okay. Just get a hold of yourself. We are going to be fine." I'm not sure if it was the calm in my voice or my reassurance, but she ultimately calmed down and stopped crying.

As I walked into the office, I saw a guy who identified himself as the fire warden for the floor. He was a short, Hispanic fellow who spoke with an accent. On each floor in the building, there was someone who was designated to be the person the building management would contact in case of an emergency, and who was to then forward the instructions to the rest of the people on that floor.

I approached the fire warden and asked, "What do we do? Where do we go?" He looked at me, drew a deep breath and said, "I don't know."

That was far from reassuring. After all, if he didn't know, how was I ever going to know? Just then, a woman in a green suit walked through the door. She was covered head-to-toe in soot. I had no idea where she'd come from but it was clear that she was in complete shock. She had a blank stare on her face, almost like a zombie.

I led her into the room and asked if she would like to sit down and she just nodded. I asked if she wanted something to drink, but again, she just nodded. I had never encountered someone in shock. It was scary to witness and I wasn't sure what to do. So I got her a cup of water and sat her down. The fire warden kept trying the phones but he wasn't getting through. The landlines were totally dead.

In the meantime, I looked in the side pouch of my briefcase and realized that a bunch of papers and bills that I was going to mail were missing. I quickly ran back into the hall and sure enough my papers were all in a neat pile on the floor. I guess they fell out when I was thrown to the ground. I scooped them up and quickly headed back to the security office. Just as I entered the office, another security officer suddenly came in; and like the first one, she was crying her eyes out. The one thing I immediately noticed about her was that she had a two-way radio.

I quickly walked over and grabbed her and said, “Ma’am, you have a radio. You can get us help. You need to calm down and get a hold of yourself. You need to get on that radio, and you need to get us help now.”

She began to collect herself and then, whimpering, she got on the radio and said, “We’re on...on...on... the seventy... seventy eight fl... fl... floor. We... we... nee... nee... need help.” But there so much chatter on the radio that no communications were able to get through. We realized, to our dismay, that we weren’t going to get any help that way.

I decided to go back out to the hall to see if I couldn’t try to find a way out. As I walked into the hall, I encountered a coworker of mine, Virginia DiChiara. It was then, when I saw the condition she was in, that the horribleness of whatever had happened, began to truly sink in.

CHAPTER 4



Virginia and I didn't have an easy history with each other. She was an internal auditor who had been hired a year earlier at Cantor Fitzgerald, and her first task was to audit my department. She came on at the end of the August—my busiest time of the year. I had been the head of the Business Administration department, monitoring all of the firm's expenses. Part of my job was managing the stock of all of Cantor's season tickets for sporting events. The end of August through the beginning of September was the U.S. Open tennis tournament. At the same time, football season was starting, and it was the end of baseball's regular season, with the playoffs set to soon begin. I was putting in 12 to 14 hour days and didn't have a minute to breathe. The last thing that I had time for was an audit. I politely requested that she come back to me in four weeks; at which point, I would be happy to give her whatever she needed. Apparently, however, her boss didn't seem to care about my already-full schedule, because almost immediately I got a call from my boss telling me I was to give Virginia what she needed right away.

Virginia was a tough lady. She would lash into me and my staff to such a degree that she made it seem like she thought we weren't capable of doing anything right. That was bad enough, but then the situation escalated. She began writing us up for all kinds of things, which cast us all in the worst possible light. I felt like I was under attack. And in fact, it reached the point where she almost got me fired. It was the worst time of my career.

By the time Virginia had completed her audit, it was decided that my department needed to be disbanded and that all of my staff would be dispersed throughout other parts of the company. I myself was transferred to the accounting department, where I was put in charge of global accounts receivables, reporting directly to Jeff Goldflam, the CFO. Jeff was a wonderful man. He, more than anyone, gave me my self-esteem back, during a time when I was feeling really low. Not only was he a terrific boss, but he also was a great human being. He once gave one piece of advice that has stuck with me to this day. He told me if I wanted to be successful that I should, "Speak British, Think Yiddish." I miss him greatly.

The elevator door open and she pressed the button for 101. It was 8:46 a.m. As the elevator doors closed, Flight 11 crashed into the northern face of Tower One about fourteen floors above. The elevator went black and “bounced around like a ball,” Virginia recalls.

“I remember seeing two lines shooting around the top of the elevator,” electrical cables that had come loose and were spitting current, “and everybody started screaming.”

In front of Virginia was a man named Roy Bell, who later said that the sound of the impact was “deafening, like someone banging a two-by-two sheet of aluminum with a hammer, six inches from your head.” The right wall of the elevator car crashed into Bell, breaking several of his fingers and flinging him to the left side. Miraculously, the elevator doors remained open about a foot. Within seconds, the jet fuel that had been coming down the sides of the elevator was ignited by the sparking cables and Bell “just sprinted” out of the elevator. Virginia had been crouching down behind Bell, and when she saw Bell go through, she thought, “I don’t hear any screaming, so I know he’s not on fire... I’m outta here.” She decided to go for it, but as she gathered herself, huge blue flames—translucent teardrops of fire, a foot in diameter—began cascading down in a steady curtain. Virginia dropped her bag, her elbows pushing the black rubber guards on the elevator doors. Left behind was a Cantor coworker. Virginia never saw her again, a fact that would haunt her for a long time.

When she emerged from the elevator, Virginia was on fire.

“I remember hearing my hair on fire,” she says.
(She later joked, “I must have put on some extra hair spray.”)

With her hands, she patted out the flames. “I got it out, I got it out,” she said to herself. Then, feeling something else entirely different and hot, she looked back and saw flames rising from her shoulder. In that instant, she remembered the old lesson from grade school: stop, drop and roll. She threw herself to the carpeted floor and rolled over and over, frantically patting out the flames.

“I remember getting up and just looking at myself,” she says, then continuing with her memory, recalls thinking at the time. “Okay, everything’s out. But then I sort of started laughing, almost like hysteria, like a giggle, thinking, ‘Oh my God, let me do it again just in case I missed it.’ I was so scared, like there was an ember on my body that was still going to go up.”

Virginia crawled some twenty feet down the hallway and sat with her back propped against a wall. She was wearing a sleeveless cotton shirt that day, and her arms and hands were seared with third-degree burns. In shock, she did not feel the pain—yet. Improbably prosaic thoughts crossed her mind. In the briefcase she’d left on the elevator were some airplane tickets recently purchased for a vacation to the Florida Keys, as well as a wad of cash. Should she go back and retrieve it? “No,” she thought to herself. “Just stay right where you are.” Then she spotted me.

“Ari!” she called out. I turned around and looked at her. “Virginia! Oh my God!”