

Le Bon Journal

Friday 6 February 2004 <http://www.bonjournal.com>
Volume 2 Issue 9: September 11th, Black Tuesday 911

Tuesday, 11 September 2001, is a day no living person will ever forget.

It was a dry, warm, crisp day, fresh from the downpour of the previous night. It stayed dry and clear even after the world came to a standstill.

Black Tuesday

The day began like any other. But for the sun-starved Londoner, it was exceptionally beautiful, cloudless and warm. The sky was as blue as ever. It was not a day to be spent indoors at an all day staff meeting.

After breakfast, I walked briskly, across 32nd street to my office building. By 8:30 am I had settled at my colleague's desk.

After checking my e-mail, I walked to the kitchen to get a cup of hot water to make tea. It was almost time for our meeting.

Others were already gathered around the mute TV in the kitchen. Was it a science fiction or a horror film? Someone suggested that we go to the main reception to watch the TV with sound.

In the reception area, a larger crowd was gathered around the larger television set. I asked the receptionist to crank up the sound. A jet had hit the first tower of the World Trade Centre. That alone would have been concluded as an accident. But seeing the second jet crashing into the South Tower raised the possibility that it was deliberate.

When we heard about the Pentagon being hit, we knew something was terribly wrong. Whatever we all thought, I don't think we realised then that this was happening LIVE. Someone mentioned that we could go to the 12th floor and see the buildings.

By the time I got to the 12th floor, only one of the two towers was visible. It was hard to believe this was real.

My first thought was to inform my family that I was safe. I was particularly concerned that my father would worry about me.

It was too early to wake up my sister. My brother was probably not too bothered. And my mother? She wasn't around when I called.

My next thought was that of evacuation. Surely, we should leave this building, which sits on top of one of the busiest train and subway stations in Manhattan. But the intercom came on just at that moment of indecision. It reassured us that the safest thing to do was to stay put. And like an obedient child following the herd mentality, I remained in the building.

In front of the TV, we watched, shocked and paralysed in silence. And like zombies, some of us walked back to the meeting room. I found it very difficult to concentrate, but I didn't want to be a sissy. So I pretended I was tuned in even though I could not contribute a single good idea to the meeting.

We were far from the madding crowd, yet not far enough to be indifferent. All we had to do was go to the 12th floor to validate what was being broadcasted on TV and radio. The twin towers had disappeared. All that was left - was white and grey smoke.

This smoke lingered for several days. That evening I walked the empty streets of Manhattan towards downtown. I didn't want to be alone in this city. My radio walkman accompanied me as far as Washington Square. Then I realised that I could not get close enough to the scene of disaster.

I was a useless foreigner in a strange city that did not want my blood or my naivety. So I turned back towards my hotel in mid-town Manhattan. It was, for me, the end of the age of innocence. The last of the summer sun.

Sounds of silence and sirens

Throughout the night, I heard either silence or sirens. It was not a typical weeknight in Manhattan.

I think it was then that I became addicted to live television. If I flipped through the channels quickly enough, I might be able to get more information. If I were away from the television coverage, then I switched on my radio walkman. If I were away from both of these, I'd surf the Web for more.

I was still an observer, unsure of what I was observing.

I had arranged a breakfast meeting at 9 am the next morning. My new colleague and I had agreed to meet in uptown Manhattan. All the building attendants were on duty checking our identification and ushering us to queue for the sign-in book.

The truth of the matter was we were simply too dumb and numb to return to our offices. We passed by a long queue of blood donors. We continued walking. We talked business and forgot about the world for 14 hours.

At a quarter to midnight, we parted. I returned to my hotel and stayed transfixed by CNN, ABC, and other news networks. I wanted to catch up on events of the day.

My sister called to tell me about the people trapped in the buildings. Those that were above the crash wanted to go upstairs. Those below the crash wanted to go downstairs. But the intercom voice that reassured them to stay put and that the building was safe confused some of them.

She told me about the man who was negotiating with his colleagues about whether to stay put or escape. She told me about the people who thought they could get rescued from the roof. Then I recalled that I had also had the same instinct to escape but decided to obey the intercom the day before.

Later I found an article on the New York Times web site discussing exactly this critical decision dilemma. It sent a shiver down my spine.

Evacuate!

How naive we were to think that we could return to work on Thursday as if nothing had happened.

No sooner had we settled into our offices were we alerted to evacuate the building. Strong voices ushered us to go - quickly but orderly.

"Hold on to each other!"

I grabbed my bag and joined the crowd. But my heart was beating fast. What if?

In the dark fire escape, I started to panic. Could this be the real thing? Was there a bomb in the building?

By the time we reached outside, I was completely dehydrated from my panic. I noticed that other buildings had been evacuated also.

Somebody shouted to move away from the buildings into the street. Somebody else shouted to stay together.

Some fifteen minutes later, the police told us that it was a false alarm. "Go back to your office!" But not everyone believed them.

Later we learned that there were more than ninety false bomb alerts in the city.

For a moment, I felt my fear. Yet, I chose to spend the rest of the day in the building. Where else could I go? At least, I could stay connected via the telephone and the Internet.

For those trapped in the twin towers, I wonder if they hesitated to decide - whether to look for an escape route or to call their loved ones. Did they know it was the end?

Escape from New York

I read about a doomed conference breakfast held at the top of the World Trade Centre. The conference supposedly started at 8:30 am on 11th September. No doubt the conference organisers and speakers would have arrived before

then. I shuddered at the possibility that I might have been an attendee.

Had it been a year ago, I would have definitely attended. Back then I was a conference junkie but soon reached an overdose after scouring the market. Although I knew about this conference, I had not bothered to read the details.

What would you do if you were caught in the top floors?

The scenario analyses I conducted in my head got the better of me. On the other side of the island lay thousands of bodies buried under tons of rubble. I wanted desperately to get out of this island of the dead and the distraught.

Fear of flying

I have a return flight that leaves tonight. But I can't get through to the airline.

For the jetsetter, Tuesday's events have a direct impact on future air travel. Flying, for me, has become as common as taking mass transit. It's a mindless activity. The difference now is that I'm suddenly conscious of my vulnerability.

Convenience is one thing. Safety is another. What more can airlines do to alleviate safety concerns among its passengers? I have clocked millions of miles without incident. How could the horrors of Black Tuesday make any difference?

The road home

It almost feels inappropriate to discuss business after the events of last week. Everyone in my industry has been affected in some way. One contact called me from Houston to ask if I had heard anything. Another friend called me from Singapore just to hear my voice.

The sharing of this so-called "complicated grief" brings even strangers closer together. The people who I correspond with by e-mail or the rare phone call are now human beings with emotions. And these emotions take time to heal.

On the island of Manhattan itself, an inexplicable tension exists. I feel it

when I'm in the subway or on the sidewalks dwarfed by the skyscrapers. Under the clear blue skies, all of New York City is mourning.

Far from the madding crowd

After finishing my morning exercises, I noticed a crowd of people gathered outside the church next to the gym. They were all dressed formally, in black. The sea of black reached black limousines parked alongside the road.

"Whose funeral?" I asked myself.

I walked up to the huge heart-shaped flower wreaths and read the names. There were so many names. They couldn't possibly be having a group funeral! Many weren't even related.

Then it dawned on me. This was no ordinary funeral. It was a memorial service for all those who were lost on 11th September 2001, exactly a year ago.

Suddenly, I felt a lump in my throat. My eyes became blinded by my tears. I could hardly get on my bicycle to leave the scene.

Far from the madding crowd I cycled. The blue skies reminded me of running away from the claustrophobia of being trapped in that skyscraper city a year ago. I had to get away. North, to Central Park. South, to New Jersey. Anywhere, but the madding crowd.

Ground zero

As the sun set behind the American flag, my friend and I joined the tourists and mourners who had come to see Ground Zero. I had come to complete the two year cycle of shock, betrayal, disappointment, reflection, recovery, and finally rebirth. I had to visit this forsaken place, if only to get on with my life.



Anne Ku, editor, was in Manhattan on September 11th, 2001. She visited again exactly two years later.

Copyright 2004 Anne Ku