My Escape From the 81st Floor of the World Trade Center

AS TOLD TO CAL FUSSMAN

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UP TO THAT DAY, I’d had an easy, cookie-cutter, beautiful life. I now know what it’s like to have a 110-story building that’s been hit by an airplane come down on my head.

It was as mundane a morning as you can imagine. Tuesdays are usually the days I go out to see clients and make sales calls. I get to my office at a quarter to eight, eat a bran muffin, drink a cup of coffee, and get my head straight for the day.

I was actually in a good mood. A couple of us were joking around in the men's room. We'd just started sharing the eighty-first floor of 1 World Trade Center with Bank of America, and they'd put up a sign telling everyone to keep the bathroom clean. "Look at this," one of us said. "They move in and now they're telling us what to do." It was about quarter to nine.

All of a sudden, there was the shift of an earthquake. People ask, "Did you hear a boom?" No. The way I can best describe it is that every joint in the building jolted. We all got knocked off balance. One guy burst out of a stall buttoning up his pants, saying, "What was that!?" The flex caused the marble walls in the bathroom to crack.

Gas main? It was so powerful, so close. I opened the bathroom door, looked outside, and saw fire.

There was screaming. One of my coworkers, Alicia, was trapped in the women's room next door. The doorjamb had folded in on itself and sealed the door shut. This guy Art and another guy started kicking the door as hard as they could, and they finally got her out.

There was a huge crack in the floor of the hallway that was about half a football field long, and the elevator by my office was completely blown out. If I’d walked over, I could've looked all the way down. Chunks of material that had been part of the wall were in flames all over the floor. Smoke was everywhere.

I knew where the stairs were. I started screaming, "Out! Out! Out!" The managers were trying to keep people calm and orderly, and here I was screaming, "The stairs! The stairs!"

We got to the stairwell, and people were in various states. Some were in shock; some were crying. We started filing down in two rows, fire-drill style. I'd left my cell phone at my desk, but my coworkers had theirs. I tried my wife twenty times but couldn't get through. Jenny had gone up to Boston with her mother and grandmother and was staying with my family. Our sixth month old son, Ben, was with her. It was impossible to reach them.

The thing that kept us calm on the stairs was the thought that what would happen couldn't possibly happen. The building could not come down. After a while, as we made our way down, we started to lighten up. Yeah, we knew something bad had happened, but a fire doesn't worry you as much when you're thirty floors below it. I even made a joke to my buddy Ryan. The intent was for only Ryan to hear, but things quieted down just as I said it, so everyone heard. I said, "'Well, we're all going to die. Ryan, hold me."
Some people were laughing, but not the guy in front of me. "I really think you should keep that humor down!" he said. I felt lousy. In hindsight, he may have known more than I did. Even though I'd seen physical damage, what I can't stress enough is how naïve I was at that point.

Some floors we'd cruise down; others we'd wait for ten minutes. People were speculating, "Was it a bomb?" But we were all getting out. I didn't think I was going to die.

At the fortieth floor, we started coming in contact with firemen. They were saying, "C'mon, down you go! Don't worry, it's safe below." Most of them were stone-faced. Looking back, there were some frightened firemen.

When we got below the thirtieth floor, they started to bring down injured people from flights above. There was a guy with the back of his shirt burned off, a little burn on his shoulder. One woman had severe burns on her face.

We got down to the twentieth floor and a fireman said, "Does anyone know CPR?" I'm no longer certified, but I know it from college. That was ten years ago. You wouldn't want me on an EMT team, but if it comes down to saving somebody, I know how.

So me and this other guy volunteer. We helped this one heavy, older man who came down huffing and puffing, and we kept our eyes out for anyone else. "Do you need help? Do you need help?" Nobody needed help. The stairway became wide open. It was time to go. The other guy took off in front of me. We were going pretty fast.

In the World Trade Center, there's a level overlooking into this big mall. Our stairwell exited out onto that level. At that point, I could look out across the plaza at 2 World Trade Center. That's when I realized the gravity of what had happened. I saw dead bodies everywhere, and none that I saw were intact. It was hard to tell how many. Fifty maybe? I remember my hand coming up in front of my face to block the sight. Then I took off. As I ran, people were coming out of another stairwell. I stopped and said, "Don't look outside! Don't look outside!" The windows were stained with blood.

It felt like my head was going to blow up.

I made it to the stairwell and got down. The mall was in bad shape. It must have been from chunks of the plane coming down. Windows were smashed. Sprinklers were on.

I saw Alicia, the co-worker who'd been trapped in the bathroom. She'd seen what I'd seen in the plaza and was traumatized. She was crying and moving slowly. I put my arm around her. Then there was another woman—same thing. I put my arm around the two of them, saying, "C'mon. We gotta go. We gotta go."

We were moving through the mall toward the escalator that would take us back up to street level and out to Church Street. There were some emergency workers giving us the "head this way" sign. I think they were trying to get us as far away from the fire as possible and out toward Church Street and the Millenium Hilton.

I got to the bottom of the escalator, and that's when I heard what sounded like a crack. That was the beginning of it. I ran to the top of the escalator as fast as I could and looked east, out toward Church Street at the Millenium hotel. The windows of the hotel are like a mirror, and in the reflection I saw Tower Two coming down.
How do I describe the sound of a 110-story building coming down directly above me? It sounded like what it was: a deafening tidal wave of building material coming down on my head. It appeared to be falling on the street directly where I was headed.

I turned to run back into the building. It was the instinctual thing to do. I was thinking, If I stay outside, I’m running into it. If I go inside, it might not land there. So I turned and ran into the building, down into the mall, and that’s when it hit. I dove to the ground, screaming at the top of my lungs, "Oh, no! Oh, no! Jenny and Ben! Jenny and Ben!" It wasn’t a very creative response, but it was the only thing I could say. I was gonna die.

The explosion was extreme, the noise impossible to describe. I started crying. It’s hard for me to imagine now that when I was on the ground awaiting my doom, hearing that noise, thousands of people were dying. That noise is a noise thousands of people heard when they died.

When it hit, everything went instantly black. You know how a little kid packs a pail of sand at the beach? That’s what it was like in my mouth, my nose, my ears, my eyes—everything packed with debris. I spat it out. I puked, mostly out of horror. I felt myself: Am I intact? Can I move? I was all there. There was moaning. People were hurt and crying all around me.

Then I had my second idea of death. I’m alive, yeah. But I’m trapped beneath whatever fell on top of me and this place is filled with smoke and dust. This is how I’m gonna die—and this was worse. Because I was going to be aware of my death. I was going to be trapped in a hole and it was going to fill with smoke and they were going to find me like one of those guys buried in Pompeii.

I sat there thinking of my wife and son again. It wasn’t like seeing the photos of Jenny and Ben that I had on my desk, though. The images I had were of them without me. Images of knowing that I’d never touch them again. As I sat there, thinking of them, I suddenly got this presence of mind: I gotta try to survive.

I tore off my shirt and wrapped it around my mouth and nose to keep some of the smoke out. I started crawling. It was absolutely pitch-black. I had no idea where I was crawling to, but I had to keep trying. It’s haunting to think about it now.

I saw a light go on. I can't say I was happy, because I was horrified, but that light was hope.

Luckily, I was buried with a fireman. I got over to him and stuck to this guy like a sticky burr on a bear’s bum. He was frazzled, but he had it a lot more together than I did. I was like, "What are we gonna do?" You can’t imagine the ability to have rational thought at that point. I was purely in survival mode. It wasn’t like, The smoke is traveling this way, so I’ll go that way to the fresh air. It’s whatever presents itself.

The fireman looked like a big Irish guy. Big, bushy mustache. He had an axe. He was looking at a wall, and it looked solid, but when he wiped his hand on it, it was glass, a glass wall looking into a Borders bookstore. There was a door right next to it. He smashed the door.

The Falling Man

Everyone gravitated to the light. Now there was a bunch of us. People were screaming. We got into Borders, went upstairs, and got through the doors heading outside. The dust was so thick, there was barely any light.

At this point, I still had no idea what was going on. I didn’t know if we were being bombed or what. I didn’t know if this was over or if it was just beginning.
I took off into the cloud. I crossed Church Street, and some light started coming in, and I could see a little bit. I saw a woman standing there, horrified, crying, lost. I stopped and said, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" She couldn't speak. I kept going.

I went along Vesey Street, using it as a guide. It started clearing up more and more, and I got to an intersection that was completely empty. That's where I saw one of the weirdest things—a cameraman near a van with the NBC logo on it, doubled over with his camera, crying.

I was all disoriented. I saw a turned-over bagel cart, and I grabbed a couple of Snapples. I used one to rinse out my mouth and wash my face. I drank some of the other. Then I started running again. It was chaos.

Even though I'd been around these streets a million times, I was completely lost. I looked up and saw my building, 1 World Trade Center, in flames. I looked for the other tower because I always use the two buildings as my North Star. I couldn't see it. I stood there thinking, It doesn't make sense. At that angle, it was apparent how devastating it all was. I looked up and said, "Hundreds of people died today." I was trying to come to terms with it. My wife's family is Jewish, and her grandparents talk about the Holocaust and the ability of humans to be cruel and kill one another. I just happen to be very close to this one.

Maybe it seems an odd reaction in hindsight. But I was just trying to grab onto something, some sort of logic, rather than let it all overwhelm me. I did thank God for getting me out of there for my kid. But I also tend to be a pretty logical thinker. I'm alive because I managed to find a space that had enough support structure that it didn't collapse on me. I'm alive because the psycho in the plane decided to hit at this angle as opposed to that angle. I'm alive because I went down this stairwell instead of that stairwell. I can say that now. But at that moment, I was just trying to give myself some sanity.

I was still running when I heard another huge sound. I didn't know it at the time, but it was the other tower—my tower—coming down. A cop on the street saw me and said, "Buddy, are you okay?" It was obvious that he was spooked by looking at me. Aside from being caked with dust, I had blood all over me that wasn't mine. He was trying to help, but I could tell he was shocked by what he was seeing.

I was looking for a pay phone to call my wife, but every one I passed was packed. My wife never entertained for a minute that I could be alive. She had turned on the TV and said, "Eighty-first floor. Both buildings collapsed. There's not a prayer."

Finally, I got to a pay phone where there was a woman just kind of looking up. I shoved her out of the way. I guess it was kind of harsh, but I had to get in touch with my family. I dialed Boston and a recording said, "Six dollars and twenty-five cents, please." So I pulled out a quarter and called my brother at NYU. I got his voicemail. "I'm alive! I'm alive! Call Jenny! Let everyone know I'm alive!" It was 10:34.

I started running toward where my brother Chris worked at NYU.

On my way to NYU, I met this guy—a stranger named Gary—who had a cell phone. He tried and tried and couldn't get through to Boston. I said, "I gotta get to NYU" and left him. But he kept calling Boston and eventually got through to my family. At that point, four of my five siblings were at the house. My wife's father was on his way from New York with a black suit in the car.
The people at NYU took me in. They were great. I said, "I don't need anything. Just call my family." They kept on trying to get through. They couldn't, they couldn't. Finally, they got through.

**I said, "Jenny, it's me."** And there was a moan. It was this voice I'd never heard before in my life. And I was saying, "I'm alive. I'm alive. I love you. I love you. I love you." We cried and cried. Then the phone went dead.

At that point, I went into the bathroom to clean myself off, and suddenly I couldn't open my eyes anymore. They were swollen. I knew I wasn't blind, but if I opened my eyes toward any amount of light there was intense, intense pain. I didn't feel this while I was running. It seemed to happen as soon as I was safe and the adrenaline came out of me.

At the NYU health center, the doctors said, "Yeah, your eyes are extremely scratched." They put drops in them, but they needed more sophisticated equipment to see what was going on. I wound up having **147 fiberglass splinters** taken out of my eyes.

Chris came back from Brooklyn to pick me up, and I held on to him and hugged him. Later, he said, "You know, Michael, this is why I stuffed you in sleeping bags and beat on you all those years as a kid. Just to toughen you up for something like this."

**When we got back to my place, I collapsed and it all hit me.** I cried like I've never cried in my life. I finally let loose, and it felt better. My brother helped me pack, and we got to Westchester, where my wife and family had gone. Jenny came running to the door. I can remember hearing the *dum, dum, dum, dum* of her footsteps.

My mother was there. My dad. My father-in-law. They all hugged me. Then they gave me my son. I could tell by the noises he was making that he was happy. I hugged him. I saw all of my old friends. It was amazing. Everyone I know in my life has called me to tell me they love me. It's like having your funeral without having to die.

I have a family that's unbelievably close and supportive and a lot of friends. I am Claustrophobic now. I have nightmares. I jump when I hear a siren. But it's the smell that haunts me. Talk to anyone who was within ten blocks of it and they'll tell you that. I had vaporized people packed up my nose, in my mouth and ears. For weeks, I was picking stuff out of my ears.

**I don't wonder, Why me?** Some people say, "You made it out; you're destined for great things." Great, I tell them. I made it out, now why not put a little pressure on me while you're at it.