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A DAY WE'LL NEVER FORGET

THE RINGING OF AN ALARM CLOCK dragged me reluctantly from a deep sleep at 5:45 A.M. on Tuesday, September 11. My husband, Todd, rolled over and silenced the annoying noise. I roused slightly, peeking out from under the covers only long enough to notice it was still dark outside. Although I wasn't ready to get up yet, I knew the bright morning sunshine would soon be streaming through the bay window in our bedroom. Pulling the covers up over my head, I attempted to go back to sleep.

We had just returned from Rome, Italy, late afternoon the previous day, so between the jet lag and the strain of being five months pregnant, a few extra minutes of sleep seemed like a good idea. I anticipated a full day ahead of me. Besides keeping up with our two energetic boys—David, our three-and-a-half-year-old, and Drew, who was 19 months—I had numerous tasks to accomplish. The laundry had stacked up. I needed to stop by the bank and then go to the grocery store to replenish the refrigerator we had cleaned out before going

away. After that I had several more errands to run. David would be starting preschool tomorrow, so I wanted to talk with him about the transition in our lives that “school” would bring. My to-do list grew longer even in my sleep as I remembered all the things I had to take care of after being away from home for a week. Vacation was over; life was back to normal. I sighed inwardly.

Todd eased out of bed, trying his best not to disturb me as he headed toward the shower. As one of the top young sales representatives of the software giant Oracle Corporation, Todd traveled a lot for business as well as for pleasure. His job often required whirlwind trips, so to him, this early-morning flight was just another day at the office—a one-day jaunt to San Francisco to meet with some high-profile clients. He’d catch the red-eye flight home that same night.

“I can do it. It’s no big deal,” he’d said when he informed me of his plans to travel so soon after our return from Europe. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Somewhere between being asleep and awake that Tuesday morning, I heard the shower running. A short time later I vaguely sensed Todd leaning over me and kissing me good-bye, as he always did before leaving for the day. Sometimes I’d have the covers pulled up so high he’d have to kiss the top of my head. That’s what he must have done that morning, because we didn’t communicate verbally—or if we did, I don’t remember it.

I heard Todd’s footsteps going down the hardwood back steps and smiled to myself as I imagined him trying to walk quietly. When we’d built our new home little more than a year earlier, I hadn’t wanted to carpet the steps

because I didn't want to vacuum them! But the price I paid for that decision was hearing the clomping of footsteps any time Todd left for one of his predawn trips.

I snuggled a little farther down, burying myself beneath the blankets. The sun would be up soon, and the boys would rise shortly after that. *Better get some last-minute sleep while I can.*

By 6:45 the sun was indeed shining brightly through our bedroom window, so I hopped out of bed. It was a gorgeous blue-sky morning—not a cloud to be seen and unseasonably warm for September in New Jersey. *What a beautiful day!* I thought. *Maybe the boys and I will have some time to play outside later.*

A habitual list maker, I started going over my grocery list, adding needed items and trying to get organized before the boys got up. I had just begun folding some laundry when I heard the patter of a little boy's bare feet coming down the front staircase.

"Good morning, David!" I hugged him in his pajamas. Drew waddled behind David in the telltale manner every mother of toddlers knows all too well. "Come on, Drew. Let's get that diaper changed before we have breakfast."

It was a full-tilt morning, per usual life for a family with young children.

The boys sat up at our breakfast bar, and I got them some Froot Loops and Cheerios to eat. Later, after they'd eaten and dressed, they watched *Sesame Street* while I went upstairs for a quick shower.

A few minutes after nine o'clock, as I was getting ready to go to the grocery store, the phone rang. I ignored it since

I was about to walk out the door. But our answering machine picked up the call, and I heard the familiar voice of my friend Elaine Mumau. She sounded stressed.

“Hi, Lisa. I know Todd is traveling today . . . and I was just calling to check on him. . . . Do you have your television turned on? . . . Have you seen what’s happening?”

I grabbed the phone. “Elaine, what are you talking about?”

“Isn’t Todd flying today?”

“Yes, he is. Why?”

“Do you know his flight number?”

“No, I don’t. Why, Elaine? What’s going on?”

“Turn the TV on,” Elaine instructed. “There’s been a plane crash at the World Trade Center.”

I turned on the television and saw the Twin Towers enveloped in a huge plume of smoke. A second plane had just smashed into one of the towers, tearing a gaping hole in the building and setting it ablaze. Commentators described the scene in shocked, pensive tones. I stood in front of our television, mesmerized by the horrific sight. Before long the newscasters reported that two planes—an American Airlines flight and a United Airlines flight—were missing and might have been the ones that hit the towers. The broadcasters speculated about possible terrorist involvement in the crashes.

I had no idea what flight Todd was on; I didn’t even know what airline he was flying that morning. He traveled so much that I’d long ago given up pressing him for travel itineraries. Most Oracle sales reps booked their travel on-line, so I didn’t even have a travel agent to call for information. But I knew Todd was going to San Francisco. And

since he often flew Continental Airlines on that route, I breathed a slight sigh of relief.

Nevertheless, as I stared in disbelief at the events unfolding live on television, my heart began pounding faster. *Oh, those poor people!* I thought. *How can this be happening?!*

Although unsure of Todd's whereabouts, I really wasn't too worried about his safety. My husband was a seasoned traveler, and over the years he'd learned how to deal with almost any situation frequent air travelers encounter—delayed flights, missed flights, canceled flights, mechanical problems, airline strikes—you name it, he'd had to work around it. By now we'd been married for more than seven years. Earlier in our marriage I'd sometimes been overly agitated when Todd was late coming home, or when I learned of an airline incident or a bad accident on the highway in an area where Todd was traveling. My mind had immediately conjured up all sorts of awful images. But Todd had always come out fine, and after a while I stopped worrying about him so much. Neither of us had any fear of flying; in fact, we often joked that the most dangerous part of our travel was the trek on the New Jersey Turnpike between our home in Cranbury, near Princeton, and the Newark airport.

Besides, Todd was a gadget nut who carried two cellular phones with him constantly—one in the car and one on his person. I nearly had to wrestle those phones out of his hands every time we went on vacation. If Todd was delayed or in any trouble, he'd call.

Still, I was uneasy. I dialed the phone number for Continental Airlines, and, amazingly, got through to a customer service representative right away. I was among

the lucky ones. Many calls were being disconnected that day—partially due to the overloaded systems with so many people making calls, but also because so much of the communications system for the tristate area had been located atop the World Trade Center towers. Cellular calls fared little better than landlines for the same reasons.

The Continental representative refused to tell me whether Todd was aboard one of their planes, but he did say that their 7:00 A.M. flight had departed Newark with no problems. The second flight hadn't yet left the terminal because the Federal Aviation Administration had grounded all flights until further notice.

I knew that if Todd's flight hadn't taken off, he would have called me, so I assumed he was safely aboard the earlier flight. *Okay, there's no need to worry*, I assured myself as I hung up the phone. *Todd's probably halfway across the country by now.*

A few minutes later it occurred to me that Todd hadn't left the house until around 6:15. Even on a good traffic day, Newark International Airport is a 30-minute drive from our home—not counting delays due to the perpetual construction at the aging airport. That certainly didn't allow Todd much time if he had booked the early Continental flight. My stomach churned as I recalled that Todd sometimes flew United Airlines to San Francisco. *I'd better call them, just to check*, I assured myself.

Completing a phone call was becoming ever more difficult. I paced back and forth while waiting through busy signals and negotiating the phone-tree maze, hoping to reach a human being. I was disappointed. United Airlines

representatives were all “helping other customers.” I was soon to find out why.

Increasingly frustrated in my attempts to get any information about my husband, I was growing more anxious by the minute. Finally I called Elaine back.

Her husband, Brian, was working at home and answered the phone. I told him of my failed efforts and asked, “Can you try to find out what flight Todd is on? I just can’t do it right now.”

Brian must have sensed my uneasiness. “Sure, Lisa. Let me see what I can find out. I’ll get right on it.”

“Thanks, Brian.”

“Lisa? Elaine is going to come over.”

I hung up the phone, turned away from the television set, and walked back to the laundry room, where despite my best efforts to maintain composure, I burst into tears. When David came in and saw me crying, he asked, “What’s wrong, Mommy?”

“It’s okay,” I answered, trying to hold back the tears. “I just don’t know where Daddy is right now. But don’t worry. We’ll find him. I’m sure he’s fine; I just don’t know what’s going on.”

David returned to his toys, and I picked up the phone again. I dialed Todd’s business cell-phone number and listened to his voice as his prerecorded message played through. “You’ve reached Todd Beamer with the Oracle Corporation. Please leave a message.”

I left a message. “Todd, I know you’re fine. But when you land, please call me right away. I don’t know where you are and I need to hear from you.”



A few minutes later my phone rang. Hoping it was Todd on the line, I hurried out to the kitchen to answer it.

“Hello!”

There was no answer. The line had gone dead. I glanced at the digital clock on our kitchen oven. It was 10:00 A.M.

I took the phone with me back to the laundry room. A few seconds later the phone rang again. I quickly picked up the receiver, but the phone had already stopped ringing.

“Hello! Hello?” I nearly screamed into the phone. Disconnected again!

Todd! Where are you?

In my wildest imagination—or my worst nightmares—I couldn’t possibly have dreamed what Todd was actually experiencing at that precise moment.



Soon afterward, Elaine and her three children arrived. She and I went into our family room and sat down on the couch in front of the television while the kids headed for the playroom. Just then the network switched from New York to Washington, D.C., and scenes from the Pentagon came up on the screen. Another airliner had crashed into the side of our nation’s military headquarters around 9:43 A.M., and the awful curl of thick black smoke had already risen high into the otherwise clear skies above the city.

And then the unthinkable happened. While rescue workers feverishly attempted to get people down and out

of the World Trade Center, the south tower collapsed. Its steel girders, superheated by the ferocious jet-fuel fire, literally melted and crumbled in a massive, mangled heap. Less than half an hour later the north tower collapsed, releasing a horrendous cloud of smoke, ash, debris, and dust. Surreal scenes of ash-covered people running through the streets filled the television screen.

Now, like most Americans, I was reeling, attempting to comprehend the reality of what I had seen and the enormity of the destruction and loss of life. Questions I feared to ask aloud raced through my mind. *Are there any survivors? Are there more attacks to come? How many more planes are out there with terrorists aboard?* My heart hurt for the unknown number of victims, and my concern for my own husband mounted. I fretted inwardly. *Where's Todd?*

At first Elaine and I sat on the couch with our eyes and ears riveted to the television set. Though shaken by the attacks on our nation and deeply grieved over the loss of life, I remained relatively calm until the networks showed yet another downed airliner. This one had crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. I knew that Todd's flight would have traveled in that general direction. Cold shivers ran through my body, and a sick sensation clutched at my stomach as I gazed in horror at the crash site. Smoke still hovered in the air, and even from a distance I could see the charred ground. It was obvious the plane had been obliterated. No one could survive that sort of impact.

The newscaster's subdued voice reported that the downed flight was a United Airlines flight that had been bound for Chicago.

Chicago? Whew! Again I felt a rush of compassion for those people aboard the plane and their families, but I breathed a little easier for our family. We were off the hook again. Todd had an afternoon meeting in San Francisco; he wouldn't have had time for a layover. So surely he wouldn't have booked anything other than a direct flight.

I got up nervously and stepped behind the couch, still staring at the television, when the newscaster's voice intoned, "We have an update on the airliner that has crashed in Pennsylvania. It was not en route to Chicago as previously reported; it was actually a United flight out of Newark that was going to San Francisco."

"No!" I screamed helplessly at the television.

Without a shred of hard evidence, I knew intuitively that Todd was on that flight. Suddenly I felt as though my body weighed a million pounds; it seemed my heart might explode. I fell to my hands and knees and gasped again, "No!"

In an instant Elaine joined me on the floor, wrapping her arms around me. "It's probably not his flight, Lisa. He's probably fine. We don't know what's what. Don't worry. Todd's okay."

"No, Elaine . . . that's his plane," I managed to say through my tears.

"We don't know that. . . ."

I'd seen enough. In my heart I knew. I couldn't watch any longer. "I'm going to go upstairs now. . . . Please watch the boys for a while." Elaine assured me that she would. I made my way to my bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed, staring out the window in a near-catatonic state. I

didn't move; I didn't speak. It was as though time had come to an abrupt halt, and I no longer existed. In a desperate, futile attempt to make sense of it all, my heart and mind had temporarily shut down. I was numb. I could see and hear, yet I simply continued to stare straight ahead.

Surely this can't be happening, I thought. It must just be a bad dream. Todd can't be gone! Maybe there's some mistake.

But the grim reality pinched at any idealism or hope of a miracle that I might have momentarily embraced. *What now? What are we going to do?* I thought of our boys, David and Drew, who loved their daddy so dearly and were now getting to the ages where they could romp and play with him as a trio of Beamer boys. Todd loved playing with our kids. I touched my bulging belly and thought of the new life I carried inside—Todd's and my third child, due in mid-January. *Oh, God, how am I going to do this?* I agonized inwardly. Our life was so good; we had so many plans. I needed Todd. He always made everything okay.

In that dark moment, my soul cried out to God—and he began to give me a sense of peace and a confidence that the children and I were going to be okay. But even that comfort didn't take away the wrenching pain or the awful sense of loss I felt. Nor did it answer the question that continually tugged at my heart: *How can I live without Todd?*

In my braver moments, I dared to ponder what Todd might have experienced aboard that plane before it had gone down. I wondered if he had been injured . . . or possibly even killed by the terrorists. I felt strongly that Todd's final thoughts and expressions would have been of his faith in God and his love for his family. And I knew in my heart,

if there were any way possible, that he wouldn't have gone down without a fight.

Even before we met as college students, Todd had been the "go-to" guy, the person everyone expected to make things happen. And usually he did! Todd Beamer always came through in the clutch. That's just the sort of guy he was. . . .