

The Reckoning

I. Prologue: In A Time Of Ruin

*It was a blood-red circle on the cold, dark ground
The rain kept falling down
The church door's swung open; I can hear the organ song
The congregation's gone.
My city of ruins.*

-- Bruce Springsteen

I had vowed not to go there while it remained a gaping void, but I went today anyway. It *drew* me there. It has been nearly four years since the day that needs no mention. Now, as I begin to write while departing New York City on a train, I hope that I can rise to the task of giving you my own account of it all. My wish is to leave in words something of value to posterity, and to render faithfully a snapshot of a time, an event, a nation, and one man's life.

It was an event for the ages, and all who remember it have a personal tale to tell; mine, as you'll see, is hardly dramatic in as far as the day itself goes. I will therefore try to weave together the different threads of my life, so that I might give context to the day when my spirit's own city came to ruin. It has been a long time coming, but it's time to tell my story. Come with me; let us go to the city.

II. The World Will Sing When I Am King

*When I am grown to man's estate
I shall be very proud and great
And tell the other girls and boys
Not to meddle with my toys.*

-- Robert Louis Stevenson

Once, in a confident American century when men walked on the moon, a little boy dropped a cartridge of film into his Sedic Sport pocket camera, pointed it skyward, and photographed two buildings, much like the kind he would design someday. For a child without friends or the social affirmation that marks other peoples' young lives, this unlikely place held meaning for him that most people cannot understand. As other boys might worship the home ballpark of their favorite team, so did he love this place. It was indeed the very icon of a childhood.

Now, after ascending in a room-sized express elevator 107 floors to the public observation deck, he pointed the same camera downward, committing to color film and Kodak paper the kind of view that he would one day enjoy from his own architect's office or lofty apartment. Just a lonely boy, a camera, two towers, and the dreams of distant someday.

III. The Thunder In The Distance

*Do you ask why I'm sighing, my son
You shall inherit what mankind has done
In a world filled with sorrow and woe
If you ask me why this is so,
I really don't know.*

*And if you take my hand, my son
All will be well when the day is done.*

-- Peter Yarrow

My mother's generation as kids had nightmares of the Bomb. She had told me about the duck-and-cover drills she had practiced in school. My generation only had fire drills, and I gave little thought to her story, or why she had bomb drills, or what those bombs were really like. I would learn later on.

I can't remember when I finally did learn about nuclear weapons and their unfathomable power. I've hardly ever had true nightmares since childhood. Occasionally, though, I still have an unsettling dream about being out in the Pacific during a nuclear test, minutes before detonation on some tiny atoll earns it the name *ground-zero*. I want to hide my eyes and take refuge from the blinding light-flash, the million-degree heat, the expanding blast-wave, and the colossal mushroom that is horror itself. At least one person in this generation dreams about the Bomb.

IV. The Coming Trials

*I've been waiting for something to happen
For a week or a month or a year
With the blood in the ink of the headlines
And the sound of the gun in my ear.*

-- Jackson Browne

Was it too many Tom Clancy novels re-created for the big screen? The leftist college-crowd propaganda? The arms race? Not sure, but for as long as I can remember, I had a certain feeling that something big would happen someday. It would be a world-shaking event, a time of great danger and difficulty, the beginning of a different era, and the time from which everything before and after would come to be measured.

For all the social and economic hardship that has been this generation's burden, we had never known danger nor destitution: No foreign attacks, military draft, breadlines, nor major wars. No heroes to emulate. The Great Crash, Normandy and Pearl Harbor, missiles in Cuba, the marches, the assassinations – all mere flickering newsreels to me; the stuff of other generations, not mine. Yet I was always plagued by a nagging sense that our turn would come, and that some cataclysm would test our individual character and try our collective will.

V. Thine Alabaster Cities

*A trip to the market
A trip into the pearl-grey morning sunlight that settles over Washington.
A trip to the market
A trip around the world
Where the evening meal is negotiable, if there is one.*

-- Paul Simon

The Internet exploded upon us (how else could one describe it), so, after a long string of unsuccessful attempts at a career, the year 1998 found me training as a programmer in the Washington area, hub of the high-tech boom.

Washington, DC: *Say it.* Feel a chill on your spine?

Just the sound has that certain noble majesty like the city itself, overwhelming in sheer order and grandeur. The white, columned buildings seem perfectly designed as places of government, delightfully familiar to us all; yet, to the visitor, they truly come to life.

You're there, walking along: "Look! It's that place on the ten-dollar bill!" Pull one out, hold it up in front of you in the street while the traffic honks and veers. Maybe later that day: "Hey, there's Senator Jack Kemp, talking to reporters!" And so on. Suddenly it's all *real*. Thus Washington gives you the feeling that Government works. It has the power to make you *believe* again.

Washington, DC: Go ahead. Say it.

VI. Days Of Miracle And Wonder

*That is why a man with numbers can put your mind at ease
We have numbers by the trillions, here and overseas.*

-- Paul Simon

For me at the time, the best part was that a new century was about to begin, the economy was humming, and I was living there among it all. Highways, radiating like wheel-spokes from the Capital Beltway, were sprouting new buildings by the month, each housing some upstart software company. Working for a contractor firm in the Department of Labor, I built Government websites. For a short while, though I didn't realize the significance, I had an amazing duty: Publishing the DOL's weekly labor statistics on the Web. It was my own hand on the keyboard that each week would release these figures to the human race, the very numbers that fueled the world's economic engine.

Speaking of the Internet, the Apocalypse, and all that: There was some nervousness about the coming of a certain date, an anticipation of approaching calamity that seems eerily ironic now. Yet the century turned without incident. Worldwide computer networks barely blinked. Silicon had triumphed.

In the Fall of 2000 I landed a better job. I felt lucky, because the economy was beginning to falter, though it was still far from affecting the software industry. In those heady days, there were high-tech job-recruitment magazines on every corner. Thick with ads, they featured articles on such fluffy topics as the perils of 'cubicle courtship'. They could afford to be fluffy.

The recession tide gathered momentum; now software started to feel the pinch too. Hiring slowed, and those magazines became thinner, their articles shifting to weightier matters such as how to keep one's job. I just worked, hoping for the best. Sadly, by mid-2001, the whole affair was in a tailspin, and major layoffs were underway for programmers. The magazines, if still in print at all, were now razor-thin, the articles advising merely how to *get* a job.

...And then there was one less job in Washington. I was laid off exactly a year after starting.

VII. A Time To Try The Soul Of Man

*I woke up this morning
I could barely breathe
Just an empty impression
In the bed where you used to be.
I want a kiss from your lips
I want an eye for an eye
I woke up this morning
To an empty sky.*

-- Bruce Springsteen

Five days later on a Tuesday morning, I was lying in bed awake. It was my first week of unemployment and I was in no rush to get up. The phone rang; it was John, my best friend since childhood: "Mike-- Hey, just calling to see if you felt anything; did it wake you up?"

Felt anything?? People used to call and ask me that after every little tremor when I lived in California, so naturally I thought of earthquakes. But in Alexandria, Virginia? "What do you mean?" I asked. John said, "I mean I wonder if you heard or felt it happen, since you live nearby, and I wanted to see if you were alright-- "

"Felt what?"

There was a silence, just long enough of a pause. Then, in a low voice: "Uh, you haven't heard the news?"

It was that grave tone, and the pause just before he said it. In that moment I sensed that something momentous was happening, bigger than anything we had ever known, or likely ever would. I somehow knew that dreaded day had come. Now bolt upright, I asked, "No! What news?"

"WE'RE AT WAR!!!" his roommate screamed. Now my heart was pounding; this didn't sound like a joke. John explained: "The Pentagon was hit by a hijacked airliner; two more planes hit the World Trade Center, and both towers have collapsed. Our country's being attacked; it's worse than Pearl Harbor! It feels like World War III..."

The Pentagon. I was only three or four miles from it, yet I'd slept through the whole thing. And the World Trade Center, where John and I had been, *collapsed??* Entirely...?

How does one describe the feeling of hearing such news? It's two opposite emotions at once: Utter disbelief mixed with a gut feeling that it's absolutely, sickeningly true. But what I was feeling most of all at that moment was a new fear. *Raw* fear, for myself and my family, not

knowing when I'd next see them. It felt like those dreams of the Bomb: We were all in danger. Nowhere to hide.

Have the wrenching misfortune to know that feeling; *it will change you.*

John and I spoke another minute or so, his hysterical roommate still screaming in the background. I said I had to go put on the TV right away, and good-bye, be careful, and that I'd speak to him again as soon as possible.

By this time, on every channel, there was nothing but replay footage, for it was all over and done (though nobody knew if it really was over yet). And there I was, just getting out of bed, while others had already commuted to work – and died. Then I saw it: A total collapse, terrifying to watch, as one tower suddenly seemed to melt like a candlestick. And then likewise the other, as if heartbroken by the loss of its companion.

VIII. Waiting For The Light

*And the high ideals and the promises
You once dressed the future in
Are dancing with the embers in the wind.*

-- Jackson Browne

In the wreckage of collapsed hope, an unemployed man sat alone in his basement apartment with no lofty view, seeing the place he had so loved become nothing. Watching the news until well into the evening, he spent the rest of the day without further human contact, much as he did on most days, until finally managing to reach his family in Boston by phone.

Have the awful misfortune to lose what you love; *it will change you.*

By and by, public life got back to some kind of normal, even as the ensuing Anthrax attacks, and later, the wars, kept our nerves on edge. As for me, I had been changed, resolving never again to be ashamed or to apologize for being American. When I see a soldier, I merely say 'thank-you'; he doesn't need to ask why. Mostly, I *feel* more, appreciating other people's pain more vividly. I shed a lot more tears.

In this time of ruin, I wish religiously for my buildings to rise again to how they were. Dreams of the event come calling less often now, yet they still visit me at night sometimes with visions of being in collapsing buildings or looking for lost friends in the rubble. The other dream: Yes, it too persists, maybe because I have the ominous sense that there is yet more to come.

Perhaps the reader had hoped for a more dramatic story about what I did and saw on the day that needs no mention; but that was it: I sat alone in my apartment, my city in ruins. I wouldn't even look outside, having drawn the window blinds, just in case, to shut out the blinding flash of the Bomb.

IX. Epilogue: *O Tempora...*

*Time it was, and what a time it was, it was...
A time of innocence,
A time of confidences.
Long ago it must be; I have a photograph...
Preserve your memories;
They're all that's left you.*

-- Simon and Garfunkel

Once, in a wondrous American century when the Concorde could make short work of the Atlantic Ocean, there stood two towers: One a young child's dreams, the other a young nation's optimism. Long they both stood, enduring time and history's capricious whims. Then one day, when set ablaze like candlesticks, the two did what candles will do: They withered upon themselves and expired. When the light went out, a boy and a nation, such as they had been, were no more.

Herewith submitted to posterity with deepest love
-- and a wish that you may know happier days,

Michael Reade Sitzman
15 June, 2005

Remember.