

## **Still There**

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We stared straight into the face of evil and saw the anger and hate, the insanity of it all. In disbelief, we watched our country wounded, our loved ones slaughtered, our fellow citizens stunned. Grown men and women cried. Their children, transfixed, watched the horror over and over again. Giant balls of fire blew out of buildings when planes knifed through pillars of steel as if they just weren't there. And soon they weren't, the skyline changing forever. Smoke and dust billowed through the avenues, looking like scenes from the next action adventure. Innocents screamed and ran for their lives. To avoid the blaze, many jumped, holding hands, staying together for the quick and final end. Sadness struck the nation, indeed the world. We hung on to our family and friends and often complete strangers, who, we would begin to realize, were not strangers at all.

But from that doom and despair, hope and determination began to flicker and then to burn through our national soul. We saw the firemen raise the flag atop the tangled wreckage, recollecting in us an image from a land far away as marines pushed and pushed to plant the stars and the stripes. It brought to mind our own song about bombs bursting in air. About our flag that was still there. The song sung over there. In England. By the Queen. By thousands in many lands.

Still there. Still there in our hearts as we watch the rescuers, their hard hats adorned with tiny splashes of red and white and blue. We watch them attack the pile of rubble, firm in their belief that if a single body still breathes, they will continue to dig. Still there as we hear of Todd Beamer, Jeremy Glick, Mark Bingham, Thomas Burnett, and no doubt others who hurled their bodies at the madmen, knowing they would not leave the shadow of death, saving hundreds from additional tragedy, preserving the landmarks of our nation's youth. Still there as we gather in groups across the fruited plain to light our candles, to cry our tears, to sing our songs, and to know that America is indeed the beautiful, that God has blessed and will bless this land, and that our flag was still there. Still there as we extend our arms and give our blood. Still there as small children offer their small hands full of pennies saved. Still there as we gaze at the skyline and see its gaping void. Still there as we look out a bit—just over there in the water—and see the lady, her hand held high, holding the lamp of promise, of freedom, of our unbendable will. Still there as we all commit once again to our experiment in freedom and take our centuries-old test of democracy. Still there as we remember the words of our founders that all people are created equal and that we dedicate our lives to that proposition. Back then. Today. And for all tomorrows to come.

So from this face of evil, the spirit of our people rises up. We stare back into the loathsome darkness. But all around us we know and see and feel and touch the light—the core goodness of this nation. We bend. But through decency and faith and love, we will not break.

Not ever.

And so I walk to work. In our nation's capital. I come upon a lady looking at me with a smile— from her black face. She holds out her aluminum foil package from home. “Try some,” she says. “It's delicious,” she says with the smile that stays. I help myself to a piece of fruit. I smile—from my white face. We nod. We know. That our flag is still there.