

When the Towers Came Down

ARTURO: LIKE SHE ALWAYS DID, Carmen straightened the bow tie on my uniform before kissing me good-bye that morning. “See you at lunchtime,” she said. My wife and I had the same routine every work day, riding the No. 4 train from our home in the Bronx, near Yankee Stadium, to downtown Manhattan. Our shifts as maintenance workers at the World Trade Center started at six o’clock. Sometimes when we came out of the train station at Fulton Street, the sun would be coming up and the Twin Towers looked almost like giant bars of gold. I never expected when I went to work there shortly after I came to the States from Panama in 1971 that I would

BY ARTURO AND CARMEN GRIFFITH
THE BRONX, NEW YORK

The building where they met and worked is gone. But what they found there remains

CHAI G WEST



TOGETHER: *September 11 brought Arturo and Carmen closer than ever.*

spend so much of my life inside those two soaring magnificent structures.

There are lots of things I never expected. Such as marrying Carmen. I liked her from the moment I first saw her more than 20 years ago, leaning up against an elevator bank. But we were both attached at the time, so we just became friends. Later, when I was getting divorced, she was a good listener, maybe because she'd been through the same thing. We used to talk on the way down in the elevator at the end of a shift, just the two of us. Once I joked, "You know, I've never kissed a Puerto Rican before." She shot back, "Well, you're not going to kiss this Puerto Rican either." I guess she was put off by how many girlfriends I'd had. I didn't give up, though. Turned out she was the one I'd been looking for all along.

Once we were together, it felt as if it were always meant to be. God must have known. If I was operating the elevator

and there were no passengers, I'd always stop at whatever floor Carmen was on and bring her a banana. "Something for you, Ma," I'd say. And when she had a break she'd find me and give me an apple. "Here, Pa." On payday we'd go to the bank together and deposit our checks, then treat ourselves to a special lunch.

On that morning, September 11, I was running a freight elevator in Tower One, covering for a coworker who'd had a heart attack. Carmen was on elevator duty that day as well, running people up to the top floors. I got a call from her at about eight o'clock. "Pa, my radio battery's dead. Can you get me new batteries?"

I got some out of the locker room on the third floor and left them for Carmen at the seventy-eighth-floor sky lobby. Then I headed back to the basement and picked up a carpenter named Marlene Cruz. She got in, I pressed the 47 button, and the elevator started up.

Suddenly the floor seemed to give way. There was a loud whistling. The elevator dropped—faster, faster. Marlene was screaming. *God, help us!* I thought. *Protect us!* We stopped dead with a tremendous jolt. The elevator doors caved in and I was knocked to the ground. The next thing I knew my nose and mouth were filled with thick smoke. "Arturo, wake up!" Marlene yelled.

I saw a flashlight beam through the haze. "Can you get up?" a man called. I reached down and touched my right leg. The bone was sticking out.

"My leg's broke," I said. Some guys put me on a plank and carried me outside.

"A plane hit the building, near the top," said one of my coworkers.

STILL ALIVE! After nine days separated, Carmen and Arturo were reunited at Long Island College Hospital, where they shared a room until their release.

"Could you call and check on Carmen?" I asked him. He said his radio was out, and all at once I got a bad feeling.

As they loaded me into the ambulance I managed to look up at Tower One. Thick clouds of black smoke poured out from a terrible gash in the side of the building—it looked like it was around the seventy-eighth floor. Right at that instant I cried out, "My wife is dead!"

CARMEN: Every morning I kissed my husband, Arturo, good-bye on the third floor of Tower One, where we changed into our work uniforms. He always looked so handsome in his striped shirt and blue bow tie. Back in 1980, when I started working at the World Trade Center, I never would have believed it if someone had told me that this big barrel-chested man would one day be my husband. I knew his reputation with the ladies, and my instinct was to stay clear even though I loved talking with him. We'd chat about our kids, swap news about our coworkers—so many of them our good friends.

In 1993 when a bomb went off in the parking garage of the World Trade Center, I saw my coworkers and manager crying on TV. I rushed down to the scene. We worked around the clock trying to get the building up and running again. We got ID cards and there were guards posted everywhere, plus lots of safety drills. I felt reassured.

One day in 1994 I was coming down in the elevator with Arturo and our friend Jose Contes. Arturo was having a good time flirting with me, as usual. "You know," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "I never did get around to kissing you."

I glanced at Jose, then looked at Arturo. "Well, go ahead then," I said, not really thinking he would do it. He put his arms around me, pulled me close,

and we kissed. Jose told us afterward it felt like there was electricity in the elevator. In that one moment, everything seemed to fall into place. That kiss was the promise. And we sealed it with wedding vows a year later.

Shortly afterward we started landscaping duty. We kept the fountain in the courtyard going and watered trees and plants in the public areas. And we hung holiday decorations throughout the towers. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Valentine's Day—the seasons went round and round and the years kept passing. On our anniversary, coworkers broadcast their congratulations to us over our service radios.

The day before September 11 we had lunch at Windows on the World with my elevator operator partner, James Audiffred, and another friend named Juan Segura. The four of us spent the hour eating, laughing and talking. We were truly on top of the world.

The morning of September 11 there were people waiting in the main lobby of Tower One to go up for a big breakfast meeting at Windows. Normally I ran the express elevator, but due to renovations I was shuttling people from the seventy-eighth-floor sky lobby. I ushered a few Cantor Fitzgerald employees into car 93A and pressed the up button.

The doors slid closed but before we moved there was an incredibly loud noise. Debris fell on top of the elevator. The side wall exploded and fire swirled around us. My passengers were kneeling on the floor screaming. I pressed the door button but it didn't work, so I pried open the doors with my hands. It was pitch black outside. I stood between the doors, holding them open. "Go, get out!" I yelled. The passengers crawled out between my legs, some screaming, some on fire. I looked over my shoulder to



check if everyone was out. Flames lashed at my face and hands. I pushed myself out from between the doors to the floor outside the elevator. I took off my jacket, patting my face and hair with it. I pressed my hands on the carpet. The skin was still cooking. Above me I saw the marble wall was split down the middle and smoke was everywhere. *Lord, help me get out of here. Help Arturo.*

Arlene Charles, one of my coworkers, and Audrey Williams, who worked for the Port Authority, grabbed my arms and helped me down the stairs. At the thirtieth floor, someone asked me, "Do you want to get first aid here?"

Keep moving, something inside told me. "No, I want to get out," I said.

As soon as we made it outside I was put in an ambulance. I looked at the towers. "Don't look," one of the paramedics said, putting his hand in front of my face. I did not listen. I saw the buildings smoking, raining debris and bodies. A terrible thought took hold of me. "My husband is dead," I said.

ARTURO: I was rushed to St. Vincent's Hospital on Eleventh Street. They gave me a sedative but I couldn't rest. I called my mother-in-law. She hadn't heard from Carmen. I turned on the TV in my room. That's when I saw the towers fall down. My towers. Our towers. Carmen couldn't have gotten out. Why hadn't I waited for her when I brought the batteries up? Why hadn't I told her I loved her one last time?

CARMEN: I was taken to Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn and put in intensive care. The tears that crept from the corners of my swollen eyes stung my skin. Someone on the news said the freight elevators got stuck before the buildings came down. The

nurse patted my cheeks with a tissue. "Try not to cry," she said.

"Would you call my mother and tell her I'm alive?" I asked. "And check to see if my husband was brought in?"

Arturo wasn't on their list. *Lord, how can I go on without him?* I prayed to go to sleep, so I could dream Arturo and the towers were standing before me, tall and strong and impossible to knock down.

ARTURO: I called my family in Panama to tell them I was okay. I talked to my children. And then I talked to God. *How can I go on without her?* I asked. *How? You may as well ask me to walk with this broken leg.*

I dialed Carmen's mother again. I had to share the pain of her loss with someone who loved her as much as I did.

"Arturo!" she exclaimed. "She's alive. The hospital just called. They say she's badly burned but she's alive!"

"Thank God," was all I could say, over and over. "Thank God."

I phoned the hospital but they would not let Carmen speak to me because she was in intensive care. "We're taking good care of her, Mr. Griffith, don't worry."

"Would you give her a message for me?" I asked. "Tell her I love her."

CARMEN: The nurse rushed into my room. "Carmen, your husband called. He's all right."

I put my hand on my heart and started crying. "Thank God he's alive," I said.

Three days later we were finally able to speak on the phone. "Pa, I'm all right." "I'm all right too, Ma," he said.

They brought him to my hospital. He bent to kiss me on my charred lips, then drew back. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Nothing hurts now," I said. Everything had fallen into place again. They put us in one room. Three weeks later we

MAKING STRIDES: *As Arturo walks, Carmen lifts. They still go to physical therapy at the gym on a regular basis . . . together, of course.*

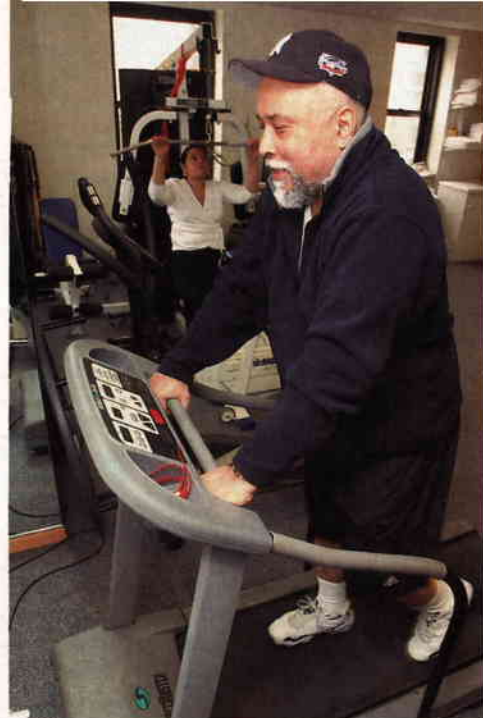
were released. By then we had learned about our colleagues who hadn't gotten out—17 in all—our friends, our family. One was my partner, James.

ARTURO: I could not have made it through a single day of physical therapy without Carmen. It hurt so much just to bend my leg. But she kept urging me on—a little more, a little farther. Her therapy was tough too. Neither of us could have gotten through without the other.

I haven't been down to Ground Zero and I don't want to go. When I close my eyes I still see the World Trade Center exactly the way it was. I see Carmen in her uniform and the spectacular view from Windows on the World. I hear the hum of people rushing to their jobs. I see the courtyard fountain I used to tend. In my dreams they're all right back where they should be and we're all together again. That's the way I'll always think of the Twin Towers. It's the place where I met Carmen, where I fell in love with her, where we worked and almost died—and then, in a sense, were reborn, and strengthened in our faith.

CARMEN: We went to visit Arturo's family in Panama earlier this year. Flying back to New York, I saw the skyline. Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, Statue of Liberty, and . . . the wreckage. I couldn't hold back my tears, yet my tears did not sting. I was healing.

The wounds inside take more time. Arturo says he still dreams about the World Trade Center. So do I. In those dreams I'm talking on my radio again. Arturo is coming off the elevator with a



bagel and tea and a kiss for me. I can almost feel the building's heartbeat.

Sometimes I see the ones who didn't make it out, like James and the people I took up in the elevator that morning who would never come back down. I know Arturo has nightmares too. I hear him rustling at night, yet I know the Lord is with us, helping us heal day by day.

The buildings may be gone, but one thing wasn't destroyed. When I can't bend my fingers because of my injuries, I know Arturo knows what I'm going through. When I remember something about the years we spent at the World Trade Center, he understands that too. Throughout everything, we still have the gift God gave us—each other. That's true for Arturo and me. It's true for us all. ■

For more on this story, see Family Room.