

—INTO THE AFTER

by Kurt Dinan

The room was little more than a cement bunker located in the back of an abandoned grocery store. Dad and I had stood third in line underneath the flickering fluorescent lights for an hour. No one could stop staring at the same white sheet that obscured the area near the front wall. Unseen spotlights backlit the makeshift partition, and the oversized silhouette of an empty chair shone through. I rocked back and forth on my heels, certain at any moment my nerves would give out and send me to the exit.

Dad motioned to the manila envelope in my hand and said, “Which one did you bring?”

“Hilton Head.”

He smiled at the memory, but it died quickly, and he returned to his thoughts and vigil watching the chair. I’d chosen the picture of Mom in a flowered sundress from a rubber-banded pile hidden away in the basement where Dad wasn’t likely to run across it. Most days he still couldn’t even say her name; God knows how he’d react to unwillingly discovering her picture.

“...in December of 2000, I took a job with security personnel at One World Trade Center where every day...”

Ethan Stuckey’s story played from a Peavey amp sitting on the floor at the front of the screen. His voice had been on a continual loop since we’d arrived, slithering into my ears and sending an uninterrupted chill through my body as if he stood directly behind me. Even after all the waiting, I still didn’t know if I believed his story which had brought us all together. Dad accepted it though, and that was all that mattered.

Metallic knocking from behind the partition silenced all talk in the room. Burt, the bearded man who’d frisked us upon entry, stopped on his way around the screen and shut off the CD player wired into the amp. I held a breath to ten, hoping to relax. A deadbolt clanged open, followed by the scraping of metal across cement. Seconds later, the outline of Ethan Stuckey, stooped and hobbling, appeared. He moved in jerky motions toward the chair as if his hips had been broken and set improperly. As he passed the screen, his distorted shadow made it appear he was rising from the earth.

Burt reemerged from behind the sheet and knelt in front of the amp. A low static hum filled the room. Dad drummed his fingers against his legs. He had been

INTO THE AFTER

anticipating this night ever since he'd transferred a thousand dollars for the two of us through PayPal. The guilt I'd experienced since helping him make the plans flooded through me again. I shut my eyes and swallowed hard, reminding myself that tonight was about saving Dad, not about my fears of a man some labeled a fraud and others called the boogeyman.

On the screen, Ethan's shadow lifted a microphone. When he spoke, his voice had the scratchy quality of an old blues album.

"You've all come tonight hoping for answers, and I can promise those to you," he said. "What I can't promise is that you'll necessarily like what you hear. That doesn't really matter to me. All of you have made a deal to hear the truth. Nothing more. What you do with it is up to you."

He lowered the mic onto his lap. Burt restarted the audio of Ethan's story, then waved forward the woman at the front of the line. I recognized her from a midnight showing of *The Lies of 9-11* that Dad had taken me to at an empty warehouse down by the shore. When she reached the edge of the screen, she paused as if reconsidering. I secretly hoped she would turn back, starting a mass exodus that would shake Dad from his waking coma. Instead, she turned the corner. I followed her outline projecting black on white until she knelt at Ethan's feet.

"I know I said it before, but I appreciate you coming along, Will," Dad said. His eyes were ringed by dark circles like he was looking up from the bottom of a well. "Maybe tonight we'll get some truth."

The irony wasn't lost on me. In the years since 2001, Dad had avoided the truth by turning our Hoboken home into a cave of wall-plastered newspaper articles and building schematics whose relevance only he understood. Even with no remains ever recovered, Mom was officially classified as deceased nine months after that September. For Dad though, no body meant Mom might have somehow survived, possibly suffering amnesia and living life elsewhere. He remained immobile in The Before, existing in a perpetual 2001 where he hibernated with footage of plane crashes, building implosions, and mystery jumpers. Meanwhile, I lived in The After, alone and feeling orphaned as if I had somehow lost both parents on the same day.

"...a massive rumbling on the street like the ground was opening up. Then I was consumed by dust and ash, and there was nothing but darkness."

I recognized most of the people in line behind us. There was the wheel-chaired man who'd been removed by Borders' security after initiating a shouting match with the author of *Conspiracies Debunked*. Past him, the woman who kept vigil at Ground Zero with a sandwich board covered with her daughter's picture. Then the blogger whose page *Among the Missing Dad* monitored daily. And the Diane Lane look-alike who brought her young son to the support group meetings. And on and on. Despite our common bond, no one acknowledged each other. Years of attending the same events brought recognition but not friendship, as if suffering alone equated to some sort of valor.

On the screen, the silhouette of the woman with Ethan convulsed as if overcome by a seizure. Then, after letting out a deep sob, she cracked him across the face with her hand. The sound echoed through the room. Burt was around the screen and on top of her in seconds.

I unconsciously stepped behind Dad. He showed no sign of my existence,