



BEFORE *the* TOWERS FELL: a 9/11 PROLOGUE

WHEN CHRIS WILLIAMS, JAN WHITE, AND I traveled to Boston on September 8, 2001, the events of 9/11 — the destruction and death — were as alien to our minds as little green men from Mars. In fact, the entire weekend seemed like something from another world, and it began with a ridiculous trip from the Boston airport to our downtown hotel.

After stuffing ourselves into an airport shuttle and snuggling up to strangers, we braved the frantic twists and turns through Boston's ever-congested streets. Each time the driver slammed on the brakes, we hoped against hope we wouldn't be wacked in the back of the head by luggage piled to the ceiling.

Thankfully, we eventually came to a screeching halt somewhat near our hotel in the Back Bay area of Boston. We peeled ourselves off our newfound friends, bid them safe journey to their destinations — and God's grace if they didn't make it — and freed our luggage from the bottom of the pile. The driver pointed to our hotel . . . down the street . . . and held out his hand for a tip. I gave him a dollar — my thanks for not killing us on the way to the hotel and my displeasure for not dropping us off at the front door.

Walking down the street, we passed a bar with plate glass windows. I glanced in and, while I thought nothing of it at the time, I didn't notice any women inside. Soon after, we reached the hotel, an older but quaint abode. Chris and I approached the desk while Jan stayed in the lobby watching our bags. Since Chris had made the reservations, she spoke first: a room with two twin beds for Chris Williams and Jan

White. The clerk searched his computer. Yes, he had her reservation, but he didn't have a room with two twin beds; he only had a room with one queen-sized bed.

As Chris tried to straighten out her room reservation, I noticed two women had come into the lobby and struck up a conversation with Jan. These women politely asked where Jan was from and what she was doing in Boston. Then they wanted to know what she was doing that evening. Jan said something about going to dinner with Chris and me. They looked at the front desk . . . saw Chris standing there . . . and then said they'd be happy to show Jan and Chris a good time.

I turned back to Chris, still haggling with the hotel clerk, and joked, "Jan has just been propositioned by two lesbians and I think you've just been invited to an evening of fun." It was then I heard the clerk say, "Oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood. We rarely get reservations for two beds in this hotel. We do have one room on another floor, if you don't mind being separated from Mr. Jeter. You'll like it . . . it's quieter on that floor."

What did he mean by *that*?

Then it dawned on me . . . the all male bar, the two lesbians propositioning Jan, and the queen-sized bed. I turned to Chris, "If sometime during our stay in this hotel I grab you and kiss you smack on the mouth, don't be offended. It will be the greatest service I could do for you and for me this whole trip. And I guarantee Joe and Christy will thank me for it!" That clued Chris in, but Jan was still having a pleasant conversation with the two lesbians.

No doubt about it, we had just checked into an all gay hotel.

I wasn't in my room two minutes before the phone rang. I picked it up and said, "Are you ready to go?"

All Chris could muster was, “Get me the hell out of here!”

While I explained to the hotel clerk that we had obviously made a mistake in making reservations at *this* hotel, and we wouldn’t want to keep his usual clientele from having rooms for the night, Chris made quick arrangements for a taxi to pick us up and drop us off at Faneuil Hall, across the street from City Hall. There, a client was to meet us and, after we took her out to dinner, deliver us to *our* usual hotel — the one we had always stayed at during our travels to Boston.

Sitting in casual business attire on a curb at the base of a statue of Samuel Adams in Boston’s bustling downtown on a Saturday evening . . . while watching three suitcases alone as Chris and Jan went shopping, I looked like the best-dressed, well equipped homeless man Boston had ever seen. Fortunately, I didn’t have to wait long. Our client arrived, we took her to the Oyster House, and she took us to a clean, and traditional hotel outside the city.

When I settled into my room, I had a good chuckle and thanked God that the most exciting part of the trip was behind us.

Unknown to us that Saturday evening, however, the most exciting part of the trip was before us.

A plot to murder thousands of innocent men and women was unfolding that very night in Boston, New Jersey, and Washington D.C. Within a few days the plot would prove successful. And life as we knew it would never be the same.

Sunday, September 9, was an uneventful day of sightseeing in and around Boston. On Monday morning, September 10, we were to finish our business in Boston, and then complete our New England trip that evening at the Rhode Island headquarters of CVS Caremark. The next day we were to fly out of Logan Airport — the very airport from which American Airlines Flight 11 and United Flight 175

departed. CVS, however, needed to push back our meeting a day, so on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, instead of boarding a plane in Boston we climbed into a rental car headed for Rhode Island.



ON A BEAUTIFUL, NEW ENGLAND MORNING, I was driving from Boston to Rhode Island to visit a client. The air was crisp and fresh. The sun had just enough warmth to keep the chill at bay. The sky was a stunning hue of blue. It was one of those mornings that made me wish I worked outside. It was one of those mornings that made me feel alive.

That was how the morning of September 11, 2001, began.

It ended in ugliness and rubble.

And nearly 3,000 of our fellow citizens dead.

With a phone call, my business associates, Chris and Jan and I became wrapped up in the unfolding tragedy. Chris answered the call; her reaction made us think something must have been terribly wrong at home. “Are you listening to the news?” Joe, Chris’s husband, asked. “No,” she replied, turning on the car’s radio. We couldn’t believe what we heard: two airliners had flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A few minutes later, the radio buzzed: “We are under attack! The Pentagon has just been hit by an airplane!”

At our client's headquarters, the lobby overflowed with hundreds of people huddled around television sets. We maneuvered our way to see the live feed of the twin towers ablaze, dreadful gray and black smoke billowing against that pristine blue sky. White and silver flecks tumbled from the buildings like snowflakes. Then the unthinkable occurred. Gasps echoed through the crowd. "What's happening?" "Oh, my God," rumbled through the lobby. I remember numbingly saying to no one in particular, "The building is collapsing." The south tower began pancaking in on itself, as the shrieks and tears in Rhode Island intermingled with the screams and panic in New York.

Unable to work or walk away from the television, we stood frozen in the lobby. The news flashed from New York to D.C., where a section of the Pentagon had collapsed. Then back to New York, as the north tower crumbled. We watched in silence, dumbfounded. Later, we heard of a violent plane crash that took place at the same time in rural Pennsylvania. And then, though none of us knew it, it was all over.

Airlines were grounded. Flights cancelled. So we decided to drive home. After making our way back to Boston to gather our things, we left the city immediately. Since two of the planes originated out of Boston, we wondered whether martial law might be imposed and the city blocked off. Driving out of Boston, on our way to Buffalo, New York, I was struck by the paradoxes of the day: the brightness of morning turning into the darkness of mourning; the peaceful beauty of upstate New York contrasted with the violent ugliness of what had happened in lower Manhattan; the eerie, clear night sky void of blinking airplane lights compared with the ghostly shadows cast against the rising dust visible in flashing emergency lights.

The events of 9/11 seemed unreal. They were . . . surreal.