It was supposed to be an average Tuesday morning at Foster’s Freeze, no different from any other. I was an assistant manager and was in charge of most morning shifts. I woke up at 5 like I always did, showered and had coffee. As I walked to work, I was already laying out the battle plan for the morning’s chores. Tuesday morning was Broiler Day. Certain parts of the broiler were washed nightly, but once a week it was dismantled further and given a thorough cleaning and inspection. The wire covers of the broiler jets were checked, the screws tightened, the gas outlets were brushed and wiped clean. If any parts were damaged or needed to be replaced, it was usually seen to on Tuesday morning. It was a little chilly and I was glad to have my jacket. As I walked, smoking my third cigarette of the day, I thought it would be a good idea to check the ice cream machines. Monday and Tuesday mornings were usually less busy than the others, so we would wash the parts of the soft serve dispensers the night before. When I came in the morning, the mix was usually gone, the machine emptied and defrosted, and the parts either washed or soaking in sanitizer. My boss had been complaining of the noises that one of the machines had been making. I figured I could do a parts inspection while I washed and delegate the rest of the chores to the rest of the crew.
I knew that I had two of my best crew members, Ryan & Rosie, on shift that day. The way I had it laid out, Ryan could take care of the broiler & floor mats. They required heavy scrubbing and Rosie’s hands reacted badly to the degreaser we needed to use. She did not have a problem with soap & sanitizer though, so she could take care of washing the machine. I would set the drawers & registers for the day, then replace all of the O-rings that were worn. We had also received delivery the day before, so I knew we had replacement parts and fresh lube for the machine. In my mind, I could picture the brunt of the morning chores being done by 8:30, 9 AM at the latest. As I crossed the parking lot, I saw Ryan standing by the front door. He looked like he had been up too late, possibly never even seeing his bed. I had come to expect this, which was another reason he usually got the grunt work. He didn’t mind and it gave him time to sober up before the boss came in. More importantly, in my opinion, the kid was never late, he never called in sick, and he was fast on the line. He was one of the few who could hold his own during a summer rush, working the line and fryers. I unlocked the door as Rosie & her husband pulled up. We all greeted each other and, as he left for work, I laid out the morning’s plan to the other two. I deactivated the alarm and told them that, if we had it all finished by 9, I would have donuts for them the following Tuesday. They agreed and we all set about our morning chores. It was just after 6 AM.

Ryan was finished washing the broiler itself and was tightening the screws on the gas jets. The broiler screens were soaking in hot water and degreaser in one sink. The conveyor chain and miscellaneous broiler parts were soaking in another. I knew he would be starting to clean the fryer oil before getting to the hard cleaning, so I moved up front to check on Rosie.
She was rinsing the machine of soap, making a bit of a mess, but I figured that was why we had floor drains and mop buckets. I knew in the end it would all be dry and I’d be able to do the maintenance I had planned. Our normal time to open for breakfast was 6:30, so I unlocked the dining room doors and turned on the Open sign. While changing the batteries in the headset for the drive-thru, I noticed we had a car pulling in. I turned on the loudspeaker and took his order, just a cup of black coffee with three sugars. I’ve worked in food for 15 years as of this writing. I have made many different things and taken many different food & drink orders, almost all of which have been forgotten. As he turned the corner of the building and drove to the window, I put a spoon and napkin in the bag with his coffee. I will never forget that cup of coffee. Unbeknownst to me, it was the last order I took before the world changed.

I slid the window open and told the man his total. As he searched through his ashtray for change, I could hear he was listening to the radio. This wasn’t unusual; I have seen many things come through the drive thru. A man listening to the news on his way to work was not uncommon; a man with tears running down his cheeks at 6:30 AM was a bit unusual. He wiped his eyes as he handed me the change for the coffee.

“You don’t have a radio on in there by any chance do you?” he asked me as I handed him his coffee. “No, sir,” I told him, “only the CD player in back. Sorry if the music is too loud.”

I turned to the register to make change. “You should try to get a radio,” he said. “We’re going to war. They’re crashing planes. They said that the first was an accident, but they’re saying another just hit the Pentagon.” Not knowing what to say, I handed him his change and told him to have a good day. He drove off and I turned to Rosie. She was looking at me confused. I
didn’t blame her, I was confused myself. I walked to the back office and called my boss. He told me that they didn’t know what all was going on, details were fuzzy. Apparently a plane had hit one of the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. When the man came for his coffee, a second had crashed into the Pentagon. I was told to get a television set as fast as I could and set it on the counter. He knew that what was happening was going to be the topic of the day. He said that people would be coming in to the restaurant, most in a state of shock. If they wanted to just sit all day and watch the television, that was okay by him. Any employee who did not want to work that day was to be automatically excused. He would be there when he could; the man was in charge of four other stores.

I called my house and my roommate answered. He was getting ready for work, was almost out the door, but had come back for his keys. I asked if he could bring my television to work, which he agreed to do, though I could hear the confusion in his voice. He dropped it off and I could see he was just hearing the news for himself on the drive over. After we plugged in the television, I used my remote to search for channels. I had no idea which news stations I would be able to pick up inside the restaurant, but I thought I’d get at least one of them. He left me to fiddle with the antenna and complained that he was going to be late for work. He was supposed to be there at 7, and it was just before. I told him I’d see him at home and check -4- on the rest of the housemates. I had one of the stations coming in, I don’t remember which, but I could tell it was a news program. It was just after 7 when I got a clear enough picture on the screen. It was just after 7 . .
Ryan and Rosie came to the dining room area of the restaurant. The pictures on the screen were beyond belief. I had never been to New York City, but I had seen it in movies, depicted in pictures. The sight of fire and smoke billowing from the first tower seemed unreal, like something from a movie. None of us said anything as we listened to the commentary from the news anchors. None of us said anything as the footage became unimaginably worse. None of us screamed anything articulate as we watched the plane fly directly into the second tower. Rosie was sobbing; I know because I can still hear it. We all stared in disbelief and barely heard the couple enter the dining room. It had to have been five minutes before I heard the man’s wife crying behind us. In a daze, I went behind the counter and asked if I could help them. Ryan sleepwalked to the kitchen and started to mix pancake batter. Rosie dried her eyes and took the headset from me as another car pulled up, the driver knocking on the window. I hadn’t paid attention when he pulled up to the loudspeaker.

As the day progressed, we moved forward in a daze. The restaurant was a ghost town for most of the day. The couple who came in and watched with us stayed until the afternoon. Rosie and Ryan stayed with me the entire shift; I have always admired them for that, especially Rosie. She had 4 children and just needed to know they were safe. I haven’t seen her in almost ten years, but I hope she’s doing well. I stay in touch with Ryan periodically. He married his high school sweetheart and joined the Army. Looking back, I don’t know that it was that day that made his decision. He had been talking about it as an option. All I know is he spent 18 months in a hell I don’t want to imagine, doing a job I don’t know I could do. I’ve had my ups and downs in life, and have now come full circle to being a student again. We, as a country, all
have had to deal with that day’s events in our own way. Every generation has some event where almost all people know exactly where they were and what they were doing when it took place. My grandparent’s generation had Pearl Harbor. My parents’ generation had the Kennedy assassination. My generation has the attacks of September 11, 2001.