

Eight Minutes and Twenty Seconds

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The first few seconds were spent in shock, then terror. After that, hell broke loose.

The Runner

The lights flashed, the tv screeched. On any and every device, a fatal timer ticked the seconds by. 8:20, *Tick*, 8:19, *Tock*, 8:18, *Tick*. The sound filled my ears, and the ears of all humanity. I stood for a solid 10 seconds, just processing, paralyzed from head to toe. *Tick*. NASA had plenty of cameras up in space, and one orbited our sun, sending live footage to Earth. *Tock*. So when their camera showed the sun exploding unexpectedly, they knew that we only had minutes to live before the effect reaches us, killing us instantly. *Tick*. People ran. Some ran to stores, breaking down windows and wiping the shelves clean. *Tock*. Some ran to family, huddling together with tears streaming down their eyes. *Tick*. I just ran. *Tock*. I didn't stop or waste my last minutes on tears; instead I saw everything. I saw the homeless man from the corner praying down on the ground, while the priest stole the gun from the convenience store. *Tick*. I saw him declare he was going out on his own terms. *Tock*. I saw him put the gun to his head. *Tick*. I saw his quivering fingers close on trigger. *Click*. I ran on.

The Survivor

Times Square had been so loud, so normal just seconds ago. The huge billboards were flashing, tourists were touring, and the pickpockets were at work. But now the billboards turned blank, hacked into by NASA and replaced by massive stopwatches. The people fell silent. Even I didn't use this opportunity to grab a stray wallet. For once in perhaps the whole history of Times Square, it was quiet. Deathly quiet. Of course, that didn't last long. *Tick*.

The Runner

The little boy was crying his eyes out, crystalline tears rolling down his soft cheeks. He was cradled by a young girl no older than ten. I couldn't help thinking that they would never get to grow up and live their lives, find love, or be successful. They'd miss the sunsets over the ocean, the friendship you never lost, and the nights under the stars. They will never be able to make mistakes I could, for their fate was inked in the stars; And it was exploding. *Boom*.

The Survivor

Momma, I'm scared.
Shh, it'll be fine.
Momma, what will they do to us?
Shh, I don't know.
Momma, Will they hurt you?
Whatever they do,
You must stay strong.
You got that?
Keep that little chin of yours held up high.

That was the last thing she said to me.

The Runner

The next street gave me hope, made me slow from a sprint to a walk. It wasn't the fluttering, wispy kind of hope either- It was the hardy kind, the one that filled you up and gave you strength, like a warm chili eaten after hours in the snow.

There were people. Everywhere. They were huddled together in the diner, on the sidewalks, in the streets. They were laughing and sobbing, rich and poor, men and women, white and black. People streamed through an Italian restaurant, carrying plates of food, on the house. Because there was no money, not really. Slips of cloth would do nothing against the sun's demise, and there was a calm peace about it. No divides, no worries, no problems. *Munch.*

The Survivor

My mother was shot that day. Lights flashed. Bullets sliced through the air, finding bodies, finding victims. I ran. I ran faster than ever, going under flailing arms and trying to drown out all the screaming, the madman's laughter echoing through my head. I was small- no older than ten, but even then I knew I couldn't turn to the police for help. I couldn't be another forgotten foster child to be bounced from house to house. From then on, I lived on the streets. *Bang.*

The Runner

I will not stop running. I will see everything. My vision blurred, my head spun, my legs burned; but I kept on running. I saw people doing their favorite things in their last minutes; some ran to the ice rink, while a girl played jump rope, while others wrote in journals furiously. *Scratch.* I also saw the dark side of people. Because a tragedy can either bring out the best in us, or the worst. The worst was not pretty.

The Survivor

Last time I saw death I ran. I ran from my mom, and now she's gone. Today is my chance to hold my ground and get redemption. I will look death in the eyes. I will face it head on. I will survive.

The Runner

9th Avenue was a warzone. Teenagers were lying on the pavement, pools of blood staining the road beneath them. The triumphant ones had their own blood mixed with their opponents as they wrestled, sporting beer bottles with busted ends and sharp pocket knives. I winced as one man smashed a boy's head to the ground, and the body went limp. *Crack.* They couldn't get jailed or punished, with only minutes left. These kids had taken out their anger on themselves, because what did one minute less on this world matter if we would all die soon? I hurried on.

The Survivor

So there I am, standing in the center of Times Square, watching the seconds. *Tick*. What could I do to make these last moments count? What can I do to redeem my mother? I decide to head to where she uttered her last words. I will die with her in my heart, and with her I'll stay. So I head to the theatre.

The Runner

As I run, I realize I am heading right into the heart of the city. Abandoned buses and cars crowd the streets, but I don't slow. I know I must get further, dig deeper, do more. I cannot be just another worthless life. I have to do something, be something, to make my life meaningful. I yearn to push Humanity forward, even in our last minutes; especially in our last minutes. Because I know we have the potential for so much more. We may have made the iPhone, but we never got to invent flying cars or cure cancer. And sprinting down the streets, I see I am not the only one. I see it in the faces of people crowding the streets. I see it in the wrinkles in their foreheads and the tears rolling down their faces. *Drip*. But mostly I see it in their eyes. Their eyes are downcast and defeated, knowing they cannot do anything to stop this, and accepting their world's fate. I had to move, to at least feel like I was doing something, even if it did nothing.

The Survivor

Mama used to always take me to the theatre. We would watch the *Berenstain Bears Musical*, *Madagascar*, or *Dr. Seuss*. When I got a little older, she would take me to see concerts, and when I was ten, I went through a Country Music Phase. Mama jumped on that passion, taking me to plenty of concerts, the last one being here on July 22, 2011. I don't go a day without thinking of the *Bang* the gun made or mama's last words. Today I know I can't run, so I push open the big theatre doors.

The Runner

It seems impossible that I ran all the way to the City, but so does everything else today. Now I know I've reached my limit, and spot the theatre around the bend. Gasping, I push open the doors and collapse on the steps leading down to the stage. At least I will die in peace. I let my face morph into those on the street; lost and broken. I will never live out my life to its fullest, but the least I can do is end it truthfully. I raise the knife I snagged from the peaceful diner to my heart.

The Survivor

The girl was going to kill herself. I burst in and she tried to hide the knife, but I saw it. Saw the light dance off its blade, begging to kill, begging just like the madman's gun. I had promised myself that if I had a second chance, I would save my mom. Now I've gotten a second chance, and I won't run from this. Is this the real reason I felt so compelled to come here? I have to try.

The Runner

She told me I can't do it, that I can't end my own life. She told me that fate was being cruel, but I must not give in. She told me to fight until I couldn't fight anymore, and that I was being a coward. She told me about mama, and how she ran away. *Swoosh*. She told me not to be like her, and not make the big mistake. I believed her.

The Survivor

So many lives, gone. So many stories, so much laughter, so much hope, so much greatness lost in the blink of an eye. All humanity has fought and accomplished was for nothing. Nobody will ever hear of Martin Luther King, or Hitler, or George Washington. All that will be left is a wasteland. But with all our faults, humanity may deserve it.

The Runner

I think of all the things I've seen today and know that we are unforgiving and terrible creatures; from the priest to the brawl, to my own suicidal actions. We humans pollute this planet, wage war, discriminate... But I also saw the diner where this common enemy helped us overcome our differences in a simple and beautiful way. I saw the tears of children who deserve to try and change our ways. I saw the knowing and resignation in the faces of others, and knew they wanted a clean slate. If only we had a second chance.

The countdown timer was reaching its end as the girls braced themselves.

10 *Click.*

9 *Boom.*

8 *Munch.*

7 *Bang.*

6 *Scratch.*

5 *Crack.*

4 *Drip.*

3 *Swoosh.*

2 *Tick.*

1 *Tock.*