

NINE-ELEVEN

On September 11, 2001, Addie Leah and I were on the island of Borneo. I had had a life-long desire to go to Borneo, principally because I grew up dazzled by the stories of the Borneo headhunters. Every travelling circus group had a “wild man from Borneo”.

It happened that Borneo is in a time zone 12 hours different from New York. We had been out for a day of sightseeing and camera clicking, and returned to our hotel in the city of Kuching, turned on the TV, and there was a burning building. There was no sound. “What is that building? Where is that building? Is that in Kuala Lumpur?” As I watched I grew ever more fascinated, and actually remembered the time during WWII when a B-25 flew into the Empire State building. After a few minutes, I saw an airplane fly into the second building, and instantly I knew those towers were in New York City. We were being attacked!

In retrospect I think they were showing videos of what had happened a bit earlier, but as there was no voice or captions, I had no way of knowing what was going on. After about 5 minutes a voice confirmed that this was in New York City, and the attack had occurred only a short time previously.

True to my upbringing in Los Alamos, I now began to pace the floor. This was probably just one phase of an attack. Where else would a nation try to hit us, and how? The answer was clear to me. There must be a plan to hit Chicago, for that is the principal communication and transportation center of the U.S. What is worse, I happened to believe, and still do, that a couple of nuclear devices have been missing ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. What if the next hit is there, and with a nuclear device at a moderate height above the city?! Now I was distraught! And frightened! After about half an hour, I concluded No, it is not an attack by another nation. It is somebody else. But who? And I began to relax. Surely this will put all Americans on the same page. And that will be very good, indeed. I expected there would be many more deaths than was the fact, but I had full confidence that it was an attack we could absorb. It was not nuclear, nor poison gas!

It was not for a number of hours that we began to hear details on an international news channel, and I came to realize that the attack was indeed planned to be bigger than it turned out. I was now breathing relatively easy.

There were some immediate problems, even for us. As all international flights to the US were cancelled, what about our getting back home? Wow, what a mess everything must be! It'll really be something to see how this all shakes out!

The following morning our tour guide, as arranged through SmarTours, Inc. announced that we were not to worry, as all our expenses in Malaysia would be covered until we were finally able to return to the U.S. Now this was unusual indeed! I have never heard of any travel organization that would do such a thing. In a few days we learned the truth—the Malaysian government had told tour operators that Malaysia would reimburse them for all their costs. So that mystery was solved.

The end of our trip arrived, and we were on the first plane of Malaysia Air Lines allowed to return to the States from Kuala Lumpur. We landed on Taiwan to refuel, and there everything was removed from the plane, and everybody had to get off to go through a new kind of security check. But the people doing the searching evidently had no experience, and few instructions, and were awash with confusion and inefficiencies. Things were a real mess, and any added security was doubtful.

We had a truly curious feeling in Los Angeles, for upon arrival I could not find our baggage for about an hour. After it was located, we emerged through customs in the Los Angeles international terminal to find it completely empty except for a few employees. Image that huge terminal room, empty of travelers! Even our fellow travelers were not in view. It is a sight I never expect to see again.

I have included these few remarks to illustrate that those who are knowledgeable about nuclear explosions are quick to think of them if there is any kind of emergency. Most people worry about fire, or theft, or something that can be viewed as fairly trivial compared to what we have seen.

We saw a good many of those famous shrunken heads in Borneo, just as we had hoped to do. They contrasted beautifully with the swollen heads that are occasionally seen in the District of Columbia!

These skulls were hanging from the rafters in one of a village visits.



Canoes came by for free.



We treasured the time spent with orangutans in their natural habitat.

