

Senior English Address

“When We Fall in One Piece”

by

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WHEN WE FALL IN ONE PIECE

By Auguste J. Roc

When I was six years old, I learned suddenly that the world is a scary place. On a beautiful, crisp, blue sky morning on my first day of first grade, a cinematic fireball roared out of the World Trade Center and fixed me to the living room window.

Our apartment building shook like an earthquake. Then, the lights went out. The power outage ended *Sesame Street* early and with no elevator, my mom and I ran down twenty-two flights of stairs to my building's lobby. As the first tower fell and the perfect blue sky turned black, I floated away from the only home I had known in a lifeboat going to New Jersey, leaving behind my neighborhood buried in a dusty, white avalanche of rubble and debris. When we got to New Jersey, a fireman's deep voice directed me to jump. I made it off the boat and onto the dock without falling into the Hudson River, but I lost my shoes and watched helplessly as they drifted towards the smoky horizon.

While I stood there, another firefighter took me by the hand, and silently guided me through a hole in a chain link fence to an office building where my neighbors sought refuge. We looked like ghosts, covered head to toe in debris. The firefighter handed me a hose so I could clean my face and hands. I know now that the firefighter had friends that had just died minutes before, but in that moment, he took my hand and helped me to get cleaned up. He showed me what it was like to be strong.

I've often wondered if, in some small way, I see the world as I do today because of that firefighter, because I witnessed that day that love and courage trump hate and destruction. While my neighborhood collapsed before my eyes, my strongest memory is still of that one firefighter. The story of 9/11 is that two planes hit the Twin Towers, but the story for me is that a firefighter held my hand.

We, the members of the class of 2017, were first graders on September 11th, 2001. We were high school seniors on April 15th, 2013, when, fresh off the excitement of receiving our acceptance letters to Harvard, we would be suddenly sobered by the Boston Marathon bombing. Three people lost their lives. Many more were seriously injured. Four days later, Cambridge was on lockdown as law enforcement searched for the remaining suspect. Students holed up in their dorm rooms for hours as police cars patrolled the city. Visitas – the three-day event that would serve to welcome newly admitted students—was to be hosted that weekend. Some of us had already arrived - and spent the day at the airport. In limbo. Waiting. In the end, Visitas was cancelled.

However, in the span of just a few hours, Harvard's upperclassmen rallied to create a Virtual Visitas for us and welcomed us through our computer screens. Despite disruption and uncertainty, Harvard students rallied to welcome the Class of 2017.

The story of the 2013 Boston Marathon is that two brothers committed an act of terror that killed and injured, but what if the ultimate story was that courageous bystanders ran toward the explosion to save lives? The story of the

days that followed is that Cambridge was on lockdown on the weekend that was supposed to have been our Visitas, but what if the ultimate story was that the upperclassmen cared enough to figure out another way to welcome us to Harvard and to make us feel at home?

Graduation day is a celebration, an occasion to lift a glass and to make a toast, to acknowledge accomplishments and to thank God that we made it through exams. But graduation day also presents us with the opportunity to set an intention for ourselves that honors the responsibility that comes with a Harvard degree.

When the universe shifted on September 11th and again on April 15, people ran toward the explosion. When I look at a map, and I trace my finger up the coast, all the lines and borders on the map run together. And when we fall, we always come down together. In one piece.

I have learned that the world can be a scary place. But I have also learned that: in the face of fear, we have a choice. Who will we choose to be when we are presented with the opportunity to care about, to stand with, to speak up for, to give up something of ourselves as a simple act of humanity? Many of us have gone to bed in fear - fear of discrimination, fear of deportation, fear of walls and bans and rollbacks. We have been afraid. But, among us are the courageous. I know because I've seen it. I've eaten next to it in the dining hall, I've studied

across from it in the library, I've walked by it in Harvard Yard. I know the mark of courage, and I've seen it here with you.

So, as we prepare to graduate and walk through those gates one final time as students, let us choose our weapons wisely. Let Courage be our defense against cowardice, Hope our defense against despair, Compassion our defense against destruction. -

Let's choose Love as our ultimate defense against fear, because in the face of fear, lies the golden opportunity to shift the narrative by being someone who is willing to walk a six-year-old to a safe place, through a hole in a chain link fence. Here, right now, lies the golden opportunity for YOU—for me, for us—to be the **ULTIMATE** story.