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A voice from the horror

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Mariya Plekan wheeled herself to the front of Courtroom 304 on Thursday morning. In a soft voice, the 54-year-old Ukrainian immigrant told the story of the most mundane of days - one then interrupted by horror, by cruel chance.

If only Plekan's bus to the Salvation Army store at 22d and Market had been late. If only the store's "Family Day" sale - which Plekan frequented to buy clothes for her late husband's relatives - had fallen on a day other than June 5, 2013. If only she had finished her shopping a minute or two earlier. If only.

Instead, Plekan was at the check-out counter that morning when the three-story unsupported wall of a Hoagie City building being demolished next door toppled onto the store, killing six and entombing her for almost 14 hours - until she heard the voice of a fire captain and felt a rescue dog's hot breath on her neck.

Now, she was on the stand to testify against one of the two men charged in the collapse - Hunting Park demolition contractor Griffin Campbell. The dead can no longer speak for themselves, so here was Plekan to speak for them, and for

herself, and for all that was lost in the collapse.

Here was a woman who, according to her lawyer, **Andrew Stern**, once loved to ride on her bus to the Art Museum, to see the flowers along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, to stroll through her city.

Here was a woman now confined to a modest room in a West Philadelphia nursing home decorated with her rosary beads. Plekan lost not only both her legs in the collapse - the ensuing 30 surgeries took even her hip sockets, which could have supported prostheses. It is a challenge for her to even sit upright in her wheelchair.

"This," she told the court, through tears, "is my hell."

Watching Plekan on the stand, it could have been easy to chalk up her hell to cruel chance. But then Sean Benschop took the stand.

Benschop, the stoned, reckless excavator who on the morning of the collapse had been banging around a building so fragile its east wall could have been blown over by a strong breeze until he knocked it over, and who has since pleaded guilty to six counts of involuntary manslaughter.

He looked over at his former boss, Campbell, who prosecutors say

managed the outrageously dangerous demolition - driven foremost, they say, by a desire to quickly harvest parts for salvage - and who now faces six counts of third-degree murder.

A man who, prosecutors say, valued money over life.

A man who, in the seconds after the collapse, before the dust had settled, amid the screams and sirens, with the dead and gravely injured so nearby, chose not to run to help, but rather turned to Benschop and allegedly asked: "Do you have insurance?"

A man who, while in a holding cell with Benschop, allegedly said it would have been better for the both of them if Plekan had died. Aggravated assault, he allegedly said, in a chilling calculation, carries a longer sentence than involuntary manslaughter.

A man who deserves whatever punishment he gets.

So you look at these two in the courtroom and you are reminded that cruel chance had nothing to do with this. That this is about so much more. That it was all so inevitable, predictable, preventable.

If only a culture could be put on trial. A culture in a city department - Licenses and Inspections - that by

so many accounts is still failing to properly inspect buildings - an agency sorely in need of a sweeping overhaul rather than piecemeal change. To see the city she loved so much, and now never sees at all.

A culture of politically connected speculators and property owners - like Richard Basciano, who owned the strip of neglected buildings along Market Street and who urged the demolition forward - that operates with little regard for Philadelphia's well-being. One that enabled the building's architect, Plato A. Marinakos Jr., who testified earlier last week under a grant of immunity, to see an unsupported three-story wall looming - balancing, as one expert said, like a quarter on an edge - over a Salvation Army building and, essentially, shrug and walk away.

A culture that somehow allowed two men to take apart a building as if it were a game of Jenga in the middle of the morning on the busiest street in Philadelphia.

A culture that predicated the moment when the mundane became the horrifying. The moment that thrust Mariya Plekan's life into a living hell.

On the stand, Plekan turned away as prosecutors showed the jury a photo of her after one of her surgeries - the surgery where they took everything, all the way up to her hips. Through an interpreter, she said she couldn't bear to look at it.

After she left court for the day, accompanied by her son, Andrew, Plekan had one request. She asked her lawyer to arrange a few hours in the city for her. Time to see the flowers. To ride along the Parkway.