

The New Century

by Linsey Abrams

Living in New York, you think you've seen everything.

Not that 14th Street, your street, had seemed a likely frontier. You knew *global warming* was going to flood Manhattan, making all downtown a shipwreck. *Some day*. But this?

And not that if you'd been that guy in the subway in Washington, D.C., and everyone's cell phone started ringing, you'd have known what was going on either.

Not that a manual on flying a commercial jet is the same as flying it. Not that Venice, Florida, with its shitty little rental cars, should be confused with Venice, Italy.

Not that the Mayor's emergency bunker under #7 World Trade Center was such a good place to hide. Not that you cared to make further criticism of that government idea or any other at the moment. Though why someone would form a motorcade to a secret location, unless it's a decoy, is a mystery. Not that *decoy* had been a staple of your vocabulary...except as referring to duck hunting, which you're against.

Not that your young mother, working at the Pentagon, had expected the highest clearance. Or to know about Pearl Harbor hours before she could tell. Not that everyone wants to hear immediately about tragedies.

Not that a drill is the real thing. Not that the real thing is readily recognizable.

Not that it wasn't bad timing that your lover's father had been moved from Florida the day before—by the two of you—to the Bronx.

And not that it wasn't puzzling to have paid September rent plus deposit, \$3900 each, to install him in *assisted living*, only to be asked a day later to move him out. Not that people with Parkinson's can always help drooling.

Not that you'd have planned your last communal

experience before it happened, to be at Ikea buying him furniture.

Not that you were offended at first by *Attack on America*. The same tag line for every program you could get on TV. Meaning cable and only CBS of the broadcast channels, since they hadn't ever taken down the old antenna. On the Empire State Building, from when *it* was the highest skyscraper. Before the new ones were affixed to the Trade Center.

Not that you'd ever paid attention to the Woolworth Building, featured in the first hour of coverage, and certainly not to its height, dwarfed twice at the tip of Manhattan. Frankly, you were concerned about the ground level Woolworths, disappearing like black holes that sucked down into them all the little tools and objects of the universe. Not that you remember half of what those were now.

Not that you hadn't complained about your lover's 45-minute showers. Not that you'd have been with her that morning otherwise.

Where would you have been? On the map of uncanny places...not where assassinations take place, for example, but where you were when you heard. Empire of a single tourist.

Make a dot for Disney World, in Orlando, Florida, with the imposter Goofy and the imposter Donald Duck. You hadn't intended to feel sad when they closed it.

Not that you thought postponing an election—even a local mayoral primary—was a good thing.

Though not that the last election—for President in 2000—topped your list of outrages now.

Who ever thought they'd wonder where Air Force One was?

Or in their lifetime visit www.fbi.org? Defend the Stock Market's right to exist?

The Japanese proverb that didn't apply: *Fall down*

seven times, stand up eight.

What wasn't the marathon: a horde of people fleeing
across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Not that everyone was Caucasian and not that everyone
was old, who escaped hair to shoes frosted
white.

Imponderables: The one who had cramps and drank the
vodka, the one on vacation, the one who told the boss
go fuck yourself and quit. The one who veered off for the
bagel. The one who was always late. The one who
voted come hell or high water....The one whose dog
wouldn't pee. The mother who time-shared. The
screenwriter so broke she took the bus to LA instead of
the airplane. The one who in the eighties became a
coke-head and never worked again. The one who had a
terminal illness anyway. The chef of Windows on the
World, floor 110, who
stopped to buy eyeglasses. All that food pureed.

And the destiny of paper: reams prematurely to the
shredder, all documents in the *Disaster* file. Passports
and drivers licenses unnecessary for impromptu free fall.
On
postcards: *Wish you were here* crossed out.

Written in disappearing ink: a window washer.

Floor 25, BlueCross BlueShield: Forget your
catastrophic coverage.

Not that they *let stand* the remark that it happened in
New York because of all the abortionists, feminists,
lesbians and the ACLU. Not that you'd thought of
yourself as
controlling world politics.

Not that they *let stand* the e-mail sent to seventeen
thousand people on the Left Media List: *I am pleased
to report that it is NOT TRUE that 4,000 Israelis did
not show up for work at the World Trade Center on
Sept.11. Please
forgive my mistake! Love and Peace and Blessings,*
name withheld in poem to avoid lawsuit.

In a flash poll, 61% of Americans favored waging war.
62% weren't sure on whom. Your lover said, *Between
evil people and idiots, we've had it.*

Children are the only logicians: The girl who said, *So if they didn't like New York, why couldn't they just ignore New York?*

The boy who when told there were people missing asked, *Are their mothers looking for them?*

Driving back to the City, three days later, from an emergency trip to your own mother in Boston, you were mildly surprised to pass a check point. Not that you expected warships in New York Harbor, where your ostentatious friend had rented a boat for the Bicentennial. Everyone got seasick from the wake of so many pleasure crafts and threw up their fancy dinners. It was 1976, the last time you saw so many flags.

The Javitz Center reminded you of Woodstock. Minus the music, admittedly. All right. Plus the National Guard. But there were the reserves of food stacked to the spirit of communal destiny and the unilateral high hopes of youth. Still, those helicopters weren't about to download ten cases of artichoke hearts from the now defunct Concorde Hotel in the Catskills. An acid head's feast. You saw two girls in hijabs and tight pants riding a sawhorse from a barricade, being cruised by two Hasidic boys trying to outrace their coats. A pair of debutantes accepting free Cokes from their ghetto counterparts, who magnanimously threw in a straw each. Everything comes in twos, apparently.

The Twins as celebrities. The most recent subjects of the serial neighborhood murals: RIP Lady Di, Mother Theresa, JFK Jr., Selena the pop star shot dead, and Lisa shaken by her crack head step-father. Or was it Marta? Well, anyway, one of those poor little girls. Like Greek tragedy, no joke.

Union Square was the opposite of a rogues' gallery: Thank God for scotch tape and color xerox and digital photography. For part-time actors' headshots and for yearbooks. For ugly rejected passport photos, for wedding albums of the divorced. Also authors' book jackets, expired IDs, last year's family Christmas cards...the calendar from Fotomat, the Polaroids. Thank God for all flat surfaces in the Park. Before it was understood that, like those on the 4 airplanes, no one would be found:

Hung from a retaining wall, a king size bed sheet with the names in Magic Marker of the permanently sleeping,

captioned: *American Proud and Tall. United Through it All.* And underfoot, *Ode to a Flight Attendant*, on cardboards taped haphazardly to the ground. A kite tail too heavy for the kite.

Grief is like a dream in which all wishes of the dead are granted. A mother now writes of her daughter,
Distinguishing Features: tongue ring, fish tattoo.

Your *own* mother can't remember if she's taken her pills or where she lost either plate of her dentures. Both pairs. But she remembered where her hair dresser was. She cleaned out her bank account, not to pay him or contribute to the \$2000 replacement teeth but to hand over a month's Social Security for a cruise that she was offered over the phone for free. Not that that could be attributed solely to dementia. How could it be free? my brother yelled at her, if you gave them \$1200?

Not that you could call all the makeshift morgues ghost towns exactly...since no one had ever lived there. And not that those towers were our redwoods if you're being literal.

Not that a human chain is the best metaphor for a policeman leading a whole floor of people by hand down 95 flights of a pitch-black stairwell. Maybe picture DNA, so unfathomable as to be beautiful. Or something ordinary but almost crazy, like a conga line.

Not that one woman who wore a placemat over her face to breathe, actually thought it was Afghanistan. Though try running for your life in a burqa.

And not that the Taliban—who blew up the two largest Buddhas in the world—merited special consideration anyway. Unless everyone deserves a second chance? Fair enough. Pick a number between one and 110.

So if we've had the disappeared and the homeless, is it now *the pulverized*? The minced-meat? Previous to this you associated body parts with serial killers, one problem New York doesn't have. Not that you could have imagined in your wildest dreams your lover saying, *It's the bodies*, after you commented that the workers were cooking again in the basement below your window. The wind had shifted. OK, so you're not a pacifist any more.

42, 000 windows. 16 acres. 5,843 dead or missing, a week later. The devil is in the details.

Bubba Starxxxx
spelled with four x's
Funkmaster Flex and Boris
You wanted to be superheroes
But ended up Rap DJ's
on a billboard.
Imagine a better resume:
your upon-a-time grand plans seeing daylight.
Desired job: rescue worker
When available: immediately
How do you see yourself in five years?
Capable of heroic measures.

TV interview at the site: *Myself and EMT Ramos are part of a trained force. We've been treated with oxygen. We follow orders. Did you see any deaths? I witnessed a disaster beyond my wildest dreams, ma'am.*

Your friend, older than your mother, who climbed down 43 flights of stairs and was finally elevated back up was asked by a reporter: if she'd known at the time that everything in her apartment would be destroyed what was the one thing she'd have wanted to save? *The view*, your friend said.

Further evidence of ruin: the name *Mohammed Islam* on a hack license.

Can the personal be tragic?
Is one the loneliest number?

Not that fitting your mother with a diaper that weekend was as bad as the devastation at home. But not that a part of you—and her—didn't wish she'd been blown to smithereens too. Not that she would remember thinking that.

In the Bronx your father-in-law (in a better world) was the same irritating man. Falling out of his wheel chair trying to pick up a paper clip...hording electrical cords without plugs...using batteries with just enough charge to ruin music.

Not that his movers, meanwhile, driving via New Jersey, had planned to run their truck into the George Washington Bridge. But clearly, ripping a hole in your

own roof is not a terrorist act.

So three of the terrorists turned out to be from Delray Beach, Florida, where your father-in-law lived... where you spent September 8-10 packing up one old man's paltry and final treasures. The same place where soon they found the Anthrax. If you think life isn't a mystery, ponder that.

Or the randomness of sweethearts:
someone clasping the nearest hand to jump with that
person off a roof
a man on a cell phone connecting to 911 and his soul-
mate operator from a plane.

One rumor was the shower of gold rising from bullion reserves buried under the buildings. Survivors imagined this as a miracle. For them it was.

And the rest, hardly more credible. The special dogs scrambling over the smoking rubble, who when being bathed and re-hydrated strained to return? How they could identify the traumatized workers—though maybe that was everyone—wasn't explained. But their paws became so sore and inflamed that Patagonia donated little pads. Where *is* that again? I asked my lover, who was reading aloud the paper. *The company*, she clarified. They donated *gortex pads*. Patagonia, the company. Forgive me for thinking *Shangri-la*.

The new grammar:
A flight attendant is not a stewardess
A fire is not a paring knife to remove a person's skin
just so.
An airplane is not a yo-yo. It can go down but that's
the end of *up*.
A subway is not a chute to hell. It's hell.
A gap in the skyline is not an amputation.
An amputation is nevertheless not by custom performed
with an airplane.
Disaster Zone is not a good sign for your nephew's
bedroom door now.
People can't say, and mean, that they were lucky to
have survived high school.
Honestly, analysis never prepared you for this.

Other things you never expected
but secretly may have hoped for:
The Queen of England to sing the *Star-Spangled*

Banner.

Elizabeth Taylor to slip into the Armory on Park Avenue to visit the families.

The Gurkhas to be sent on assignment in Afghanistan. How often have you heard *Whatever happened to the*

Gurkhas? Not often enough.

The high school marching band from Huntsville, Alabama, that played, standing stock still, at the site. The psychic in Brighton Beach who came out of retirement to help find the living then stayed to contact the dead. The mother and son who drove straight through with crawfish from Louisiana. The Oregon tourists who refused to cancel.

So what if Kate Smith commissioned *God Bless America* to have a hit.

So what—you half mean this—if the Yankees lose the World Series.

And so what if your cell phone won't work from the subway never mind a 747.

It's a cliché: *location, location, location.* And yet Suddenly nothing else matters.

How could all that happened

Have fit into one week for one reason in one city?

Because this is New York.

Where else would the 21st century have begun?

September 11—December 6, 2001 \wedge *New York City*