

THE PICTURES I HAD TO TAKE

(Because I Knew Words Would Fail Me)



I AM NOT A PHOTOGRAPHER. I DON'T LIKE THE WAY STOPPING TO LOOK through a camera interrupts immediate experience and corrupts my recollection of events. September 11, 2001 was an exception. On that morning, and for the next two days of my involvement in search and rescue, I carried and used a small digital camera for one desperate reason: I knew I'd never be able to accurately retrieve from memory what I was seeing through the warped lens of emergency.

I'd just begun the workday at my desk in the second floor loft I share with my wife, photographer Sally Gall, on the corner of Greenwich and Vestry Streets in Tribeca, and had only subliminally registered the rumble of a jet passing low overhead, when my phone rang and a friend said: "If you look out your window, you'll see something amazing and terrible."

When I got there, Sally was already leaning out our open corner window to look the dozen blocks down Greenwich Street to the World Trade Center. "What am I seeing?" she whimpered, "What am I looking at?"

High above us, under the kind of piercing blue sky known to pilots as "severe clear," angry flames and black smoke belched from the gaping maw in the North Tower. My response came directly from the belly. "Fucking terrorists."

"No!" Sally resisted. But the wound was too large and deliberate to have been made by a private plane. And I could see where the wings had sliced through.

My impulse was to stay close to home, but Sally wanted to get closer, to better see and understand. I would have gone with her, but I was waiting to be sure my typing assistant was safely off the subway. Asking Sally not to get too close, I handed her my new point-and-shoot and asked her to document what she saw.

On the street corner under our window, I stood looking up at the North Tower as nearby buildings emptied and the streets filled with people of every stripe and nationality. A postman of Middle Eastern extraction came to stand beside me. He had an American flag patch on his uniform sleeve. His eyes brimmed and voice cracked as he told me he delivered to the North Tower. "Twenty-five thousand people are on their way to work in there."

I wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Let's hope they all get out," I said, but I was preoccupied with the character of the fire.

Trained as a volunteer fireman, I knew that as the angry orange flames died down and the smoke went gray with steam, water from the upper floors was doing some good for the moment. But I worried that the blast had

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ruptured the emergency sprinkler system's water lines, which lead me to imagine something worse. By coincidence that morning, I was due to deliver an IMAX film script to a producer. Its subject was extreme skiing and for the last four days I'd been steeping myself in the science of avalanches. Burned into my brain was the rapidly escalating mechanism by which a single toppling snowflake can trigger a catastrophic sloughing of snow. I couldn't stop thinking that if the fire was hot enough to distemper steel, and part of an upper floor collapsed, the tower's famous exoskeleton structure could channel that energy in a vertical avalanche of pancaking concrete and steel.

That's when the second plane ripped through the South Tower and exploded in a fireball that made me duck. With millions of glinting sheets of paper drifting east like mica from a mountaintop, the sky was devastatingly beautiful as I ran down Greenwich Street, desperately searching the thickening throng of dispossessed businessmen and women from the nearby office buildings, hoping Sally hadn't gotten close enough to get hit by plane parts or glass.

Six blocks down I found her, rattled by the explosion and unable to work my camera. Taking it from her, I asked her to go back home where it was safer, then I began to document what words were already inadequate to describe.

I could see the people. Their legs, arms, and heads were jutting from the windows above and below the damage in the northwest corner of the North Tower. Some were waving jackets. Dangling out of one window, someone was trying to rappel a curtain or tablecloth to the floor below. He lost his grip and was gone. Two more people leapt out holding hands. Falling faster than you'd think bodies should, they parted and disappeared below the roofline.

By the time I averted my gaze, I saw eight human beings leave the smoldering tower, and even now I have a strong urge to disremember what I saw. In fact, I've only recently come to understand the only picture I took out of a hundred that day that cuts off the tops of the twin towers. It is a telephoto shot. At its center is the blurred X of a person in free fall.

Stunned beyond belief, I threaded the dazed crowd back to where Sally stood on our street corner. The smoke from both towers was black and thick, and that meant hot. Again I spoke from the gut. "If the fires don't stop, the buildings will come down."

Sally protested: "No they won't! How could you know that?"

I didn't want to know it, and I was hoping my gut was an idiot. But two or three minutes later, the South Tower slid to the ground, and I felt like the worst of Cassandras.

"Where'd it go?" Sally gasped. "Where'd it go!"

I was concentrating on the orphaned North Tower. The smoke was billowing furiously now, but thanks to the westerly breeze I could make out someone on the roof, just to the left of the big antenna. He was waving a jacket and if anyone had a chance to be snatched from disaster by a helicopter, he did. But the skies were amazingly empty.

I was focusing all my will into a prayer for his rescue when the guy on the roof confounded all reason and sensibility by tumbling into space. Or rather, the building fell away from beneath him.

Sleep researchers say there is only one constant distinguishing all nightmares from dreams: the sense of helplessness. The next 18 hours were just as pointless and helpless a nightmare as they could be. And the building collapses weren't over. After helping set up a first aid station, I waited among idle paramedics hoping victims would show, just to know there'd been some survivors. But when the only visitor

to the station was an old woman who'd tripped in her apartment, I got tired of waiting.

From our basement, I retrieved a hardhat, a painter's respirator, my mountaineering boots, climber's harness, and a crowbar. Going as far down the street as I could, I signed in to a search-and-rescue volunteer line and stood with other well-meaning locals, some still in business suits and loafers, to wait for the fires in Tower 7 to cool so we could get closer to look for survivors. We'd just cheered a squad of firemen marching down to the pit of doom, when I heard the surreal plink-tinkle sound of a music box being played

backwards. When I looked up the bronze glass wall of Tower 7 was rippling like gelatin. "Get out of here!" a policeman yelled as the 47-floor building collapsed, sending a firemen-swallowing wall of ash and debris up Greenwich Street.

I have never run so hard or so far in such heavy boots.

By midnight, I was sitting in the back of a welder's truck full of construction volunteers, listening to reports crackle over the police band

radio in the cab. At 3:00 a.m. we were "next in queue" when all volunteer activity was suspended. There were finally enough emergency personnel on the scene.

Dragging myself home, I slept poorly. Then, late the next morning, I went to the window. Outside it was eerily quiet, another severe clear day. I wondered as I leaned out to look down Greenwich if the nightmare had happened. The open sky, the rubble, and the massive plume of smoke said it had. But the pictures in my camera confirmed it with a vividness my memory sometimes wants to deny.

TEN YEARS LATER, NOW THAT THE SO-CALLED "FREEDOM TOWER" IS GOING

up in the neighborhood and the memorial park is in place, I miss the twin towers even more than I did when they were reduced to a gaping pit. This may sound negative, but I do not care for nationalistic symbolism usurping a neighborhood already ravaged by terrorists. Why 1776 feet high? Why not a more fitting number than one of revolution and war? Why not 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act guaranteeing true, universal liberties? Why such numerologies at all?

I also don't care for a park that forces me to think of the dead every time I walk by it. Honor the victims, yes, but is the permanent removal of a viable part of Manhattan from productivity, and its replacement by a cemetery, really what the hard working victims would have wanted? And with all the tourist mourners, gawkers, and patriots who will come, can this corner of Manhattan ever "return to business as usual?" I only lost one friend in those buildings that terrible day, Neil Levin, Executive Director of the Port Authority. We'd only just met over a few meals, but I liked him a lot. I have trouble believing this is what he would have wanted. I imagine Neil would want the place to be a symbol of resilience, and of the hard work and determination that built not just the Twin Towers but our country. I imagine he'd rather see his office put back and his replacement hard at work there.

I'm as sentimental a guy as there is. It was fashionable among New Yorkers not to like the Twin Towers. As a newcomer in the nineties, I loved them. They were my weather gauge; just by looking out my window at them, I could tell what to wear. They were a kind of urban polestar, too; by triangulating with the Empire State Building, they told me where I was in the city. Their replacement will no doubt function that way, too. But I wonder how long it will be before what is still imprinted in my brain, by years of routine seeing and response, fades and makes room for its replacement. **c**

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