

More than a grave and a ruin, Ground Zero was a new New York neighborhood that transfigured the best and the oldest part of the city, turning your head with exotic sights that lifted you and flattened you simultaneously, proving, every hour, that ordinary men are creatures of infinite interest if only you can abide them and keep from getting killed. For one historic instant the meanest of mean streets were not in Harlem, the Bronx, or Little Italy where my father was born a hundred years ago and where he brained a local bully with half a pistol, they were down at the end of the island where the air alone could kill you and your boots left prints in the dust of the dead. I was only a man with a camera having a long look around but there is no need to apologize for that. More movies should have been made there, for all that is gone now forever.

After a screening of the film *Bad Lieutenant*, I found myself in a parking lot facing its director, Abel Ferrara.

"Thanks for that movie," I said.

I had arranged the accident.

Ferrara shook my hand, leaning into my arm in a gesture of camaraderie. I told him I'd shot a movie at Ground Zero.

"You did?" he said, stopping in his tracks. "I wanted to do one too."

I had only brought it up in order to specify the gratitude I felt for that brave, X-rated explosion he had made roughly a decade ago. I said: "Trying to do something fierce, you look for other films to give you the courage."

"I understand, I understand."

"*Bad Lieutenant's* an ally. Keep at it."

Walking away, he said: "No, listen—they're not gonna stop us," and I took *they* to mean more than foreign operatives, I took it to mean the forces against a man ever making a *Bad Lieutenant*, a *Liberty Street*, or any film that takes the camera where it isn't supposed to go.



I wish Ferrara had been there shooting. It was not only the grit, the meanness, the gruff vulnerability that would have appealed to him. This was New York life at its rarest and most typical, over the edge of the rational world—the only place to be. It was electric, it was mysterious, it was a theological problem circumscribed by funerals in all five boroughs and it was a lot of tired dirty guys doing their daily jobs. Men were snorting stuff all the time but it was not cocaine, it was DNA. Breathing through respirators, philosophers and seminarians could have held their classes there without saying a word, and Jacques Derrida, who lived close by, could have deconstructed the very idea of *respirator* and what it meant to absorb the event through *a mask* (pointing out that mine was made in Brazil), to at once breathe in, filter out, and *infiltrate* what would seem to be a contradiction in terms: Ground Zero, a standing on nothing, a no-thing full of things with antecedents in Hiroshima, the first Ground Zero that was once a target-to-be, an atomic point of arrival; the name now used for the departure of the Twins, a target-that-was which has become a point of departure for something else—something like a century—another—of blind fundamentalists hurling their mad deities at each other.

Among men to admire, to enjoy and to learn from there were hustlers, thieves, nerds and blockheads of very American stripe—New York, after all, went on New Yorking—but they did not rule the day. It was more than circumstantial that everybody invoked what an indelibly beautiful morning it had been. The clear blue sky out of which the terror came was a primordial vision. It might have created a city of dayfearers. It didn't. Men went abroad. Things got done. New Yorkers who ran from those collapses didn't run from the city. The urge to reconstitute a bearable existence was palpable—and powerful. But amidst all the calls for perpetual remembrance, conveniently forgot where the honest Downtowners trying to get back home—back home, when that was a bit like sailing back to Vesuvius and more thought was given to Afghanistan than to Liberty Street. As it cut across the island there were places farther east—around the Federal Reserve, for instance—where it was doing a lot better, but the three blocks of Liberty at the south end of the site were a mess, devastated, and between Church and Greenwich streets, a block of great resilience that included a firehouse, two residential buildings from the teens of the last century and a few older buildings dating back to the 1800s, Liberty Street was, to me, a national disgrace. If you think that after September 11 residents and shopkeepers were shown a little mercy, no: the desert men in the sky





*Glimpse of the new neighborhood from Greenwich Street, which intersects Liberty.  
Trucks weighted with Trade Center steel rolled slowly down Greenwich on their way to Pier 6.*

were only the first to dispossess them. Landlords, insurers, cops, the City, environmental agencies, the president and the president's people hung them out to dry. One of the nation's oldest streets (Crown Street before we left the English), Liberty was bivouacked, looted, lied to, bullied, insulted, ignored—at one point it was even written off—virtually razed and built over—in architectural renderings of the new neighborhood. Some of the men who paid for the 11th were better protected.

And yet, incredibly, in my year and a half of filming I personally encountered less anger there than ever in my New York life, perhaps because



anger is good for destruction but not in it. When a proud, independent shopkeeper showed me a photograph of men in uniform enjoying the stock from his little shop—"Do you see who they are? These are the heroes! This is not the American way!"—his emotion was oddly out of place, unseemly: it made him a foreigner in the neighborhood he'd pledged his life to, for he hadn't figured out how to live there now, or how to live anywhere. When a foreman from the nightshift told me what he wanted for his birthday—his brother, who was buried, he thought, under the Tully Road—"I'm hoping to find him by Friday, I have a good feeling about it"—it was without sarcasm: he was truly looking forward to that gift of decomposed remains wrapped in a bunker boat, and in redefining the notions of finding someone, a good feeling, and celebrating your birthday he encapsulated the way September 11 and its aftermath confounded the ordinary with the macabre. As for hate, I didn't see much of that, except in myself, perhaps because a lot of it had burnt off already or was stored up for later or perhaps because it was, to say the least, rather too much in evidence gusting up your nose.

Some days I would sit on a bench in City Hall Park, where the stone fountain was empty but the triglobed gaslights were burning day and night; I would look up through the trees at the Woolworth Building, or over toward the mayor, and I would think about the ill-advised, ill-natured restriction against photography that had turned me into a spy in the house of destruction, an undercover agent for independent film, and I would hope that there were, at least, teams of oral historians coming to catch this event while it was raw, still literally in the air. It wouldn't have taken much prodding. Out of a trinity of smokers down in Bowling Green Park, which is enclosed in a castiron fence built in 1771 around a plot where Peter Minuit allegedly bought Manhattan Island for sixty guilders worth of junk, a man named James Jones hit me up for a touch after a long conversation about addiction, homelessness, and the fact that more people associated his name with Jonestown than *From Here to Eternity*, which is why he was calling himself Steve. These guys were perfectly clean and they were minding their own business but from the moment I spotted them and observed their mannerisms I thought of them, affectionately, as Burroughs Boys: you could have sketched them into the margins of *Junky* or *Naked Lunch*.

"All these buildings're still full of dust," Steve said after lifting a couple of bucks from me, unconvinced—at least undeterred—by the admission that I was homeless once myself, was only a misstep away from it again,



and was shooting on a shoestring. Steve proofed himself, showing me his driver's license to verify the name as identical with the author of *The Thin Red Line*. It was midsummer. It was 2002. The Red Cross tent that was here in September had picked up and gone but September was still alive. "Windy days you watch it blowing off," he said of the dust that was allegedly not traveling anymore and that allegedly wouldn't hurt you if it was. "It comes down on everybody. We see it all the time. We're in a position to notice."

Ike, a Polish-born shoeshiner who worked the Broadway fence in front of the Trinity churchyard, where obnoxious young sharps tried to hustle away his custom, told me about his brand-new box.

"Everything was falling," Ike said. "Everybody was screaming. I said: 'I better get out from here,' so I ran across the street. I wasn't even thinking about taking my box with me. I say: 'I want to save my life.' People was running so bad they pushed me down, trying to get away from the explosion, because the explosion was right here. My knees was injured and I couldn't come back to work for seven weeks. That's right. Yes. O yeah. Then a lady, a customer, she knows me, she say: 'What happen to your box?' I say: 'They broke my box from people running.' I didn't have no money at the time, so she gave me a hundred dollars, she bought me the shoeshine box because I had no box to work with. Yes. *Uh* huh. So there's nice people around."

It was spring of 2002. Site work was flying. Streets were opening. Storefronts were seeing new signs and paintjobs. Plywood departed, windows returned, restaurants and stores reopened under the guise of being clean—excepting a shop called Chelsea Jeans, which had the historical consciousness—perhaps, too, the enterprise—to leave one window as it was on the 11th, the clothing layered in World Trade dust. Ike's Broadway was crowded, so was Wall Street behind him. One of the hustlers said: "Pops—you got a sponge?" and Ike loaned him the spitshiner he used after the Kiwi. September 11 was not old Ike's first run for his life. At the age of eleven he'd been taken to Bergen-Belsen.

"Just happens to be I was Jewish," Ike told me in the midst of a thorough shine. "They say: 'We not gonna bother you, you gonna work.' But if you say you not gonna work, they pretend you gonna take a shower and they gas you to death. I saw thousands of people coming out. We had to bury them in big graves. After about six months—I was working outside—I run into the woods and I got shot running away, but some



people was hiding me out and that's how I survived. But my family didn't survive. All my family died over there. Yeah. That's what happened." Ike unsnapped the right cuff of his jacket and he rolled up his sleeves to show me the scar, saying: "Right there. Yes. O yeah." The huckster next to him was probably thinking: "It's not the old man's *sponge* I need for business, it's his fucking *arm* with the Nazi bullet."

When I asked Ike whether he felt afraid of the city now, he said: "I'm not scared, no. Come out here I feel much better. I've been in New York for fifty-one years, I'm not gonna move out now." Business was picking up and people were kind to him, but it was different now. "I had a few steady customers used to come here from the World Trade Center, but I don't see them guys no more. I don't know if they gone or whatever. They don't come around here no more." In a topless joint, the Pussycat Lounge on Greenwich Street where trucks bearing the twisted steel rolled off the site on the way to Pier 6, a barmaid, Jax, had told me the same thing: steady customers were gone, but when I pressed her on whether she meant gone or *really* gone, she made it clear that she didn't mean displaced: she meant dead.

I thought about Ike when, a short time later, I read an article by a friend on the ethics of Spinoza. I said something like: "A good test for Spinoza is to ask whether he's useful to a guy who is (a) shot by Nazi guards running away from Bergen-Belsen, then (b) sixty years later, shining shoes in front of Trinity Church, he finds himself running from the collapse of the Twin Towers." As a reminder that survival is an open invitation to a future that doesn't preclude catastrophe, Ike deserved a documentary of his own, but during the three and a half years in which I composed *Liberty Street: Alive at Ground Zero*, a two-hour film made from more than two hundred, I would fight like a dog for even five minutes of Ike, so great is the necessity to cut until you feel as if you've cut everything.

In fact this allegedly well-documented catastrophe generated so many unanswered images, and such a tangle of questions over the double helix of plots and permissions leading up to it, that only under the narrowest definitions could you say that it was documented at all. Only one young filmmaker, Jules Naudet, was properly situated near the intersection of Lispenard and Church about fourteen blocks from the Trade Center and, although inexperienced, was sharp enough to shoot the first of the two bomber jets as it entered the North Tower. Who was shooting—who was watching—before that? Events don't begin when the networks find them.



Even then, what did we see of the jumpers, the bodies and parts of bodies in the Austin Tobin Plaza and in the streets around the site? When a teenage nanny in charge of three little children told me about seeing chunks of meat on the Liberty sidewalk, and how she was confused because she couldn't recall a butcher on that block, I learned more about September 11 than all the networks had told me. As for what I saw of the people who are paid and are sworn to prevent such a disaster, the answer is: not much that mattered. That seeing was too controlled for me. So was this. After the first few shots I had taken of Ground Zero on a chilly October morning were disrupted by National Guard, I could see that I was going to have to fight to work here and I could see that it was worth it. The City's disarmament of cameras could be seen as symptomatic of a much larger move toward concealment and the repression of prying eyes that would see into the precincts of policy and privilege; but here we are talking about a parcel of New York that was redefining civilization—hardly a small case—and if you had the stamina for it these very old streets in which the republic had arisen were forceful places in which to consider recent events, the state of the union, and the fact that more than 767s had been hijacked. In St. Paul's Chapel, where men sipped something hot or slept on cots and pews, George Washington went to service after the first inauguration and his pew is still there, it's the one not scored by the utility belts and gear that sat with the men from the site. Thomas Paine boarded with friends on Church Street. Madison lived on Maiden Lane. Federal hall, the first seat of government, was located on Wall Street, at the east end of which both Hamilton and Burr lived as neighbors for a time when they were building their law practices and stepping over cowshit until the street became more generally gentrified. In fact Hamilton was everywhere: Stone Street, Pine Street, Garden Street, Cedar Street, and in the graveyard at Trinity Church Hamilton was littered with the debris of both collapses. Now that the Constitution he worked so hard to ratify was being privatized by men who were thereby proving that they weren't Americans . . . now that the marble and the granite of Federal Hall had been fractured by the shock of both collapses . . . you would walk by Hamilton, with Con Ed lights at Rector Street and Broadway flashing on his monument, and even at the lowest point of midnight fatigue you would wonder how to be a citizen.

This camera that was hiding in the bag over my shoulder: was it a way to cast a vote? Was it a weapon of revolt? If, at the age of fifty-three,



you are shooting what is decidedly a young man's movie, how do you meet that standard? The more I thought about the camera, the more I determined to make picking it up matter more than putting it down and to do something right for which it was worth going to jail. One could say that I was only walking around the premises, but why the *only*, as if it weren't enough? Isn't that what men of thought ought to do, walk around premises, probing them, challenging them, arranging them, perhaps, into an interesting idea or the basis of an argument?<sup>1</sup>

Cocteau called film a form of confession. Bless me father for I have sinned. Believing that, like all men, the terrorists were fashioned in His very image and likeness, I took the camera to town in order to see what constituted a good day's work for them in one of the great vineyards of the Lord. When the Koran challenges men to write their own chapters, threatening them with fire that is made of men and stones, I assume it is talking about an unbeliever like me who has seen some of that fire and is ready to start writing. But Hemingway was right in preferring to trust the names of places over the thoughts of men, even of men who were in a war with him. Ground Zero—it was really the perfect name. Like the place itself it meant too much, it explained nothing at all, and no master interpreter (not even Derrida) stepped into the light.<sup>2</sup> From perimeter rooftops you saw barges on the Hudson that carried more clarity about it than the *Times*. In the fractalist geometry of the pile every sign of disorder, however impressive, was just that, a sign, a marker beneath which innumerable combinations were only to be revealed in the act of being removed. The floor of one mess was the table of another: it was a long way to the bottom. There were no gross forms without nuance here, but this was a tough place for art because, beyond the technicality that artists weren't allowed, art likes to take a thing and ramify it for you. After September 11, Lower Manhattan was a fever of ramification all its own. Ironies, poignancies, absurdities, epiphanies pelted you in the face until you were glad to help lift something large, climb a ladder, trim a drillbit with a hacksaw or use the camera zoom to help locate a brick that was hiding in a façade. Fechner's Law, which is a formula for quantifying relations between external stimuli and the way that we receive them, would have been as useful here as a ruler in the ocean. If a poet had opened his mouth you would have shot him. But if you perched over the site and you watched those machines, that was some kind of art: balance, grace, rhythm, agility, tuned for improvisation, psyched for risk, braced



for endurance. At least it put wonder into the thought of engineering and it showed you that, amidst all that ravenous masculinity, a few feminine verbs were necessary. Had he come to watch here, Derrida could have been taught something too: a new school of deconstruction.

Ground Zero worked something on everybody, and few were protected or prepared for what they found because none of us is educated for that. The popular formulation that we needed to do one thing or another *or else the terrorists will have won* was sophistry to honest eyes. A glance from any rooftop told you who succeeded, who failed that morning and nothing could turn that around. The very same prospect told you not to begrudge any solace to anybody within the law, and peptalk platitudes, jingoistic slogans, the silicone breasts at the Pussycat Lounge, memorials and banners from Oklahoma City, Crayola greeting cards from faceless classes of second graders, Red Bull, vodka, applause, hot food, massages, prayers, smiles from volunteers or maybe more from some of the Ground Zero groupies, even a fistfight or two seemed like leeway, like cutting a little slack, although they ought to have stopped short of a hasty war and violating the Posse Comitatus, and they ought to have stopped short of treating Downtown loyalists as if they were trespassers when, in fact, it was ten men in jets who had trespassed here and no one had done a thing to keep them out.

For me a few four-shots of Starbucks espresso hit the spot and, despite its association with upscale leisure, I couldn't find an article, a book or a film that could brace me as well as a dark draft of that brew. On the morning of the 11th several downtown Starbucks held open their doors for the stunned, the blinded, the choking, and while I was shooting they enabled me to recruit myself and the camera when we would have had to shiver in the streets. Donavin Gratz, a principal in my film whom you will meet in this book, said to me recently: "Starbucks—that was your solace, your solitude," and he was right: even the smell was sanctuary, not from being around the site, which is where I wanted to be, but from the world that had made it happen. There was a lot to be seen in that coffee. To this day a cappuccino works its memory-magic like a crumb of *petite madeleine* in Proust's spoonful of tea, only I don't see the provincial quietudes of Combray, I see the floodlit sprawls of baked Pittsburgh steel, the John Deere Gators parked at delis and pizza joints, the spotters with spades digging for flesh, the diesel excavators cleaning up after bin Laden and his Wahhabi financiers with compatriots in the White House. I see



the birds, too, diving down for World Trade feed or moping around as if it were pointless to fly again, a reactive depression in which they found me complicit. Saint Francis, who adjured his feathered flocks to appreciate their birdly blessings, would have taken one look at that ragged, feeble assortment and he would have shaken his head and kept his counsel.

I envy Proust his memory, not his subject—meaning, of course, I envy him his eyes. My own eyes had a zoom that took me across Liberty Street into places my perimeter pass would not let me go—if you can’t crash a gate, fly over it—but I worry, even now, that I did not see enough and should have shot more fiercely. I would like to have seen Ferrara there—or five of him. Despite the prohibition against the lens, I was surprised not to see more people dodging around, trying to capture this. Perhaps these secret shooters were hiding as well from me as from the law and their films will emerge. Perhaps movie moles were even rarer than I thought. They had to have acted fast, for Ground Zero was a disappearing act and there were no reshoots, no second takes here. Within nine months the site would be clean, the scrapped steel shipped to foreign ports—all the more necessity to have this abundance artfully extracted, preserved, and proposed as a primary cause for contemplation, rumination, investigation. I, for my part, was stocking up to build some of the wreckage of Lower Manhattan on a four-foot table in a small carpeted room, a fool’s errand unless it engendered a little astonishment, never a sure thing. It might feel like life, wonderful life when you focus but the soul of the lens is not so easily animated. Hundreds of hours of footage for one handmade film mean nothing: no ratio is reasonable unless you get it right. Films, like books and like people, need to know much more than they can say.



Nothing about Ground Zero was simple, nothing about it was dull—or even its dullness was interesting—and nothing about it was clean. From the moment that I walked out of the Number 4 train at the Fulton Street station, the odor from the pile was pervasive. “Ho—Christ—is that *it*? Jesus.” I was only at the stair that brought you up to the little Keys Made, Shoe Shine shop in the first of the corridors that led to Fulton Street less than half a block from Broadway. So: the site came to meet you where a dry cleaner advertised four pairs of pants for ten bucks, and where the third rail beneath you carried an old life of yours through a long dark tun-



nel into oblivion. Photography had failed to render this, or even suggest it. Manhattan subway corridors are never much to breathe, and *nasty* can be used in New York all the time, but as I walked past the barber's to the short second stair that faced an arrowed Twin Towers sign pointing you, improbably, downward again toward the World Trade Copiers, it smelled like the burning of things that shouldn't ever burn but were burning at their essence and with fiendish energy, as if the fire could be fed forever. It told you, instantly, of something at work here that was equal to the might of the city itself. It made you wonder what it looked like. It also made you wonder whether you ought not to have stayed on the train. To borrow Shakespeare, it was an odor *at which my nose was in great indignation*.

I am sure that in the forested New York of Cooper's *Deerslayer*, an old American smoked a pipe, lowered into the old earth and dreamed a long premonitory dream of this odor, the hawks full of fire, the rills of black water, the forts falling down, and the warriors from the country of silver sand, but he could not think how to communicate it. He groped for the power of tongue but was muted by the endeavor, saying only: "You will each have to dream it for yourself." And so we have.

"Bury your face in the embers of a smoldering fireplace." That is how I once tried to suggest the sensation, but the likeness was lame for this was a compound odor that derived from the burning not of paper and wood merely but of everything the city has accrued and placed within the reach of its enemies. For me the odor was not corporeal—I was to sample that later from a roof on Liberty Street, where parts of people were rotting in drains and flies rested comfortably on your hand or on car-size remnants of the Towers—but it was electrical, it was metallic, it was plastic, it was rubbery, and as close to a solid entity as scent could attain. With a little more strength it would emanate fists that would pummel you in the chest and the face. It did that anyway when the wind blew hard, which it knows how to do in between two rivers that are running a short sail from the Atlantic.

I say that the odor came to greet you. For what? If it did not come to destroy you it certainly came to defeat you. If you had to attach a participle, *drifting* and *wafturing* would not qualify. *Drilling* is more like it, but what kind of an odor drills? Aggressive, pernicious, it attached itself to you, penetrating the fibers of your clothing, the pores of your skin, the ways into your lungs and your heart. Terrorism. In a phone conversation tapped by federal authorities, a Yemeni terrorist said: "The fire has been



lit and is awaiting only the wind.” The wind he was talking about carried it that Tuesday, but less partisan winds continued to carry the fire for months. Well into November that vile stifling odor still dominated the air, fuming its way up the island. Everyone in New York must have smelled it and, thinking about the liars at the EPA and all the other complicitous agencies, must have said, at least once: “*Safe levels?* Safe levels of *what?*” If I had gone back to Montmartre in order to write another novel about Matisse I’d have found *safe levels*, not here. Because of that odor, no one in Lower Manhattan could escape intimate knowledge of the disaster that changed the temperature of a beautiful day by two thousand degrees.

Amazing. Here is an urban environment so supremely smoke-conscious that, half a year later, the board of a luxury co-op on West End Avenue, close to Lincoln Center, would deny new dwellers the right to smoke in their own apartments, and yet ten men have, in a sense, arranged to smoke in everybody’s apartment. I do not mean to be frivolous in making this connection, I simply could not get over the fact that such a season of homicide, hysteria, despair, dislocation, toxicity, insomnia, unemployment, and daily consternation could have been visited on Manhattan by a small pack of monomaniacs.

On the 1st of December I was photographing a section of Twin Tower being hoisted into a barge on the East River. As it was necessary to work without a tripod, I was trailing the smooth trajectory of the big Weeks crane as it swept out over the water by seating the camera on my scarf and sliding the scarf along the surface of a marbled composition book. A fire broke out toward the south end of the island—it was around Moore Street—sending smoke clouds billowing toward the water. Fire trucks sped down the FDR Drive. Knots of people gathered. Cops redirected traffic. I was trying to stay focused and did not want to become a journalist who chases fires, but it occurred to me that I would be a moax if I neglected a new nightmare erupting down the street in order to shoot the detritus of an old one. Blowback, the CIA’s gift to the population, isn’t a temporary endowment: it will rule and shape this country with the constancy of the Constitution, and as little was being done to forestall a fresh assault as was done to impede the last one. Division between the acts of anticipation and remembrance had been narrowed down to nothing. Everybody working around the site, or living there, looked up whenever a jet sounded above them. The wheels of a Mack could turn a steel streetplate into a thundersheet re-creating the ten-second storms of 9:59 and 10:28. Even



the sirens and the bleats of fire engines, cop cars and ambulances were plangent quotations from September. So I went to have a look, camera ready, feeling as if I were working at someone else's occupation.

I think it was on Broad Street that I passed a black woman in her sixties who was walking out of her building. With a calm, almost whimsical dismay that made me wish I'd had the camera turned on, she said to herself: "O lord—what's burnin now?" That sentence carried a history, and you can bet that the odor I have labored to evoke was central to it. If I were another director I would record that line with an actress and insert it into my film as if it were part of a wild track. One could position it anywhere, use it repeatedly as a refrain: "O lord—what's burnin now?" But my sketch of this woman needs revision. She was alone, but she was not really talking to herself. I doubt that it was the Lord she was talking to either. I think she was talking to the world in which madmen burn New York or any city in which people are trying to live a decent life. It was almost as if she had said: "O lord—what're *they* burnin now?" The hinge of that verb, that *burnin*, to the events of September 11 interested me. The Towers were punched open, the Towers gave, the Towers fell, and as they fell they rose again as two huge black hands coming to choke and smother and sweep the streets of anybody in them. The fact that it was all in the blink of an eye doesn't matter because time adjusts to catastrophe: brief, sudden traumas are allowed to repeat themselves and reverberate forever. But the Towers also burned, and they did so unforgettably. Everyone, even New Yorkers who weren't in town that Tuesday, smelled it interminably, an odor that even attacked lamentation itself, granting it no quarter in which to breathe. Heraclitus was right: *in the abysmal darkness, things are known by their scent*.

Seven months later I asked David Stanke, a resident of 114 Liberty Street, which is directly opposite the site, about the effects of the odor on his life. David's small white building, constructed around 1913, has had a lucky star above it, for it survived the wide brute demolition of the area when the Towers were put up, and survived it once again when the Towers were put down, although all of its Liberty windows were fatally blasted; a beam of the South Tower had gouged a section of its façade; and its homes had been bombarded with a rubble of office equipment, shards of tinted window glass, slats of venetian blinds, bricks, aluminum, cameras, pottery, paper, steel, photographs, furniture, sheetrock, ceiling tiles, spaceage plastics, portland cement, foam insulation, and organic



illustrations of *Gray's Anatomy*—all of it coated with lethal dust. Dumpsters full of Twin Tower and 767 had to be craned off its roof. In a small central fire-escaped lightshaft between 114 and the neighboring 120 (125 Cedar), you could see, even in May, a display of articles that could make you wish you hadn't gone to the window. As 114 was not yet habitable, the Stankes and their four little children—all of whom were directly under the Towers during the tumult, with David in the same mad streets trying to find them—had lived in five locations since the attack.

David's reaction to my query was charged with his adversary relation to the odor.

"It was a cloud on my life," he said, "and a cloud on everyone's life. It impacted you physically and immediately. You had to think: 'I shouldn't be breathing this.' But you couldn't move to the other side of the room and you couldn't get rid of it. You couldn't do *anything*. When I went through the subways the first time, I thought: 'O my God, this is the smell from when it happened—it just stayed down here because there's not enough air to clear it out.' I didn't realize it was ongoing smoke. It took me a while to see that it was a *living* odor, not merely a *lingering* one. We had moved to a temporary apartment in TriBeCa, thinking: 'It can't smoke down there forever. The fires will all go out—they can't last that much longer—they *can't*—the smoke will stop, and we'll all feel better.' But the smoke just kept pouring out. You would sit there thinking: 'God, what can we do?' We couldn't close the windows because the air *in* the building was really bad, so we ran air conditioners and heaters at the same time to get some filtered air and yet not be frozen. It wasn't until December that you finally stopped smelling it everywhere."

The apartment in which David had been staying was near the Holland Tunnel, which is three subway stops north of the site.

"Any car coming into Manhattan out of that tunnel," he said, "the first thing that hit them was the odor. I had a friend in Soho who was in a serious funk about it. She wore a mask, she didn't like going back to her house, and she kept saying to me: 'Don't go back, don't go back—that odor is too much.' The odor was a reminder: it kept September 11 in everybody's face. You could look away, but you couldn't turn your nose off."

Donavin Gratz, a carpenter who converted old Liberty from a commercial to a residential building and who, after September 11, was hired by the co-op to secure it from looters and to retrieve it from the City and make it habitable again, said: "Not really knowing *what* you were breath-



ing. *All the time*. Green smoke comin up everywhere out of these shafts. Unforgettable. Days it was blowing into the building I gave everybody off because we just couldn't *breathe* that shit."

Donavin and I were on the filthy black overhang of the Liberty rooftop with the huge gape of the site directly below us. Although he has a handsome face and a lively, charismatic presence, the stats on Donavin are nothing extraordinary: medium height, medium build, medium-length brown hair; but Donavin is one of the toughest men I know, and in his scrappier moods he has faced off with FBI, advanced upon construction men three times his size, and climbed out of his truck to treat with any breathing portion of Lower Manhattan that tried to thwart his objectives at Ground Zero. Mayor Bloomberg referred to him as "that guy from Liberty Street." But the odor was beyond him. You couldn't scrap with that, and Donavin exhibited a tangle of two frustrations: one with the memory of the discomfiture, the other with the task of describing the indescribable, which could not be separated from believing the unbelievable.

"Horrible," he said. It was 2002 and the odor was mostly gone but he was suddenly transfixed, as if he were *seeing* the odor as it advanced across the roof at him, hating it all over again. "Days it would come directly at us on the wind, it was: 'What the hell is *that*?' It was . . . *plastic*, it was . . . I don't know *what* it was. Ten thousand ballasts that were all melted together from fluorescent lights, computers, everything that was in there."

The first time he walked me around at 114, Donavin and his men slid a plank of plywood from one of the walls that were hammered by the collapse, so that the grapplers and dumptrucks were visible from the room where you stood around dusty red couches and stacks of window panes that retained only jagged filthy perimeters of glass. Going to look out, he said: "Is it a good day or a bad day?" This was in December, but Donavin wasn't talking about the look of Ground Zero—it was pretty much looking progressively cleaner to everybody—he was talking about the smell.

At the start of my first morning with the camera, the first sight to capture me the moment I reached the frozen zone, beyond which a citizen couldn't stray without a pass, was a cop who was walking with an apple in one hand, a respirator in the other. He wasn't dusted or disheveled. He walked slowly to a squad car and climbed into the back seat. The car made a three-point turn and drove north up Broadway, a one-way street going south. Nothing spectacular there, or worthy of comment, excepting the fact that a respirator was walking through the Financial District of New York



City, a placement of object that should not be seen in a civilized world. In that entire day, however, the only respirator I saw doing the job for which it was made was on the face of a photographer on West Street who looked as if he'd been shooting since the 11th. A loudmouthed cop threatened someone with arrest for having turned around and taken another picture after she'd told him not to shoot in that direction—"Don't you play with *me!*"—but the guy with the respirator must have had it customized to filter sound out as well, for he ignored the altercation and continued to shoot around it as if he were working in a world, albeit a subworld, to which his entitlements were every much in order as any worker with a badge and a uniform, an attitude I found characteristic of anybody who worked the site successfully. I was going to try it myself until a troop of National Guard marching up from Battery Park made me think that maybe this was not the time. That day a few Downtowners, very few, wore those white paper wafers-on-a-string that carry labels warning you of their worthlessness. Psychologically they must have helped people who had had enough of thinking rationally about danger for a while, and they might have degraded the odor, but the only relief *I* could imagine was to split. Splitting, though, was not enough. It was dawn when I arrived at the site, but late that night on Long Island it would be there in my nostrils, making them bleed, sickening every breath. The room in which I quarantined my clothing reeked of the site for more than a week, as if my jacket, my cap, and my scarf had started a fire of their own. One did not need to enter the room to smell it: it would find you as you passed the door. Mark Wagner, an architect engaged in tagging items from the site for an historical archive, told me that he went to California for a vacation, opened his suitcase, and realized the coat he had worn to Ground Zero was unwearably permeated with the stench of the pile, which had followed him cross-country and was setting up house on the West Coast.

When David Stanke invited Stefania Masoni, a feng shui master, to cleanse his apartment and to liberate the spirits she had located there, she coaxed her own ceremonial plumes everywhere, including the keyhole of a cabinet she couldn't open, displacing the odor of one smoke with that of another. With a trancelike purpose she moved her scents around swiftly, but witnessing was good, she said, so I followed her room to room, playing the part of three cameras, inhaling more smoke than any cupboard or any transient dwellers there. It was interesting to



watch her in this peaceful act of cleansing while there were hundreds of men across the street cleansing another way; interesting, too, to watch David. Formally trained for business, David was smart enough to know that to give this experiment a fair enough shake it was best for him to bracket skepticism and surrender to the motion of the procedure. He has a tall, slender frame, close-cropped white hair, the most perfect skin I have seen on any man, and the handsome youthful face of a print model—hardly inscrutable; but zooming in on it, it was hard even to tell if he was looking at the present, the future, or the past on Liberty Street. This was good for the film: the face neither demeaned nor extolled the ceremony. It watched. Or so it seemed. As I chased behind Stefania, I recalled what David had said to me a week before: “I’d hate to think that there were souls trapped here who were waiting to be released.” A slight catch in his voice told me as much about David as the keen observations I was hearing in many hours of conversation at Ground Zero. But the truth is that no manner of incense, however infused with prayer or invocation, was proof against the meridians of dark rancorous energy that had crossed Liberty Street.

When I asked Stefania, hesitantly, whether feng shui could ever be applied to the site itself, she answered instantly: “That’s my dream.” She wanted to tackle it with a team, although she did not say *tackle* and her method, more esoteric than the one she used for David, was not clear to me. I didn’t pursue it because I knew it would never happen, but we did entertain various means of getting a feng shui squad into the pit. The image of a half-dozen monks or other masters spreading out across the site, like Oriental ghostbusters, in workboots, hardhats, and respirators with flashlights and feng shui paraphernalia was no more mad than anything else in Lower Manhattan during the time I was shooting. Tex McCrary, a storied oldtimer you will meet in another chapter, called Lower Manhattan “the last great frontier town in America for a good idea.” At this time especially, jokers were wild: almost anybody could make things happen that made a difference, or at least made sense.

During the first few weeks, 114 was a command post for firefighters who used it as a means of watching the pile from the Liberty windows. Out of a speaker on the sixth floor an alert signal blasted to evacuate the site in the event of instability. That dust-impacted speaker, now a historical artifact, was left lying around just waiting to be claimed for a museum



since the day Donavin took it out of the window. One day, before their own building had been repaired, the firefighters of Ladder 10, Engine 10, who are housed at the intersection of Liberty and Greenwich, hung a big new sign above the door of the Ten House:

**TEN**  
**ENGINE TRUCK**  
**OPEN FOR BUSINESS**

Never mind that they didn't have a truck, and if they did they couldn't have brought it into the house or into the street. The will was there, the fight was in them. But there were hollowed-out dreams on that street, along with fractured hearts, falls from grace, suicidal predilections, heated correspondences, fights—fights everywhere—fights with City officials, with federal agencies, with unions, with cops, with insurers, with the mayor—threats of demolition, protracted nightmares, water leaks, byzantine bureaucracies, and toxic infestation at 114 in the face of which fire hoses were useless. Whether feng shui fared any better is hard to say.

One morning in mid-May we were sitting in some of the chairs that had been left in David's place when David spoke about the odor as if it were something out of *Alien*. "When the people doing repairs began to investigate the ductwork, opening vents, drilling, checking for contamination, the odor of September 11—and this was January, February—rushed right back out again. The air, with the odor of that day, had been lurking up there in exactly the same shape and form." In late July, going to meet Donavin at his apartment on Pearl Street, I was turning the corner at Maiden Lane and Broadway when the odor of the site, which had left me alone for half a year, halted me, spun me around, and turned me into a nose with a man attached. Given the animal urgency with which I sniffed the corner in circles, trying to situate the odor, it surprised me that no one else was similarly engaged. Had some Broadway renovation, or a new excavation in the construction of the PATH train in front of Liberty Street, exposed some subsurface fire that was burning beyond the official limit, or otherwise dislodged a lost pocket of the 11th? When I mentioned it to Donavin he answered with a single word—"Where?"—and it was charged with the intensity of interest and the immediacy with which two people will discuss an old foe. You'd rather not see him again, but if he is around you need to know exactly where, and you want the higher ground.



When I discussed this phenomenon with Owen Burdick, director of music at Trinity Church, he said: "They could put you anywhere on the planet and if you smelled that odor again, you would know it *instantly*. You'll know it for the rest of your life. The burnt wire, the burnt steel, the burnt flesh, that had almost a sweet, sickening, acrid . . . there was a kind of a . . . it just . . ." His reach for articulation was familiar. "I don't remember the day the odor turned off," Owen said, "but we were down here in our offices and the smell was just *constant*."

The odor, like the dust from both collapses, entered Trinity Church by invisible means, for apart from a few pieces none of its stained glass had broken, and the windows hadn't been open because they aren't openable.

One morning I was walking along Exchange Place, approaching the intersection of New Street, when a woman who was coming up behind me started singing in a brave, clear, incredibly relaxed gospel voice: "I am washed in the blood of the lamb."

No one in the Wall Street crowd seemed to care, or even to notice her. Perhaps they were used to her, perhaps they were lost in the start of their own day. I hung back to let her pass, then I followed along behind her, listening to her sing until she entered a jewelry store. It was morning. It was September. It was bright. It was summery. It was much like that terrible Tuesday, people told me, as they looked up into the sky. The woman appeared to be on her way to work. I wanted to follow her farther and to record at least a refrain or two by turning the camera on, but it was a rather intensely federal day, for Wall Street was hosting, at Federal Hall, the first joint session of Congress there since 1789, and tailing a gospel woman felt mildly imprudent. If even the thought of congressional oversight can turn me toward the criminal class, three hundred senators and reps a block away made me want to run for cover, which is exactly what I did. But like the woman I overheard on Broad Street, this voice wouldn't leave me.

"I am washed in the blood of the lamb."

She had to be singing about the 11th. If she weren't, I would not have been able to hear her. But what did she mean by that? *Washed in the blood of the lamb*. Could the power of religion that helped propel some of the savages into the World Trade Center have carried this woman back to work? I wondered how soon after the hour of the catastrophe this woman was able to sing. I wanted her to come out of the store, wanted to ask her, politely: "When the streets stank to hell were you singing the same way?"



I wondered, stupidly: *Can you be cleansed by toxic dust if the blood of the lamb is in it?* I wondered whether her words might not be taken literally. “I am washed in the blood of the lamb” could be a simple statement of fact, meaning: “Today is September 11. Every day is September 11,” in the way that a Christian would say: “Today is Easter Sunday. Every day is Easter Sunday.” If what was burnin now was the blood of the lamb for her, perhaps she had welcomed, with open arms, the storm of whirling ash as it pushed across Exchange Place, much the way the bookwoman in *Fahrenheit 451*—Truffaut’s film of the Bradbury novel—takes a stand within the flames as the firemen, the book police, burn her library. The flames and the woman embrace each other: ecstasy, evoking Joan of Arc. I wondered whether there mightn’t have been one single person, someone in the Towers, someone in the streets, whose life could have been saved but who decided their deliverance had come and let it take them. If, as Hamlet says, there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, there must be one in the fall of those towering Rockefellers and the souls who went with them, but I was not convinced by the people who were stepping up to claim it as theirs. “It was a miracle,” “God was with me,” as if omnipotence picks and plays its little favorites by the hour. This song, though, this testimony—it made an irrational sense to me. *Washed in the blood of the lamb*. I didn’t know about blood, blood from any source, but I wouldn’t have minded a cleansing myself. I was as much to blame for those attacks as anybody.

A Wilfred Owen verse, “Spring Offensive,” about young English soldiers who, *knowing their feet had come to the end of the world*, were mowed down in France during World War I, contains this line: *Some say God caught them even before they fell*. We shouldn’t have to be God to do that; or, if we have to be, well then we should be God. The least I should have done was to catch them as they fell: the Towers, the jumpers, the men and women for whom, like the soldiers in Owen’s poem, *instantly the whole sky burned with fury/Against them*. What if the dust and the stench you were trying to shake off were there to purify your soul? “I am washed in the blood of the lamb.” *What the hell does that mean on New Street in Lower Manhattan?*

I didn’t know who to ask. I only asked Owen Burdick, as we sat in his small Trinity office, to sing a hymn for me, one that is woven around the twenty-third Psalm, which he sang for the dying when the Twin Towers were burning, an act of compassion that I wouldn’t have imagined: singing beautiful verses, offering them up, not to save your own skin but