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Nothing Good Came Out of It: 9-11 Twenty Years On

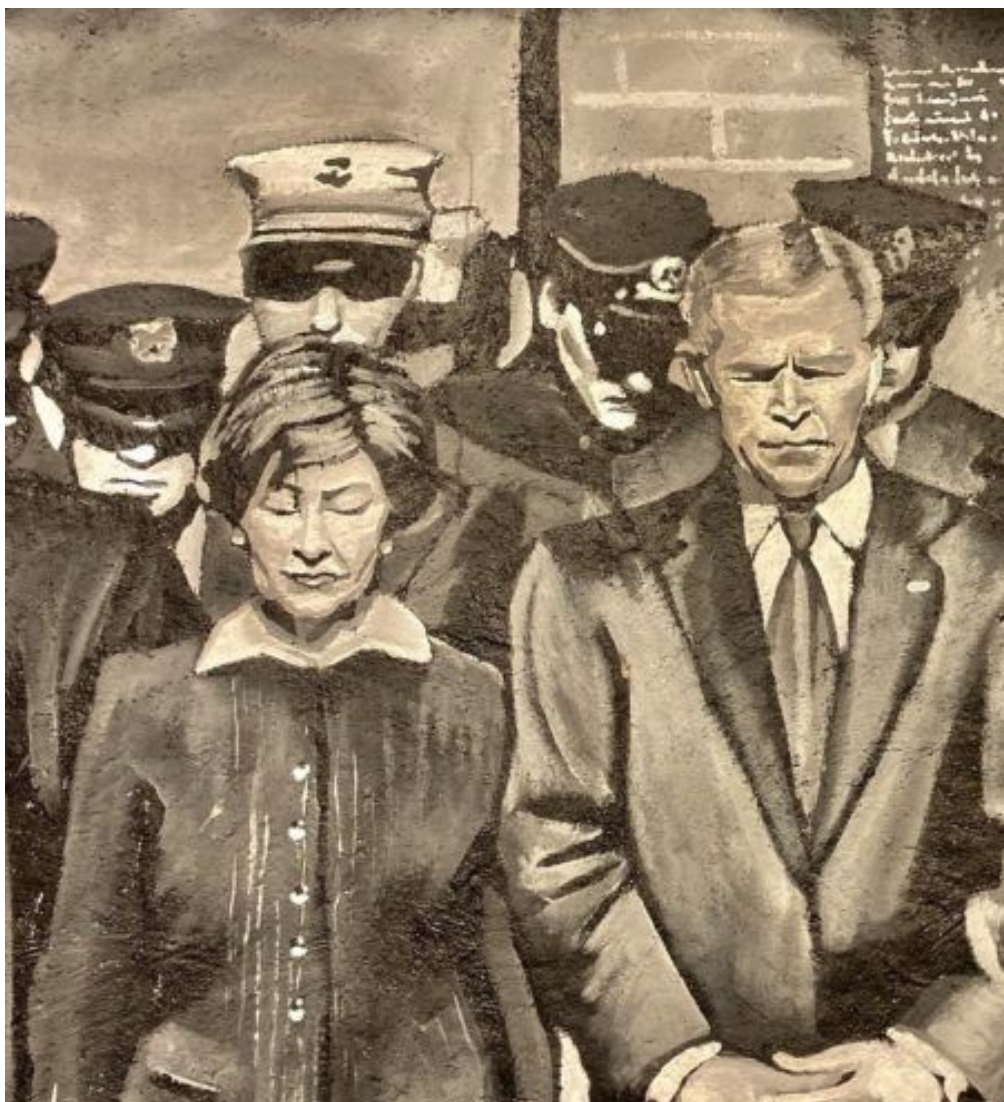


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I remember it well. I woke up early the morning of September 11, 2001. I was in Manhattan attending a meeting and visiting a friend. She left to catch the subway. I finished up the pot of coffee we were sharing, dressed and headed out the door. Her apartment was in the Chelsea district; one block north of the Chelsea Hotel, in fact. I made sure I had a key to get back in, locked her apartment door behind me and took the stairs to the front of the building. After exiting, I took a left away from the Hudson. I noticed a small crowd of people at the corner. They were all looking southward. Although it was bigger than a normal morning crowd of people waiting to cross the street, it didn't seem unusual. When I got to the corner, I joined the group. That was when I saw the smoking airplane stuck in the side of one of the Twin Towers. My first thought was that a pilot had made a disastrous error. We talked among ourselves. The Black man who stood at the corner most days with his boom box blasting tunes and the news moved the radio dial up and down the scanner looking for news that might help us explain what we were seeing. Then another plane hit a tower. The situation was now bona fide crazy and a bit scary.

The radio guy found a station reporting the news. He left it there for people in the crowd to listen to. Although confusion reigned at the radio station, the story filtering in was that the two planes appeared to be part of a terrorist incident. Thousands of workers were trapped in the Twin Towers, thousands were fleeing and attempting to flee, and first responders were flooding into the blocks around the buildings. My friend worked near the Towers at an art supply store not far from The Knitting Factory—a music venue where we had drunk a few beers the night before. I headed back to her apartment and began calling her workplace. I needed to make sure she was okay before I left town. At first, there was no answer. When I did get through, a recording told me that the store was closed due to the events occurring in lower Manhattan. I called the airline I was flying out on next. All flights were canceled. My purpose became clear. I had to find my friend. I left the apartment and headed south towards Greenwich Village. On the way, I stopped at a Radio Shack store and bought a pocket radio. While I was paying the cashier, we watched the second tower fall. Fascinating in the way a tragedy can be, neither of us said a thing. I took my change from the guy and wished him luck. He responded in kind.

I turned on the radio and began my trek towards Washington Square Park. People were out on the sidewalks. Bars and restaurants were open. Many of them had a television sitting in a window or on an outside table broadcasting the news as it unfolded. Most of the commentary was confused and uncertain at first. By the time I got closer to the Village, that confusion was slowly being replaced by government officials telling people how they

should react, various generals talking about how the US should respond, and the face of Rudy Giuliani. America's freaking mayor was clearly taking advantage of the slaughter for his own venal purposes. It did make the scandal around his wife and his mistress playing out in Gracie Mansion second-page news. Seeing his face on every television screen from 24th Street to Washington Square Park is a memory from that day that won't go away.

As I moved slowly south, the stench from the burning towers became the dominant smell. It reminded me of the smell of a burning car. A combination of burning plastic, paint, steel and various fossil fuels, there was no doubt as to its toxicity and no way to escape its heavy even oily presence. Thousands of people walked north as I continued south. Some looked quite dazed. Some were missing their shoes and others wore shirts soaked in sweat created from fear. Tear-streaked faces and high-strung conversations seemed the order of the day, with good reason. As I listened to the commentary on the radio I had just bought, I wondered what would happen next. Once the smoke cleared, so to speak. From the sound of things, it seemed like war was inevitable. Not because it would solve a damn thing, but because it would gratify the angry Americans ready to kick somebody anybody's ass. The patriotic babble from armchair generals, stupid presidents and right-wing warmongers was morphing into nationalistic vitriol that would have put John Birch, Curtis LeMay and General Patton to shame. Liberal politicians and their cohorts in the press were echoing these sentiments with a similar fervor. The future looked bleak in general and bloody for those who would almost certainly be attacked soon.

I stopped at a bodega a couple of blocks from Washington Square Park and bought a couple of tall boys to drink while I walked. I was hoping I would find my friend somewhere in the Village. I discovered that Manhattan was blocked off by the police and military south of the park. People could leave that area but could not enter it. I found a spot on the grass and cracked one of the beers. Just as I took a long drink from the can, I heard a woman calling my name. It was my friend. We kissed and hugged each other tightly. The sound of sirens and cops giving orders on megaphones drowned out our voices but not our relief at finding each other. We sat down on the grass and watched the hundreds of other people who had also decided to rendezvous or just hang out there. There were no televisions and the radio noise was quickly being drowned out by a growing crowd of people playing guitars, congas and other instruments. Most probably feared the growing certainty that the powers in Washington, on Wall Street and in the Pentagon were going to kill some people somewhere. As the stench of the burning towers hung over

lower Manhattan, dozens of people in Washington Square Park began to sing and some even danced. Then, another building collapsed. It wasn't a dance of celebration, but a danse macabre that continues to this day.

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