

ADAM GOPNIK

AUTHOR OF THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

PARIS TO THE MOON

THROUGH
THE CHILDREN'S GATE

A HOME IN NEW YORK

"A wonder of a writer. . . . The very model of urbanity: frankly, unsentimentally, wisely enchanted." —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*



The City and the Pillars

That morning the city was as beautiful as it had ever been. Central Park had never seemed so gleaming and luxuriant—the leaves just beginning to fall, and the light on the leaves left on the trees somehow making them at once golden and bright green. A bird-watcher in the Ramble made a list of the birds he saw there, from the northern flicker and the red-eyed vireo to the rose-breasted grosbeak and the Baltimore oriole. “Quite a few migrants around today,” he noted happily.

In some schools, it was the first day, and children went off as they do on the first day, with the certainty that this year we will have fun again. That protective bubble that, for the past decade or so, had settled over the city, and that we had come home to with a bubble’s transparency and bright highlights, still seemed to be in place above us. We always knew that that bubble would burst, but we imagined it bursting as bubbles do: No one will be hurt, we thought, or they will be hurt only as people are hurt when bubbles burst, a little soap in your mouth. It seemed safely in place for another day as the children walked to school. The stockbroker fathers delivered—no, inserted—their kids into school as they always do, racing downtown, their cell phones already at work, like cartoons waiting for their usual morning caption:

EXASPERATED AT 8 A.M.

A little while later, a writer who happened to be downtown saw a flock of pigeons rise, high and fast, and thought, *Why are the pigeons rising?* It was only seconds before he realized that the pigeons had felt the wave of the concussion before he heard the sound. In the same way, the shock wave hit us before the sound, the image before our

understanding. For the lucky ones, the day from then on was spent in a strange, calm, and soul-emptying back-and-forth between the impossible images on television and the usual things on the street.

Around noon, a lot of people crowded around a lamppost on Madison, right underneath a poster announcing the Wayne Thiebaud show at the Whitney: all those cakes, as if to signal the impotence of our abundance. The impotence of our abundance! In the uptown supermarkets, people began to shop. It was a hoarding instinct, of course, though oddly not brought on by any sense of panic; certainly no one on television or radio was suggesting that people needed to hoard. Yet people had the instinct to do it, and in any case, in New York the instinct to hoard quickly seemed to shade over into the instinct to consume, shop for anything, shop because it might be a comfort. One woman emerged from a Gristede's on Lexington with a bottle of olive oil and said, "I had to get *something*." Mostly, people bought water—bottled water, French and Italian—and many people, waiting in the long lines, had Armageddon baskets: the Manhattan version, carts filled with steaks, Häagen-Dazs, and butter. Many of the carts held the goods of the bubble decade, hothouse goods: flavored balsamics and cappellini and arugula. There was no logic to it, as one man pointed out in that testy, superior, patient tone: "If trucks can't get through, the army will take over and give everybody K rations or some crazy thing; if they do, this won't matter." Someone asked him what was he doing uptown? He had been down there, gotten out before the building collapsed, and walked up.

People seemed not so much to suspend the rituals of normalcy as to carry on with them in a kind of bemusement—as though to reject the image on the screen, as though to say, *That's there, we're here, they're not here yet, it's not here yet*. "Everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster," Auden wrote about a painting of Icarus falling from the sky; now we know why they turned away—they saw the boy falling from the sky, sure enough, but they did not know what to do about it. If we do the things we know how to do, New Yorkers thought, then what has happened will matter less.

The streets and parks were thinned of people, but New York is so dense—an experiment in density, really, as Venice is an experiment

in water—that the thinning just produced the normal density of Philadelphia or Baltimore. It added to the odd calm. "You wouldn't put it in a book," a young man with an accent said to a girl in the park, and then he added, "Do you like to ski?" Giorgio Armani was in the park—Giorgio Armani? Yes, right behind the Metropolitan Museum, with his entourage, beautiful Italian boys and girls in tight white T-shirts. "*Cinema*," he kept saying, his hands moving back and forth like an accordion player's. "*Cinema*."

Even urban geography is destiny, and New York, a long thin island, cuts off downtown from uptown, west side from east. (And a kind of moral miniaturization is always at work, as we try unconsciously to seal ourselves from the disaster: People in Europe say "America attacked" and people in America say "New York attacked" and people in New York think "Downtown attacked.") For the financial community, this was the Somme; it was impossible not to know someone inside that building, or thrown from it. Whole companies, tiny civilizations, an entire zip code vanished. Yet those of us outside that world, hovering in midtown, were connected to the people dying in the towers only by New York's uniquely straight lines of sight—you looked right down Fifth Avenue and saw that strange, still, neat package of white smoke.

The city has never been so clearly, so surreally, sectioned as it became on Wednesday and Thursday. From uptown all the way down to Fourteenth Street, life is almost entirely normal—fewer cars, perhaps, one note quieter on the street, but children and moms and hot-dog vendors on nearly every corner. In the flower district, the wholesalers unpack autumn branches from the boxes they arrived in this morning. "That came over the bridge?" someone asks, surprised at the thought of a truck driver waiting patiently for hours just to bring in blossoming autumn branches. The vendor nods.

At Fourteenth Street, one suddenly enters the zone of the missing, of mourning not yet acknowledged. It is, in a way, almost helpful to walk in that strange new village, since the concussion wave of fear that has been sucking us in since Tuesday is replaced with an outward ripple of grief and need, something human to hold on to. The stanchions and walls are plastered with homemade color-Xerox posters, smiling

snapshots above, a text below, searching for the missing: "Roger Mark Rasweiler. Missing. One WTC, 100th floor." "We Need Your Help: Giovanna 'Gennie' Gambale." "We're Looking for Kevin M. Williams, 104th Fl. WTC." "Have You Seen Him? Robert 'Bob' Dewitt." "Ed Feldman—Call Ross." "Millan Rustillo—Missing WTC." Every lost face is smiling, caught at Disney World or Miami Beach, on vacation. Every poster lovingly notes the missing person's height and weight to the last ounce and inch. "Clown tattoo on right shoulder," one says. On two different posters, there is an apologetic note along with the holiday snap: "Was Not Wearing Sunglasses on Tuesday."

Those are the ones who've gone missing. On television, the reporters keep talking about the World Trade Center as a powerful symbol of American financial power. And yet it was, in large part, the back office of Wall Street. As Eric Darton showed in his fine social history of the towers, they were less a symbol of America's financial might than a symbol of the Port Authority's old inferiority complex. It was not the citadel of capitalism but, according to the real order of things in the capitalist world, just a come-on—a desperate scheme dreamed up in the late fifties to bring businesses back downtown. In later years, of course, downtown New York became the center of world trade, for reasons that basically had nothing to do with the World Trade Center, so that now Morgan Stanley and Cantor Fitzgerald were there, but for a long time, it was also a big state office building where you went to get a document stamped or a license renewed. No one loved the buildings save children, who took to them because they were iconically so simple, so tall and two. When a child tried to draw New York, he would draw the simplest available icons: two rectangles and an airplane going by them.

Near Washington Square, the streets empty out, and the square itself is beautiful again. "I saw it coming," a bicycle messenger says. "I thought it was going to take off the top of that building." He points to the little Venetian-style campanile on Washington Square South. The Village seems like a village. In a restaurant on Washington Place at ten-thirty, the sous-chefs are quietly prepping for lunch, with the chairs still on all the tables and the front door open and unguarded. "We're going to try and do dinner today," one of the chefs says. A

grown woman rides a scooter down the middle of La Guardia Place. Several café owners, or workers, go through the familiar act of hosing down the sidewalk. With the light pall of smoke hanging over everything, this everyday job becomes somehow cheering, cleansing. If you enter one of the open cafés and order a meal, the familiar dialogue—"And a green salad with that." "You mean a side salad?" "Yeah, that'd be fine. . . . What kind of dressing do you have?"—feels reassuring, too, another calming routine.

Houston Street is the dividing line, the place where the world begins to end. In Soho, there is almost no one on the street. No one is allowed on the streets except residents, and they are hidden in their lofts. Nothing is visible except the cloud of white smoke and soot that blows from the dense stillness below Canal. An art critic and a museum curator watched the explosions from right here. "It was a sound like two trucks crashing on Canal, no louder than that, than something coming by terribly fast, and the building was struck," the critic said. "I thought, *This is it, mate, the nuclear attack, I'm going to die.* I was peaceful about it, though. But then the flame subsided, and then the building fell." The critic and the curator watched it fall together. Decades had passed in that neighborhood where people insisted that now everything was spectacle, nothing had meaning. Now there was a spectacle, and it *meant*.

The smell, which fills the empty streets of Soho from Houston to Canal, blew uptown on Wednesday night and is not sufficiently horrible from a reasonable distance—almost like the smell of smoked mozzarella, a smell of the bubble time. Closer in, it becomes acrid and unbreathable. The white particulate smoke seems to wreath the empty streets, to wrap right around them. The authorities call this the "frozen zone." In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, spookiest and most cryptic of Poe's writings, a man approaches the extremity of existence, the pole beneath the South Pole. "The whole ashy material fell now continually around us," he records in his diary, "and in vast quantities. The range of vapor to the southward had arisen prodigiously in the horizon, and began to assume more distinctness of form. I can liken it to nothing but a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the

heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon. It emitted no sound." Poe, whose house around here was torn down not long ago, is a realist now.

More than any other city, New York exists at once as a city of symbols and associations, literary and artistic, and as a city of real things. This is an emotional truth, of course—New York is a city of wacky dreams and of disillusioning realities. But it is also a plain, straightforward architectural truth, a visual truth, a material truth. The city looks one way from a distance, a skyline full of symbols, inviting pilgrims and Visigoths, and another way up close, a city full of people. The Empire State and Chrysler buildings exist as symbols of thirties materialism and as abstract ideas of skyscrapers and as big dowdy office buildings—a sign and then a thing and then a sign and then a thing and then a sign, going back and forth all the time. (It is possible to transact business in the Empire State Building and only then nudge yourself and think, *Oh, yeah, this is the Empire State Building.*) The World Trade Center existed both as a thrilling double exclamation point at the end of the island and as a rotten place to have to go and get your card stamped, your registration renewed.

The pleasure of living in New York has always been the pleasure of living in both cities at once: the symbolic city of symbolic statements (this is big, I am rich, get me) and the everyday city of necessities, MetroCards and coffee shops and long waits and longer trudges. On the afternoon of that day, the symbolic city, the city that the men in the planes had attacked, seemed much less important than the real city, where the people in the towers lived. The bubble is gone, but the city beneath—naked now in a new way, not startling but vulnerable—seemed somehow to increase in our affection, our allegiance. On the day they did it, New Yorkers walked the streets without, really, any sense of "purpose" or "pride" but with the kind of tender necessary patriotism that lies in just persisting.

New York, E. B. White wrote in 1949, holds a steady, irresistible charm for perverted dreamers of destruction, because it seems so impossible. "The intimation of mortality is part of New York now,"

he went on to write, "in the sound of jets overhead." We have heard the jets now, and we will probably never be able to regard the city with quite the same exasperated, ironic affection we had for it before. Yet on the evening of the day, one couldn't walk through Central Park, or down Seventh Avenue, or across an empty but hardly sinister Times Square—past the light on the trees, or the kids on their scooters, or the people sitting worried in the outdoor restaurants with menus, frowning, as New Yorkers always do, as though they had never seen a menu before—without feeling a surprising rush of devotion to the actual New York, Our Lady of the Subways, New York as it is. It is the symbolic city that draws us here, and the real city that keeps us. It seems hard but important to believe that city will go on, because we now know what it would be like to lose it, and it feels like losing life itself.