

9/14/01

Friday: 8:30 am. It's rainy. I wake up even though my alarm isn't even set. So much for sleeping in. My muscles ache horribly. I stretch, but to no avail. Turn on the radio. I pull on my jeans and a t-shirt and head downstairs to the newsstand. I pick up the NY Post and the Daily News. The NY Times is sold out.

NY POST: There's a picture of a blonde woman in tears holding a flier that of her missing fiancé, Andy O'Grady. The headline reads: "**New York's Tragic Face.**"

DAILY NEWS: The headline blares: **AIRPORT LOCKDOWN**. And under a photo of the president, it says: "Tearful Bush Vows Victory. Will visit New York today to tour ground zero."

The city is still in shock. For now, I busy myself with chores. Time to do laundry. I wash my jeans and New York State Troopers t-shirt, along with everything else. I pick up the day planner that I had found the night before and leaf through it.

Maybe I'm violating her privacy, but I want to get a sense of who she is:

Michele _____. Lives in New Jersey. A French woman. A teacher. A golfer. She has marked when school starts. Meetings. Notes in French. Notes in English. There's a catering menu for Cosi, a French gourmet sandwich shop. A card from Indochine, a hip restaurant in the East Village. It appear as though she has children, though.

There's an entry in the front page: In case of emergency, please notify Damien _____. Is he the one who's missing? I call her. Tell her that I have her book. She seems distracted. Detached. At first, I tell her that I'll leave it with my doorman. I assume she'll be back in the city. Back at the Armory. But she hesitates. I tell her quickly that I'll put it in the mail immediately.

I slip the day planner into an envelope, with a note. Something to the effect of: "I'm not sure whether or not you've been directly affected by the World Trade Center tragedy, but please know that my thoughts are with you." The Post Office is only half a block away and there is no line. I send it Priority Mail.

It's Friday, but we don't have to work. My company has given us the day off for the National Day of Mourning. I've been sporadically checking messages. They're all about how our network is down. That we can't have remote access to the network. I'd lugged my laptop home just in case. So much for getting any work done. Every now and then new messages are posted about the status of our access. Nothing I can do about that, so I ignore them.

I don a new pair of pants, but put on the same New York State Troopers t-shirt that I'd just cleaned. I slap on the worn out nametag and a red, white and blue ribbon and leave for the Armory at 1:30 pm. The street leading up to the Armory is now fully lined with scores of photos taped to the wall, to the mail box. Votive candles rest along the base of the building. Flowers lay on the ground, carefully placed.

I pass the first checkpoint easily. At the Armory entrance, one cop takes one look at my t-shirt and waives me on. "I remember that shirt," he says. I find Michelle, Phyllis and Simon busy at work in the food area.

I launch right in. Today there are not nearly as many families as yesterday. But the ones who are here are still stoic. Still somewhat hopeful. The Armory has evolved. The bare, functional walls have now been covered up with white curtains. A huge projection TV screen has been raised near the cordoned-off family area. American flags line each of the walls now. The New York State flag is also aloft. Bunches of fresh flowers are laid out on every table throughout the Armory. Probably forty or more tables worth of flowers. However, in the food services area, the Red Cross workers who had sat idly by the day before were nowhere to be seen.

My first task: I instinctively fill up a crate of food and drinks. But not nearly as many people take me up on refreshments. Soon I shift gears to garbage duty. The tables where all the detectives are stationed now have a new layer of restaurant paper lining them. Neat and clean for the new families and repeat visitors who come by with new information. New DNA. New evidence of a life that's now gone missing. I clear off the tables, empty the garbage bins.

Upstairs. Downstairs. Once again, I keep busy. The WALL OF PRAYER has evolved into a wallpaper of missing people. A family album that contains only sadness and smiling people.

I see a lot of familiar faces. Cops. Volunteers. Soldiers. Red Cross representatives. Salvation Army workers. We nod. Recognize each other. Move on. Kathy, my ad agency friend has found her way in as well.

I barely eat all day. A banana. A bottle of water. There's more despair here today. Less hope. After only two hours, I'm overwhelmed. I escape outside and pass by an Hispanic woman who's smoking. I must look desperate when I ask if she has an extra cigarette. She seems to hesitate: "Well, if you really want one." Obviously she doesn't want to give me one.

"Never mind, that's okay," I reply.

This seems to be my breaking point. I pass her by and once I'm beyond the parapet, I crouch down and lean against it. Tears are already streaming

involuntarily down my face. I'm able to hold in the gasps. I'm concerned that the TV cameras will capture this moment — I'm in their line of sight. So after a minute, I stand up, wipe my eyes and head over to an area where the press can't follow.

Cops. Volunteers. Families. They pass by and all look at me with sympathy. I feel like a fraud and try to compose myself. I see the woman again, from whom I had asked for a cigarette. She looks at me and said: "Do you want a cigarette now?" I nod a "no," but she pulls one out and hands it to me. Now I understand why. It is her last one.

"I couldn't," I say. "It's your last one." She insists.

She lights it for me and walks away. Just what I need. So much for my success at quitting smoking. I finish my smoke and barrel back into the Armory. It's more of the same and I pick up the pace. Keep busy. Past the volunteers. Past dazed family members. Past detectives, chaplains and soldiers.

Out in the back quadrant, near where I stash the garbage, I see a Guardsman. He looks completely zoned out. I ask him how he is. "Haven't slept in 47 hours." He looks it.

As we talk, I discover that he has five family members missing. His brother, a fireman, is stuck on sub-level three at Ground zero. He had called on Wednesday from his cell phone. Trapped in a void with some other people. They had water, but no food. He could last for ten days, the soldier tells me. But it's Friday already. And they haven't found anybody in the rubble since Wednesday.

On the back stairs that lead out to the street, the Guardsmen are on duty. Smoking. Talking. You can tell they haven't seen a cot in awhile. No sleep. No showers. No change of clothes. I mention my hot bath of the night before. He looks tortured.

"Don't tell me that," he says.

I tell him I live a block away. He and his buddies could go over, if they wanted. Obviously, he can't. That would be AWOL. His name is Albarran. I haven't a clue as to what his rank is. We talk. He hands me a cigarette, lights it. Small talk. Ex-wife. Where he's stationed: Long Island.

On the side street, past the gated fence, the street is packed with cars and trucks frantically dropping off supplies and donations. Ambulances, cop cars, state trooper cars, mourners, well-wishers and hopeful volunteers also line the block. The WALL OF PRAYER outside has now expanded and taken over any spare wall space around this side of the building. It's unbelievable.

Heading back into the fray, I chat with another soldier. He's not with the National Guard. Not normally. Regular Army, he says. He was home on leave when the tragedy struck. Apparently, he rushed to report into the Armory and ended up with this National Guard unit. He spoke of his disdain for the Guardsmen. Spoke of how some Guardsmen were taking some of the donated supplies to stock their office upstairs. He is disgusted.

"This wouldn't happen in my unit," he says.

Further on, I see three people in their 20s. Looking for their father, I wonder? Their mother? Brother or sister? They stand up from the table, obviously finishing up their discussion with the detective. One woman embraces and hugs the detective. "Thanks so much," she said. "I think we've accounted for everyone." They were all beaming. Finally, a success story. Who knows if whoever they were looking for was in a hospital somewhere or managed to flee in time, but at that point, all that matters is that somebody wasn't missing any longer.

Choked up, I rush past them. Near the food service tables, a matronly woman decked out in red, white and blue comes up to me and pins on another red, white and blue ribbon. Now I have two pinned onto my shirt.

George Pataki, the governor of New York State is here. He stands at the podium in the front, giving words of encouragement to the crowd. I barely register his presence, let alone what he says.

George Bush is in town today, too. It's eerie, but we know exactly when he's here. First we hear the F-16s in the sky announcing his descent into the city. Then we can even tell when he has moved from one part of town to the other.

Since air traffic is curtailed, any signs of movement we attribute to him. He is downtown, at Ground Zero. We watch him give a speech on TV, standing next to a fireman. Oddly enough, he doesn't show up at the Armory, though rumors fly about his expected visit. One spectator on the street stops me to ask me: "Is it true George Bush is coming here?" I tell him that I think so, but who knows.

By this time, there are too many volunteers in the food service area. People are wandering around. Bumping into each other. Slowing down the process. I focus on the other two quadrants and downstairs. Keep moving. Until a woman flags me down to tell me that they need ice up on the mezzanine, where the Guardsmen must report. They're expecting a battalion of soldiers who are heading up from Ground Zero. Right now they're preparing the food tables for them.

There's no ice on the main level. I check downstairs in the kitchen. Still none. I head outside to the refreshment staging area in front of the Armory. They, too, are low. Instead, they send me across the street to Popeye's Chicken, a fast-food

restaurant. A Salvation Army volunteer and I grab a container, put it in a shopping cart and head across the street. Inside, they direct us to the backroom, where a woman begins scooping ice into our bucket.

I find out that their ice machine has been working overtime for the past three days. They've been the primary source of ice for the Armory. All for free. My co-volunteer, a 60-year-old Hispanic guy (he calls me Mami) takes the scoop from her and tells her that she's done enough. Let him take over.

Meanwhile I thank her profusely for her help. She is gracious, but talks about how they won't even give her any Gatorade or drinks, even though people at the restaurant have been incredibly helpful. Even people in the crowd outside are offered drinks and food.

I immediately run across the street and grab an armload of drinks and bring it back to give to the restaurant workers. The only business they've been getting is from the cops, because the public cannot access this area otherwise. And I bet they've not been charging the cops, either.

Once we fill the container, we wheel the grocery cart around to the side, where there's an elevator. We've got at least 150 pounds of ice here and my shirt soaking wet from the ice and the drinks. As we walk, he tells me that he doesn't let women do man's work. He wouldn't let me push the cart. He boasts that he's 60 years old. "Do I look 60?" he asks. He runs his finger through his hair. It's jet black. He doesn't in fact, look 60. Maybe 50. "I take care of my woman's needs, Mami. I keep her happy, you know what I mean?"

The elevator is out of commission. Aargh. We cannot carry this up. Instead, I run inside and grab a dolly and ask two volunteers — strapping strong young men — to meet me back at the front. We meet up and they haul the ice up the stairs and load it on the dolly. We then take it inside and they lug it up the stairs to the mezzanine.

Already the soldiers are arriving from Ground Zero. They look haggard. Dusty. Ready for a shower. The area's closed off to the public. In one room, we hear an "ooh-rah" cheer. Obviously they need some company spirit right now, after everything they'd been through.

A cop comes up to me and asks if there are any more red, white and blue ribbons. The officers outside are clamoring for them. They're tying them around their wrists. We're completely out, though. I feel helpless at not being able to fulfill a simple request. I know how important it is to them right now, especially since so many of their fellow cops and fireman are missing down at Ground Zero. They need this show of solidarity.

I tromp back downstairs for another run at garbage duty. It's easier to do solitary tasks like this where I don't open up and interact with anyone for more than a few seconds at a time. At one table, I hear a woman say to a detective: "You mean I'm going to be rich?" She says it in such a dejected manner. I suspect her husband had some good life insurance policies, but it's no wonder that this doesn't matter to her at all.

Outside, where the Salvation Army truck is stationed, I touch base with the two workers. Roscoe and John. (Or at least I think his name is John— I meet so many people). Roscoe has been joking and flirting with me since yesterday. They're both characters and are a great escape from the frenzy that I find indoors. "I'm looking to get married," Roscoe says. He proceeds to give me his resume: "I'm 42. People tell me I look 30. I just got out of a relationship." He'd been with her for a year. Before that, his previous girlfriend had died of cancer. He tells me that he makes as much money as a doctor. He's a mechanic, has been one for 25 years. Owns a few car washes. I tell him he needs to take another six months off before he starts a new relationship.

"Yeah," he says, I've been clean and sober for six years. Everybody told me I couldn't do it. I showed them," he says proudly.

Back inside, around 9 pm, I sit down for a break. Michelle, Simon and I sit on folding chairs behind the food service tables, but it's not long before I'm back out on the floor, cleaning off the tables for the next round of families.

Simon, the Aussie, is enthralled by all the accents that the cops are sporting. Pure New York. Or, rather, Pure New Yawk. In spite of myself and the situation, I find myself surveying the sea of cops, many of which are quite charming and handsome. I keep tabs on one tall, dark, handsome detective in particular. Very sweet, too. Amazingly, over the past two days, he's managed to keep a solid sense of calm and fraternity with the people around him.

As I clear away one table as five detectives stand up to leave. There's a pack of cigarettes sitting on the vacated table. They don't belong to anyone, one cop says.

"Go ahead, they're yours," one says after I ask if anyone left them. I hadn't given in to nicotine all day, since my lapse earlier, but I greedily pick them up and head out to the back stairwell, where the soldiers were, of course, on duty.

After a smoke and a chat, I'm back in the groove. Restock the food table. Deliver chocolates and sweets to tables. Hand out water. Pick up garbage. By now, we figure out what people like. Pizza. Chocolate. Bananas. Water. The power bars and healthy granola bars aren't going nearly as fast.

It's amazing how many restaurants are donating foods. Armies of pizza delivery men parade through at regular intervals. Nearby restaurants are sending freshly prepared trays of hot food.

Office supplies, socks, gloves, medical supplies. It's all pouring in. We're overloaded. They put a call out over the TV and radio. Response is overwhelming. We even took down the sign at the side entrance that said "NEED BREAD" because people respond so quickly. Now we need boots. More gloves. Socks. Towels.

Again, out at the Salvation Army Truck, I check in with Roscoe and John. Another smoke break. John graciously gives me a lighter that is among the donated supplies. I meet a woman with the Salvation Army. Her husband is with the National Guard. He called her by cell phone not long ago and told her they were headed uptown.

It is getting chilly out and the guys were getting cold. Near the truck were a bunch of donated long-sleeve t-shirts. She asks one Salvation Army worker — one in authority, apparently — if she could take a bunch of shirts up to the soldiers. He refuses her request. "They'll all want one if you bring them up." That's the point! Why donate them otherwise? We're disgusted with him. She tells me that he'd just sell them anyway. So much for faith in the Salvation Army.

She then asks another boss the same thing, who tells her to take whatever she needs. We grab a bunch of t-shirts and make our way to the side entrance on 25th Street, which is reserved only for soldiers. Thankfully, she has a pass that gets us in. We walk by a huge scanner machine, like the one they use at airports. Security is indeed, tight here.

Upstairs, we find the debriefing room. His unit hasn't arrived yet, so we leave the shirts with the only soldier in the room. At least they can wear them under their fatigues and get a bit warmer.

Downstairs, on the main floor, Liz Taylor has shown up. It's around 9:30 pm. She's incredibly short and her hair looks like a Pomeranian is sitting on it. Her stylist is with her. She's moving about the room, talking to cops, family members, volunteers. Very gracious.

I pull on my sweatshirt around 11 pm and step outside for another cigarette. The female cop guarding the door has been so wonderful. Smiles every time I walk by. Encouraging. Thankful. She's amazing. Has a beautiful shade of red lipstick on. Every time I see her, she always looks so fresh.

Occasionally, we'll hear the sound of an F-16 overhead. No other air traffic is allowed. It's amazing how skittish we all are. Heading back in, another cop stops me and starts to ask for ID. I realize that I'd covered up my home-made volunteer

tag. I pull up my sweatshirt and says "Oh yeah, I remember that shirt. You had it on yesterday. Go on in." They're really tight with security today. Especially so with George Bush in town. Must be he left town just now.

I sit curbside near the MCI Worldcom trailer, where family members and volunteers can make free calls to anywhere In the world. A man in a business suit encourages me to make a call as well. He's visited the volunteers inside at the food tables a few times and has made the same offer. I can't remember any long-distance phone numbers of any friends abroad. Besides, it's more important that family members take advantage of that service.

"Come make a free phone call. Anywhere in the world," he says. "Free call. C'mon." I demur.

Near the outdoor refreshment tent, I spy the 60-year-old Hispanic volunteer again. "Mami," he yells out. "Where's my ice container?" He sounds annoyed. "I have to have it back." I'm a bit disoriented and finally remember what he's talking about. "They're using it upstairs" I tell him.

"But I have to have it back, " he says, persistently.

"I don't know what to tell you," I reply. "I can't go and take it back right now." I am really on the defensive. "You don't have to yell," I say.

Then he backs down, sees that I'm upset. "I'm just a bit deaf, I wasn't yelling. Don't worry about it. I'll get it later." We're fine again. Papi and me.

As I walk up the stairs into the Armory, I stumble and a cop reaches out to catch me. "Are you okay?" he asks. I must admit that I'm running on fumes at this point. But it's nothing compared to the stories I've been hearing all day. Nothing.

At the back entrance, the freight elevator opens and soldiers are forming a human chain, handing out box after box. They're computers. Printers. Monitors. From IBM. Donated. Earlier somebody has donated a photocopy machine. They're setting up a command station in the back, near the interpreter's stations.

While Michelle and I are taking a break behind the food services table, a detective keeps coming back for chocolate kisses. We start up a conversation. We talk about how no one is going to lose weight here at the Armory with all this food. "Well," he says, "the only reason I keep coming back here is not for the chocolates, but for the chance to flirt with you."

We volunteers decide that we're absolutely going out for drinks the next night. We're not even sure if we can volunteer at the Armory the next day. We've put our names down on the volunteer list, but they're warning us that they may not be able to take us. So many other people are waiting to help, especially since it'll

be Saturday, when people will be off work and ready to help out. They also warn us that they're changing the nametag colors. On Thursday it was yellow. Today it is orange. And I still have on my hand-fashioned name tag. Security is indeed getting tighter.

I make sure to get Michelle's cell phone number. She'll be at the Armory the next day before me and I told her I may have to call her to get me in. It's now around 1 am. Simon, Michelle and I decide that our batteries are really low. It's time to make our way home. On our way out, I make sure to sign up for volunteering. Even at front desk, they say "we can't guarantee you'll be let in."

Thank goodness, home is only one block away. Once again, my muscles ache. No amount of massage can help, I think. On the elevator, I push 10. Another guy pushes 9. We've both obviously had a long day. So much so, that I get off on 9. I realize my mistake and punch the "up" button. The elevator opens and I see the same guy. We've obviously mixed our floors up. We laugh at our mistake. No one is thinking straight these days.

"See?" he says. "That's how crazy things are."

Inside my apartment, I check my voice mail. My father has called. He talks about how they'll be raising the largest flag west of the Mississippi. Right in Rock Springs, Wyoming. He's helping to organize the effort. My sister, Cindy, also called. She'd been trying to call since Tuesday but couldn't get through. I talk to both of them briefly, but cut the conversations short each time. I don't have the heart to talk to anyone right now. Not about politics. Not about war. Not about the Armory or the families. I check my e-mail.

Out on the balcony, I smoke a cigarette. My apartment faces south and I could see how the bottom of the city is lit up. The smell of smoke is still in the air and the eerie glow from the financial district is a painful reminder of how much life had changed since Monday.

In some ways, however, the city is back to normal. The transvestite crack whore who makes her bed on the stoop across the street is now back on the stoop after a three day hiatus.

I run a hot bath, soak my muscles for 20 minutes and then collapse into bed.