

9/16/01

Sunday morning. I wake at 8 am. Back to sleep. Again, at 10 am, I awake and this time crawl out of bed. After throwing on some clothes, I go downstairs to pick up the New York Times, the New York Post and the Daily News.

DAILY NEWS: **WE'RE AT WAR.**
(Inside, there's a full color pullout of the American flag)

NEW YORK TIMES: **BUSH TELLS THE MILITARY TO 'GET READY'; BROADER SPY POWERS GAINING SUPPORT**

NEW YORK POST: Headline: **WAR**
Subhead: "We're at war; you will be asked for resolve, for the conflict will not be easy. You will be asked for your strength because the course to victory will be long. Those who wage war against the United States have chosen their own destruction."

At 11 am, I place a call to David, a friend out in Westport, Connecticut. "Come out," he says. We consult the timetable and decide Call David.. "Come out." He gets the schedule. There's a 12:07, 1:07, 2:07. I decide on the 1:07 and jump in the shower.

At 11:30 I'm on the corner of 24th and Lex. Should I go to Connecticut or go to the Armory. The pull is strong. Already, guilt is washing over me for doing anything but volunteering. It's also a selfish guilt, because it allows me to keep busy. The decision is made as I walk over to Park Avenue. I avoid the Armory entirely and grab a cab uptown.

An Asian driver picks me up. We talk of Tuesday's events. His son, 10 years old, is having nightmares. He won't let him watch any more TV. The cabbie barely hears me when I try to chime in with commiseration. But I realize that he just needs to talk, to connect with other people. And at this point, I'm more than willing to listen.

At Grand Central, things are surprisingly normal, beyond the small phalanx of cops out front. I pick up a croissant at one shop. A Diet Pepsi at another. "\$1.75, please.," the shopkeeper says. As I passed him earlier, he was talking about selling out of his USA t-shirts. A profiteer? I pull out \$1.50 from my pocket. It's only \$1.25 in my neighborhood. I dig into my pocket for another quarter, but he tells me not to worry. "This is fine," he says.

I buy a round-trip off-peak ticket. I'm still torn about leaving. But I'm exhausted. Mentally and physically. Michelle Simon and Monique will be there. But not me. Instead, I make my way to track 27 after buying the Daily News to take with me on the train.

On the train. The 12:07. A couple is discussing politics loudly. They talk about the terrorists. Osama bin Laden. Afghanistan. I bury myself in the newspaper to escape the chatter. But the news is more of the same. The now familiar picture of the man jumping from the World Trade Center stars back at me. Of all the images, this is the one that affects me most. My eyes water and I toss the paper aside.

I wish desperately that the couple would simply shut up. Enough! It's at the point where I'm nearly ready to beg them to stop when, two seats ahead of me, is an African American family with a beautiful boy. He's probably two years old and full of piss and vinegar. Blissfully unaware of what's going on in the world. He's loud, self absorbed and adorable.

At first he annoys me, but as the ride continues, I welcome his noises. I'm hoping that his rumbling will drown out the political couple's musings. It doesn't work. I start humming. It reminds me of when I used to make up tunes when I was a little girl, while I was swinging on the playground by myself. It's still not enough to mute the couple. I cover my ears. Still I can hear them. Please, more of the boy, I beg silently. Tears flow down my cheeks at this point. I don't bother to wipe them off as they flow past my sunglasses. Surely everybody on this train older than two years old is experiencing something similar to me.

I finally disembark at Westport. I'm an hour early. David thought I'd be on the 1:07. I catch a cab to his house. Westport is bucolic. Leafy green. A wealthy enclave. Apart from flags scattered throughout town at each house, you wouldn't know that the world had changed. No planes overhead. It's deathly quiet.

As we're driving through the tree-lined streets, the cabbie is a bit cantankerous. "No way am I going near that island," he says. "I had two fares last Tuesday. At 8 am. They wanted to go to the city. I turned them down. Thank god."

He then grumbled about the car stopped behind them at the traffic light. I look back. It's a hornet yellow Range Rover. Worth \$100,000 at least. Very conspicuous. The guy is a hot-shot record producer, the cabbie tells me. "Thinks he owns this town," he says.

At 5 Caccamo Lane, David comes out to greet me with a big hug. I see Sean for the first time. He's more than a year old, but I've never met him. Melissa and Kyle, David's wife and son, are at the beach. Dave's family is on the way from the city.

Dave tells me of how his brother Gene managed to escape the mess. Apparently, Gene works on the 30th floor of the WTC. After the crash, when word got out about the crash, he heard the command “get out!” He fled down the flight of stairs and was running so fast that his feet barely hit the steps. In fact, he didn’t meet anyone ‘til the 11th floor.

Outside, he jumped into a northbound van. Two men had picked him up and had gotten the hell out of there. They didn’t stop until they hit Yonkers, north of the city. There they dropped Gene off at a bar, where his sister came to pick him up. In the meantime, David was frantically trying to reach his brother all day and didn’t hear that he was safe ‘til 4 pm.

After David, Kyle and I took a walk around the neighborhood, the rest of his family shows up. I’m on my first glass of wine. The first drink in over a week. Halfway through the drink, I’m already feeling the alcohol..

I ‘m still sore. Dave gives me a towel and sends me upstairs to the hot tub. Heaven. I aim the water jets at my muscles and spend a half an hour relaxing. Finally, Melissa and Kyle arrive.

She met a woman on the beach. The woman was wearing shorts, her husband was in pants and the baby was splashing about the ocean in his diapers. Melissa gave her a swimming diaper and found out that they were refugees from the city. They just needed to get away and weren’t equipped for the beach.

Everybody is exhausted. We all are lethargic. Charlie heads upstairs for a nap and I’m not far behind him. Forty five minutes later, Melissa wakes me for dinner.

Gene is flying to Chicago tomorrow. His company is relocating some of their staff to the Chicago office. Flying doesn’t seem to bother him. He’ll probably be glad to be out of the city.

We barbecue some meat, fix up some bruschetta and sit down to dinner. Afterwards, we celebrate Sean’s birthday. Sitting right on the table, he sinks both of his hands into the cake and begins to fingerprint everybody with frosting. Before long, it’s bath time for the kids.

Around 8:30 we head in to watch TV. Everybody’s talking about their experiences, from the survivors to the man on the street. It’s too much. I’m not ready for this, especially since I’ve been without any TV exposure since Thursday. I escape into the formal dining room, lay down and shut my eyes.

As we all start to leave, Charlie says he’ll drive me back into the city. He lives in Brooklyn. That’s crazy, I tell him. It’ll take forever for you to get home. “No, it’s not right for you to go back into the city alone,” he says.

I finally convince him that it'll be unwise. They're moving the base of operations from the Armory to Pier 94 tonight after they close at 12 pm. They'll be mobilizing and who knows what kind of traffic he'll find. Melissa chimes in to say that loads of city people will be heading back into town. Who knows what traffic will be like? He finally relents.

Dave drives me to the train station. We're early. Then an announcement comes on. Train is 10 minutes late because an "earlier incident." Everybody looks searchingly and nervously at each other. We wait.

The train comes. I hug David good-bye. Jump on the train. 1 hour and 10 minutes later, we're back in NYC. I walk downtown. The Empire State building is lit up. Red, white and blue. It's the first time since Monday night that it has been lit.

Guardsmen are walking along Park Avenue. On 26th Street, deliveries are still pouring in at the Armory. Or maybe it's a truck waiting to cart it to Pier 94. I'm tempted to try to get in to help with the final clean-up. But I decide to forego any further volunteerism for the night..

On my block, there are more and more pictures, more candles. Bunches of cut flowers dot the landscape. At home, I have four phone calls. One from my hairdresser in Burlington, Vermont, calling to see if I'm okay. My apartment still smells smoky. A slight coating of white dust has gathered over everything the past few days. Dad also left a message.

I check e-mail. Call Dad. Talk gets too political. I try to get off the phone, cut short his conversation. I'm a bit rough with him. He thinks we're too soft. Our generation. I tell him of Joe and Alan from Atlantic Beach FL. Two kids, college, volunteer firefighters who flew up on Friday to help. I tell him there are so many stories like this. I'm impatient with his intransigence.

I can't take it. I get off, but not before I hear the cracking in his voice. Clearly I've upset him. I call him back immediately and relay the story of how I gained entrance into the Armory on Thursday. I knew he'd be tickled that I used his influence as a former State Trooper to get in. He laughed and choked up. "I wouldn't expect anything less from my daughter. I taught all my kids to do the right thing." Now I can hang up with a clearer conscience.

Out onto the balcony, I am still struck by the glow in the sky to the south. It occurs to me that I haven't been on the roof since Tuesday. It's supposed to close at 10 on weekdays. I take my chances and make my way to the roof. On top, I look south. There's a white mushroom cloud high above the buildings, lit up by the floodlights that are guiding the rescue and recovery workers. I need to see this to give myself a reality check. My mind has been everywhere but downtown the past few days.

At 1:30 am, the street is much quieter. Fewer sirens. The military trucks on Lex between 23rd and 24th are emptied out. A news van has packed up and moved out. Only one Army truck remains. A few civilian cars are parked. The cops, who have manned the main intersection of 23rd and Lex are gone. And the skateboarders have taken back the street. Finally, around 2:30, I turn off my lamp and head to sleep.