

## Back Talk from Jeremy in New York



*In the wake of September 11th, one former desert resident now living in New York City shares his story, and his emotions, with us.*

# “The Birds are on Fire”

*I don't feel good. I don't know,  
I just feel all ... anthrax.  
-overheard in Grand Central Station*

*by Jeremy Baumann*

When I was a kid growing up in New York City, I sent fan letters to the Mets, Jets, Knicks, Rangers—I loved all the local sports teams. They'd write back with thank-you letters and signed pictures I'd use to decorate my walls. A few weeks ago I wrote my first fan letter in nearly 30 years. It was addressed to, of all things, a parody newspaper, *The Onion*, which publishes funny stories. I wrote to congratulate them on their success in making me laugh for the first time since September 11th. The editor, who was interviewed on National Public Radio, said they wouldn't skirt the issues of the 11th but it would be a different sort of humor than they were accustomed to. It would be the sort of humor that would make people cry. They won on that score as well.

One story quoted the terrorists who were surprised to find themselves in hell—claiming it sucked and they had been lied to, there were no virgins, no paradise. Another story reported that hugging is up 76,000% from this time last year. President Bush Urges Restraint Amongst Nation's Ballad Singers, they reported. It felt odd to laugh again in the new New York where it's no longer unusual to see people crying while standing in line at the supermarket or waiting for the light to change. In this new place where Dan Rather and David Letterman cry on national television.

The city has changed in so many ways. The quietest place I know in Manhattan is now Grand Central Station. There's an escalator that slowly rises three stories. It used to be a noisy place where people bustled and pushed, now they stand in silence and think. Like me, they worry about the almost daily

bomb and anthrax scares in this building. I look down at the little window of faces as they rise like a never-ending snake below me, and feel the pulse of New York. Some days people seem almost okay, some days their eyebrows raise and their foreheads furrow in group worry.

Some of the changes seem almost comical at times. A friend Madeleine called in the middle of the night in tears, her boyfriend wasn't being there for her during this difficult time. We met for coffee and bumped into her sister, Lisa, who looked frustrated.

“Man, I'm bummed, they're sold out everywhere,” Lisa said.

Maddie shrugged at her sister and made the *oh-well* face.

Lisa turned to me, “So, Jer, you getting a gas mask?”

I said, “Naw, I hear they're no good for Anthrax.”

Maddie looked up at the clear blue sky, as if contemplating rain.

“Yeh, but Small Pox and Seren gas they're good for, right?” her sister asked.

I said, “I think so, but I don't recall, it's so much information. I saw some expert talking gas masks and his funding being pulled for developing a bioterror plan for the Feds...”

The sister said, “I know! I was just watching that guy. He was kinda' cute, right? For an older dude?”

I shrugged and looked at my sad, sweet, pretty friend who stood there, looking off in the distance, her eyes focused on nothing. I hugged them both goodbye and have checked up on Mad everyday since. I'd forgotten how hard this was all hitting her. She's never lived anywhere other than the neighborhood we grew up in. She's a recording artist who writes award-winning songs about love and New York. She drew the cover of her album—a self-portrait of a gentle, loving hippie girl looking at the Oz of Manhattan in the distance, a guitar in hand. The World Trade Center front and center. Her album is called *Dream Town*.

While eating at our favorite Indian restaurant recently, my girlfriend studied the Manhattan skyline in the distance and suddenly seemed sad. I asked her what she was thinking.

“The Empire State Building looks lonely,” she said.

I remembered thinking the WTC towers were like big brothers, taking the glory away from the Empire State Building by dwarfing it, not in beauty, but certainly in size. Now that they were gone, he could shine again, but that like a brother, he didn't want to. He wanted them back.

I'd been too embarrassed to share my thoughts on the subject until she did, but I'm

*“The Empire State Building looks lonely,” she said.*

certain we're not the only ones to think such things. Jaded New Yorkers stop and stare at the Empire State Building like tourists now, as if seeing it for the first time.

It's become common to attribute human characteristics to buildings since September 11th. One of the first vigils spawned that night was formed in Union Square, where children's drawings and paintings were hung on fences, hundreds of yards long, intermingled with photos of *The Missing*. A little girl's crayon drawing showed the World Trade towers as people, their faces twisted in fear, their arms wrapped around each other as they cried “NO! NO!” at the planes approaching. I worried for the future of our children's sanity when another kid's drawing showed pairs of shoes and bottoms of bodies and tops of bodies and heads in all different colors. A blue arrow pointed to the blue shoes and blue body parts. Another the same with red or green. In her child's handwriting it said, *Maybe with hope we can put them back together.*

Shortly after the 11th I went for a long walk around the city with my dog. I'd spent days glued to the 24-hour news and needed to be outside, to see that things weren't all that bad. I found myself near where my mom grew up in the West Village, an area I'd lived for about a year. I headed towards the little firehouse where the guys were always hanging out front playing with the local kids. Everybody loved them. But something felt wrong as I approached. There weren't the usual crowds singing songs and holding candles like all the other fire stations. I could see a police barricade in front of the garage door from down the block. I ran towards the station and, for the first time since the 11th, broke down and bawled like a baby when I saw the truckload of bouquets that filled the entire driveway. They were all dead.

The rains had snuffed all the candles, and the ink and paint on the cards and letters covering the walls ran like tear-streaked mascara. One that hadn't run was in crayon, a card from a little girl, which said, simply, *I'm sorry you lost your lifes. I'm sooo sad. May your souls please rest in peace.*

I walked down the block to Banditos, one of my old hangouts, and asked for a pack of matches. The hostess must have seen me coming through the window for she smiled and asked me to light one for her, too; she was pissed they kept going out. The candles sparkled from the rain as I lit them.

“Doesn't the little firehouse look like a sad face?” the hostess had asked. I said yes, they all do.

Journal Entry: *Today I went down to Ground Zero and smelled the smell of burning bodies. And hair. And computers and asbestos and benzine and glass and plastic and wires and clothing. The fires still burn after three weeks despite the torrential downpours, as if a gateway to hell has opened for us all to ponder.*

*I came because I was forgetting too quickly what had happened here. As if very shortly we'd all get back to normal and forget the smell and taste and feel of this horror; it felt wrong to laugh again this soon and this close to this place.*

I also went because my dog, a big German shepherd named Java, had received his papers to do volunteer work in New York City and we'd spent the day in a Grief Class for accompanying family members to The Site. I had to decide if this was a place I would want to frequent. At the class one of the things we were told was:

*Your dog will be depressed and need debriefing, as will you, if you are chosen to escort the families into Ground Zero. Your dog's nose is at least 400 times more sensitive than ours; the stench you smell from the burning piles, your dog will break down, process and identify specifically and accurately. This is sacred ground. It is very busy with very sad souls. Thousands of them. You can feel them in the windows and the buildings and the rubble...*

They warned us that the rescue workers were going insane. They won't leave the site. They sleep on plywood when they can no longer stand, but they won't leave the sides of their buried brothers. With wild eyes, they'll run to you and your dog and embrace them. We're supposed to calmly let them know that we're here for the families and to please be gentle with our dogs. The workers need help forced upon them, we're told, even if that means arresting them, for they are no longer emotionally well. But, we are asked, who will arrest them? They are the police.

The speaker showed us a pair of protective dog booties that were designed to last for months. They were torn to shreds—from a one-day visit.

After the class, Java and I went to Pier 94 to do some volunteer work. The place is as big as an international auto show with scores of booths for every organization, utility, and business that was affected or wants to help; there are areas for food and massage and clothes and phones and fax machines and copy machines and interpreters for every language under the sun and everything is free for those affected. We went to spend time with the kids of the vic-

tims and workers so they can briefly forget their troubles when they're playing with happy dogs. We wandered around to let all the grown-ups take a break from their roles as grown-ups by playing with an animal with a wagging tail for awhile.

After an hour or so, Java needed a break, so we paid our respects as we inched down the Walk of the Teddy Bears, the largest Wall of the Missing in the city. It must be 50 or more yards long. You can't do the whole thing in one swoop, it's too many wedding and skiing and college graduation photos of too many healthy, happy people holding their children and mates with smiles on their faces surrounded by too many words of unspeakable loss. New words would have to be invented to attempt to do this justice. It's... it's... all of them... pictures of those lost adorn the wall from the ground up to as high as people could reach to tack up and staple photos and cards and letters and notes. The bereaved started using markers on the drywall to keep their words from being touched, even if they were covered by more cards, they'd know their words were still there next to photos duct taped and glued into place, as if it made a difference, and to them I'm sure it did.

After three weeks the tone of the notes was changing in heartbreaking ways. What used to say *Missing: Mary Smith - 5'1, Morgan Stanley, Missing since Sept. 11, Please Contact Bob Smith at (212)...* had changed to: *Mary, we love you. Come home soon, the kids and I can't make it without you... to: Mary, we'll always love you. We'll never never never forget you, we promise with all our hearts. Rest in peace knowing your babies will always be yours. You will never be forgotten. Never.*

*Tommy, you are the best son in the world and we'll always love you. You gave us everything we ever could've wanted in a boy and we thank you for spending the time you were able to with us. Love, Mommy and Daddy.*

This was our third visit and I felt comfortable enough to enter the staff cafeteria for the first time. It was like a commissary on a Hollywood studio lot where you really do eat beside people dressed like aliens, belly dancers and giant mice. Here, on Pier 94, we ate beside National Guardsmen, Firemen, Police, Sheriffs, Troopers, Doctors, Nurses, CIA, FBI, FEMA and Red Cross workers to name a few. On every table, as far as you could see, were stacks of papers, inches in height. Not wanting to disrupt the voluminous paperwork, I sought a table with no stacks of papers but could not find one, so I sat beside some cops and some women from the FBI who fawned over Java like kids. A little old lady in a Red Cross uniform asked if she could get me something to drink. I told her thanks, but not to make a fuss over me, I was just a volunteer and

would be happy to get *her* a drink if she'd point the way. She said no, that she'd come all the way from Bozeman, Montana, with her husband to help out. She was a nurse but all there was to do was wash dishes, so with great pride they washed dishes and emptied trash cans. Now could she *please* get me something to drink.

After she brought me a coke (with ice and a lemon wedge) and I started to eat, I realized the giant stacks of papers everywhere were letters and cards from people all over the world. In addition to the many thousands of letters out in the public areas, adorning every inch of wall space, here were thousands more. I put on my game face and read a few, but a rogue tear betrayed me when I read yet another crayon-smear card. This one said, *Dear firemen and rescue workers. Thank you for all you are doing. I wish I could help you, but I can't because I'm only 4 years old. But I'll help when I grow up. I promise.*

After we left, I needed to talk so I called my cousin Julie, whom I'd not seen since before the 11th. We compared war stories. She won. She's a first and second grade teacher not far from the World Trade Center. As the teachers and young students watched the buildings burn along with the rest of the neighborhood, one of her pupils cried out, "Mrs. G., the birds are on fire!"

There was a moment of silence, while I soaked that one in. I asked about our 93-year-old grandmother who Julie visits weekly.

"She's okay, I went over on the 11th to make sure she was all right. She was watching the news on the Spanish language channel."

I said, "I didn't know she speaks Spanish."

"She doesn't."

I said, "Oh," and we laughed.

Then my cousin said, "I asked Grandma, 'Why are you watching the news in Spanish?' She said, 'Oh, I thought there was something unusual about it.'"

I said, "Mom said a lot of old people are probably thinking it's the 'World Trade Center Collapses' movie. Does Grandma?"

Julie said, "Well, I asked her 'Grandma, do you know what's going on?' She said, 'yeh,' she does. I said, 'Do you know that's where you and Grandpa went for your 50th wedding anniversary? Windows on the World? It's not there anymore.'"

I asked what happened next.

"She looked me in the eye and nodded. She said, 'Yes Dear. I understand.' And we changed the subject."

I started tearing up thinking my grandmother's memory of my grandfather had been stolen from her somehow, when my cousin suddenly said, "Hey! Did you go

next page

on the Walk of the Teddy Bears?" I told her I did—that it was amazing.

I hadn't read the signs before, so it had eluded me, the idea of the pier's giant Wall of the Missing being dubbed the Walk of the Teddy Bears. I saw there were teddy bears all along the ground, piled up and out, three deep at some places, there were thousands of them. My cousin explained they had been trucked in from the people of Oklahoma City to the people of New York City to let us know their hearts were with us. Julie said they came in a caravan of trucks through Times Square, with a full police escort, flashing lights and entourage, press meeting and the whole bit. The bears all had notes attached to them; I had only read a few. One said, *This teddy has been in my family for over sixty years and three generations, I hope it will bring a little happiness to someone in New York. With love, the people of Oklahoma City.*

Julie asked if I had been working since the economy had been so bad. I told her about an ad agency I was writing for—that I learned a lesson not to talk about The Incidents with people you don't know well. I told her about a temp who said to a group of employees that he hadn't met anyone who'd lost a loved one.

My cousin said, "Uh-oh. What happened?"

I told her everything went silent. In that room was a woman who'd lost her daughter and her mother, my buddy who'd lost three family members—cops and firemen, and a woman whose 14-year-old daughter had been admitted to a hospital. She was a student from Stuyvesant High School who went to see if she could help in some way. People jumping from the buildings landed near her, which was more than her young mind could bear.

I told my cousin I was writing a story about my experience since the 11th, and I worried that things so heartbreaking only weeks ago hardly raised an eyebrow now and what that meant for us all. Things that made me weep only days before just seemed like stories now. The tragedy of other peoples' losses doesn't seem to bite so, as we're becoming more concerned about our own losses. At first the worry was that four more planes were supposedly hijacked. Then bridges might be blown up, or trains and buses. Then anthrax and bioterror. Then the war started. Now everyone's looking for work.

At times getting through your day in New York is no longer like watching a movie that flows, it's more like a slideshow of intense images that flash before you without segues; a new picture appears before you with no reference. One minute you're in a subway with a bomb threat, the next you arrive in Grand Central with National

Guardsmen yelling at tourists to drop their suitcases and RUN! RUN! THAT WAY—RUN! The next minute a fireman's crying and hugging you for letting him pet your dog.

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Suddenly I was at Ground Zero, thinking back on my day. It was just a minute ago we were in the Grief class, then on the pier, then talking to my cousin, then at the fire station in The Village and now we're right back here, the clouds of smoke illuminating the sky in a lovely purple hue juxtaposed by haunted shadows of razor shards weighing thousands of pounds, projected on the sides of buildings. The office building across the street looks like a hunk of butter someone left a knife in.

The editor of comics for the *New Yorker* was discussing possible submissions for publication on a talk show. One showed two businessmen in front of a restaurant. One says the food is only so-so, but the security is excellent. Another comic mentions the latest pick-up line around town: *Hey babe, you know if you don't come home with me, the terrorists have already won.* Why this suddenly comes to mind at Ground Zero, I have no idea.

More memories come to me.

My sister called and woke us up on the 11th saying that traffic was hell due to a plane hitting the WTC. While she was still on the phone, we turned on the news and watched as the second plane hit, suddenly changing everything in this country forever. The hope that something had gone wrong with the air traffic system was quickly erased and reality set in. I worried about my eight-year-old niece who watched, first on TV as the buildings collapsed, and then in the distance as a plume of smoke rose outside her window a moment later. We tried to donate blood but were told the wait was three days long. No blood was really needed since there weren't any survivors. The triage centers on the Hudson River piers sat with scores of empty gurneys and eventually doctors were ordered down to The Site to perform amputations to extract, hopefully living, bodies.

A great mass anxiety came from healthy people wanting to help and being offered no options. The volunteer work with Java was a Godsend, but it took several weeks before the Pet Therapy canine system was set up. Until then, writing was my only outlet, but I didn't even know what to write, there were too many terrible stories. By default I started a list of THINGS THAT

MADE ME CRY TODAY.

Day One: The image of a couple holding hands and jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center to their death. Wondering if they even knew each other, or just needed not to be alone for this truly ineffable act. Wishing they could have just died without having to go through that.

Day Two: *Ma'am, I understand you're upset the fountain isn't on, but all the Parks Department workers are helping extract bodies from the rubble. If you can get down there and are willing to ask them to put down a dead body to come fix the fountain, you would be perfectly within your rights.* —My girlfriend on the phone with a constituent.

Day Three: Connie Chung's interview with the Irishman who was in The States visiting his sister and her kid. He was by the WTC when the planes hit. He took a badly burned woman into a bathroom to put water on her and asked how he could help her. *Pray with me because I'm dying*, she said. Jet fuel had melted her hair to her head and her clothing to her body. Praying with her, the second plane crashed. He said, *I won't let you die*, and carried her out. Despite the mayhem, people parted to let them through. She saved his life by being where he was to help her. He later learned his sister and his beautiful niece were on the United flight.

Day Four: *I explained their daddy was dead and wasn't coming home anymore. They asked if he was in heaven. I told them, yes, he was. They asked if they could still speak to him on his cell phone.* —A woman on the news.

Day Five: Having a cab driver from Yemen explain to me quite eloquently that these things are done by Osama bin Laden and his peers because they are terrorists and that's what terrorists do: instill terror. It's eponymous, he said. It's their job. Everybody has to have a *job*. Fearing that this actually makes sense to someone. Maybe to a lot of people.

It's been two months now and the escalator in Grand Central seems almost like the old days. People are starting to push past each other and muttering. The sirens were so constant for so long that people used to say *what's that noise?* when there was a moment of quiet. Now people feel resolved that they're all false alarms and hoaxes and that everything is maybe, sort of, kind of okay.

That sense sent me back down to Ground Zero for the third and final time on Thanksgiving to see if it was starting to feel okay down there, too. I knew as we ap-

proached that this world was separate from the rest. That it would never be okay down here. Incredibly, fires still burn. As soon as the stench and smoke wafted over, I was reminded of the gravity of incomprehensible numbers. It's been reported that over 1000 kids lost a parent *just from the New York fire department*. One single business left 1500 widows and kids with one or no parents. Over 100,000 people are out of work.

My girlfriend and dog and I were able to get into Battery Park City, where I lived a couple of summers ago. The building is not even a block from where the World Trade Center stood. The doormen remembered me and opened up with their stories. I asked if the building sustained any damage. It had, the turbine you saw shooting off on the news is the same one that crashed into their building. Nobody was killed. In fact, nobody in the building is missing except the lady, a doctor, who went missing the night before.

As we spoke, a woman with two little girls came in. The doorman shook his head in disbelief when I asked if families with kids returned to the building. He said he was amazed, but they did—even those with babies. There are some subsidized apartments on the north side of the building that was hit by the turbine. The management company won't let the lower-income people move into vacancies on the safer sides, away from the lights and noise and smoke. They threaten to sue anyone who wants to break their lease.

The Embassy Hotel nearby has signs all over the windows about being closed due to asbestos hazards ... medical problems of children and adults alike in the area are rampant with a host of respiratory ailments. The noise is unbearable, as barges have tons and tons of I-beams and concrete dumped onto them around the clock, and the lights are those of a baseball night game. People here still stand and stare and cry and place flowers and wreaths and bouquets and teddy bears in every open crevice.

The good news is that rent in my old building has dropped. If you want a one-bedroom apartment today, the generous landlords of Battery Park City will offer you up to a 25% reduction in rent! Maybe as little as two grand a month.

The doorman replayed his morning of the 11th for me—how they ran as the black clouds and debris flew towards them, the ground shaking so hard they fell down. How the collapse blew out most of the windows of his and the surrounding buildings. Menus from Windows on the World, on the 110th floor, landed in their lobby. One doorman stayed at the building for 24 hours to help evacuate and get people's wallets and such for them ... he used a Pampers diaper as a respirator the entire time.

We stood up the block from the charred and broken remains of the buildings, my girlfriend and dog and I. Bernadette had had enough, but I held onto one long last look, for I don't think I'll be there again before it's all cleaned up. It's all too sad, the tattered remains of the building looking like the gigantic carcass of a woolly mammoth picked apart by buzzards.

A fireman came over to pat Java. I asked if he had any words to describe what he's experienced, since I can't find words big enough. He kissed Java's snout, looked up and said, *Biblical*.

On our right was the now shattered glass-enclosed promenade of the AMEX complex where I'd romped with Bernadette and Java on one of our first dates. In the foreground people held up little kids and snapped pictures as if at a carnival. People sold T-shirts and FDNY and NYPD hats. Did they know or care that a few blocks away was a shrine to those officers? That a little boy, probably around the same age as their child, wrote a card that said, *Dear Daddy, happy birthday. We're still celebrating even though you are dead. You are my hero.*

We turned and walked away.

It's been about six weeks since that first talk with my cousin. She invited us over last night to watch "Du Rififi Chez Les Hommes," some classic French flick, with her husband and his cousins. I asked how her students were and she said they had finally stopped making and tumbling WTC towers in the building block area. We agreed that was a good sign.

I said, "I told my boss about your student who cried that the birds were on fire." "What'd she say?"

My boss said, "But, wait, they couldn't see birds from the ground, what do you mean 'the birds were on fire?'"

When she finally understood, she said, "Oh, my God, you mean the kids thought the people jumping were birds? That's horrible! I mean, that's—that's terrible. But at least the children didn't know they were people, right? That's really good. That's excellent, but it's tragic. I mean ... I mean ... that's really a beautiful thing that they were spared ... that they didn't know...."

And I knew what she meant, we all did. And we all agreed. It was an excellent, terribly, horribly beautiful thing. ♫

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