

LADDER 25

By Stephen Gauer

Ladder 25 of the New York City Fire Department is a small fire station on West 77th Street, on the upper west side of Manhattan. At the beginning of October, I was staying for a few days in a studio apartment in a brownstone just down the street from Ladder 25, and every morning on my way to the subway, and every evening, on my way back, I would stop at the sidewalk memorial of flowers, candles, photos and messages paying tribute to the six firefighters who died in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

In front of the display was a small table and a folding chair; on the table lay an inexpensive black notebook with ruled pages. The word "MEMORIAL", in hand-printed capital letters, appeared at the top of the first page, followed by the sentence "Ladder 25 wishes to thank all our neighbors for their love and generosity", and then the first of more than 400 messages: "Thank you and we all love you." The last message, signed "Catherine O", read: "There are no words to offer, only love." There were few tourists in Manhattan that week so I assumed these messages came from people who lived in the neighbourhood. Most mornings I saw people on their way to work stop in front of Ladder 25 and ask the two firefighters standing there how things were going. Often

someone would reach over and touch one of the firefighters on the arm or the shoulder, and I would have to look away.

There were memorials everywhere in the city. Some of them were small and unexpected, filling a corner or window on a quiet side street. Others were large and impossible to ignore and attracted a dozen people or more. The intimacy of these sites seemed at odds with the New York I remembered: a crowded, gabby, romantic city, a city capable of holding in precise balance the opposing forces of loneliness and social interaction, a city whose devotion to privacy and seclusion could at times seem absolute. Stare up at a skyscraper and feel reduced to insignificance. Walk into Central Park for five minutes and watch the rest of Manhattan disappear. Stand at a stoplight on Fifth Avenue, surrounded by fifty people, and feel the purest anonymity of big city life.

Manhattan's grief was part of an enlarged social space that even the shyest visitor could step into. During lunch at a Columbus Street restaurant, the woman at the next table was disagreeing with her friend who said his life hadn't changed; "I know what's important now," she said firmly, "and I know how I want to live the rest of my life." I looked up and she caught my eye. On the subway heading downtown, a Columbia University psychologist doing grief counseling told me that the city, like any patient coping with the death of a loved one, "had good days and bad days. Yes, it's been very difficult. Yes, most of us know someone who died."

For four days I walked and listened and studied faces. In Starbucks, a young woman with black hair wearing a gray track suit stared at the Times, her face drained of any discernible expression; was she lost in the ocean of bad news or grieving for a loved one? The city seemed smaller and quieter than it had in the past, but some sounds took on an amplified and urgent meaning: the wailing sirens of police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks, once normal events in a city of eight million, now advertised events far beyond the normal. The flags that flew from stores and apartments on every block, from cars and taxis and trucks and limos, from lapels and hats and headbands, from dog collars and belts, at first shouted assembly-line patriotism, but then modulated into something else: a single, city-wide statement of remembrance.

New York is a city of words, and the words were taking on new meanings too. In the riot of commercial colour called Times Square, a simple black and white billboard read: "Imagine all the people living life in peace." At Rockefeller Center, where the flags of all the nations of the world had been replaced by the stars and stripes, the inscription above the main door read: "Wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times." Beneath the words, the carved face of a Greek god (Zeus? Neptune?), beard streaming sideways in an imagined wind, looked ready to blow the flags off their flagpoles. I wandered into a Japanese bookstore nearby and found, in the architecture section, a 10-year-old paperback called "Why Buildings Fall Down."

On my last night, I took the subway downtown to Chambers Street, walked east towards Broadway, and passed a giant billboard of Kiefer Sutherland promoting a new TV series. The text read “This fall prepare yourself for one unforgettable day.” At Broadway I walked south for a couple of blocks and stopped at the police barricade at the corner of Maiden Lane. To the west, two blocks away, was ground zero, where the buildings had fallen. Enormous lights, mounted on cranes, were focused on the rubble and the one remaining section of shattered wall, monochrome and shapeless, like the buildings left standing after the Hiroshima bombing in 1945. Half a dozen tiny bulldozers and cranes moved back and forth, back and forth, in the bright light, picking up bits of wreckage and dropping them onto flatbed trucks. I felt no surprise and no emotion; this was history through the wrong end of a telescope.

Around me, small clusters of people were staring, and talking, and taking pictures. A young man explained the details of the collapse to his girlfriend. Some Germans took pictures with flash cameras. A well-groomed man in an expensive suit muttered “It’s so surreal, so surreal” to his companion, an equally well-groomed woman in an expensive black coat. The young people in the group were alert and visibly excited; the older people seemed to stare with colder, disbelieving eyes. One middle-aged woman stared for a long time, and then wiped away a tear as her husband touched her shoulder.

A little further down Broadway, past an empty McDonald's, three pieces of thin plywood were nailed against the barricade to create an impromptu memorial wall. I wrote some of the messages down in my notebook: "Justice, not wrath, please God", "We are all praying for you", "God bless you all." I counted the candles: four white and four purple, with two small bouquets of flowers in between.