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On the Streets Of New York, A New Menace

By Sally Jenkins
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Oct. 12—It used to be that New Yorkers knew what to be afraid of: subways at night, darkened stairwells and certain blighted parks. Now the danger could be in the air ducts and envelopes, and this has unnerved a population that thought it was accustomed to living with menace.

Outside or in? It used to be such a simple question at lunch hour on a blue-sky day. The maitre d' would say, "Outside or in?" and New Yorkers would consider the temperature, or whether it was a good hair day, or the possibility of showers. Today, they considered the vents.

At Sardi's, a theater district tradition on 44th Street, the lunch crowd of 40 or so was quarantined for an hour, due to an anthrax scare on an upper story of the building. It was just one of a string of anthrax scares that swept midtown, and further terrorized New Yorkers, a month and a day after the destruction of the World Trade Center.

Sardi's dining room manager, Sean Ricketts, sent drinks around to tables where nervous patrons made cell phone calls to their families, and gamely joked. "The show must go on." But he canceled a wine tasting scheduled for later in the afternoon. "That's the challenge," he said, "to stand up to these shadows you can't see."

Upstairs, emergency workers wearing hazardous materials jumpsuits vetted a piece of mail with a suspicious residue, then passed it on to the Department of Health for testing. On the sidewalk, police from a crime scene unit sealed off the surrounding buildings, including the theater next door, the St. James, where people were trying to buy tickets to the smash hit "The Producers" were ordered to remain in the lobby.

Bob and Audrey Rose, of Lodi, Calif., said they were not the fear. They emerged from the lobby with "Producers" tickets and said they still plan to come to New York to see the play.

"There's going to be millions of things for [illegible]," Bob Rose said. "We're not worried about the risk. We [illegible] fuse."

For Claire D'Angelo, what had been a vague [illegible] became real during a cigarette break. She was standing in front of the New York Times's 43rd Street offices, taking a long last drag, when she heard an announcement squawk over the walkie-talkie of a security guard. "Close the doors," said the unseen speaker. "No one goes in or out." A Times employee had opened a piece of mail and discovered a white powder.

D'Angelo, a secretary in the newspaper's corporate office, saw the doors being secured and thought she might never see her co-workers again. "I have never been in a situation like this," she said. "I can't believe this is happening to us."

At the NBC Building, one employee watched an emergency crew seal the vents in the NBC building, and simply left, went home and got his golf clubs. Then there was the woman in the fashionable downtown building who demanded that her doorman check her mail, a potentially life-threatening service, to which he replied, "Lady, you want me to check your underwear too?"

But mostly, New Yorkers went on with their lunches, and with their work. Mail carrier Henry Rivera paused on the corner of Hudson Street and Bank, his truck idling. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "You've got to keep doing what you do. Meanwhile, the terrorist is right behind you."

At Tribeca Grill, a fashionable downtown restaurant only recently reopened after the destruction of the World Trade Center, the staff held a meeting on security issues. The wreckage of the WTC was visible from the front door. Employees were instructed not to accept any mail or deliveries from strangers and not to leave any service entrances unlocked.

"What do you do, stop living?" asked manager David Gordon, a New Yorker born and raised. "Get checked every time you have a cold?"

Oscar Garcia, 27, a city landscaper, pulled dead branches from decorative trees planted in the sidewalk in lower Manhattan. In the distance the wreckage of the World Trade Center still smoldered, and a huge American flag hung from a crane. "I'm not frightened, being that I'm a New Yorker," Garcia said. "New Yorkers will deal with it. This is where we live and what we created, and we'll face it."

Garcia pulled on a pair of rawhide gloves and snapped a dead branch in half. "I'm just going to keep these trees alive, make them pretty," he said.

Staff writer Robert O'Harrow Jr. contributed to this report.

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