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NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2001

Broadway: Street Of Life, Loss

Change, routine mix along fabled roadway

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At the other tip of Manhattan far to the north, people say the smell of Ground Zero once journeyed here when the morning wind was calm. It seemed an unlikely intruder, the collected dying breath of two giant buildings some people here have never seen but on television and in photographs.

Ask about the catastrophe of exactly two months ago and the answers are the same as those given all over this city of islands.

"It was a terrible thing that happened and it is something that hit all New Yorkers," said a woman walking home with her groceries near Dyckman Street.

Ground Zero seems like a foreign land this far north. This neighborhood of terraced blocks and old trees is joined to Ground Zero and lower Manhattan by a common street, Broadway. To walk its length, nearly 12 miles, from north to south, is to pass ordinary scenes that seem to have lost their innocence. A woman in a restaurant window eating soup with the back of her hand heavily bandaged now sets loose imaginations familiar with cutaneous anthrax.

The long walk is a crescendo of tension, through all manner of neighborhoods, quiet and blaring, dull and shiny, poor and rich, eventually reaching one still in a gentle state of siege, still guarded by soldiers who smile for tourists who want to take their picture.

Not far from Columbia University, a girl of about 5, sings "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" with her mother as they walk south on Broadway. Baseball season ended last week, but that song disappeared from the seventh innings months ago, replaced by a more patriotic song. To hear a mother and daughter singing it today is about as strange as it would have been to hear them sing "God Bless America" before Sept. 11.

The American flag is everywhere in the city, with many of various sizes in the windows of the Afghan Kebab House on the Upper West Side. The name of the restaurant is dis-

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played within the outline of Afghanistan, a shape now so familiar from news updates on the bombing.

The restaurant owners have posted four American flags and a large "I (heart) NY More Than Ever" poster in their windows next to restaurant reviews praising its Afghan-style dumplings. The flags seem to say, "Please do not hate us." In the middle, of the afternoon, the restaurant is closed.

In Times Square, a crowd of young fans gather outside the studios of MTV for a glimpse of Colombian singer Shakira, the Latin world's Britney Spears, who is taping a show inside. The fans outside and inside the windowed studio wave small flags, apropos of nothing in particular. In post-attack New York, flags are just an expected accessory of any gathering or ritual, a show of respect in the midst of mindless fun.

The crowds and lights of Times Square look as tourists expect, bursting and bright and immune to the destruction to the south.

"I was surprised how normal everything feels; I was expecting a ghost town," said Judy Dale, visiting the city from Texas with her two daughters. "We almost didn't come but I'm glad we did."

It is not until you reach Union Square that Broadway starts to change appreciably. The statue of George Washington riding his horse is fenced off. And although park employees do their best to remove fliers and pictures and other postings from the fence, the papers and the flowers reappear every day.

This was the original outpost of Ground Zero, the northern border of the red zone right after the attack, and the place Allan Neale slept for that first week. A Manhattan resident for 15 years, he left 18 months ago for a woman who hated the city, but returned when he heard about the disaster.

"This is my city," said the longtime bicycle messenger. "I had to come back. I'm not leaving again."

Broadway abruptly changes at Canal Street with the appearance of blue police roadblocks. Pedestrians can walk unchecked below Canal but cars must stop. Police vehicles are parked everywhere. And at any moment an unmarked government vehicle, usually a large sedan or SUV with tinted windows, races through a red light.

City Hall Park, recently repaired to a state of grand beauty, is closed indefinitely and guarded by armed men. Once one of the city's precious treats, now it is an oasis no one can enter. At Fulton Street, a street musician plays "Dust in the Wind," the 1970s hit by the band Kansas, on a steel drum. Indeed there is dust in the wind. On Chambers Street, a drugstore stocks most of an aisle with $400 air purifiers advertised to wash and humidify the air at the same time

In front of St. Paul's Chapel, the public displays of mourning hang thick on all vertical surfaces. Young African men and middle-aged Asian women sell pins, flags, ribbons, World Trade Center postcards, and hats that say FDNY or NYPD. Tourists and other curious bystanders crowd the west side of Broadway for a glimpse over the fences of Ground Zero. They climb onto scaffolding for a better look, and hoist children and video cameras above their heads. Some just come to watch the live news broadcasts at the scene. News equipment is wired into a lamp post, on which the "missing" flier of Carmen A. Rivera, 32, last seen on the 78th floor of Tower Two, is posted.

Airplanes have resumed flights over Ground Zero. Charles Marsh, a resident of New Mexico with ties to New York, recently flew in one of those planes. He looked at the space where the towers once stood. And then he looked at the rest of the city, reassured at what he saw.

"As you look down on the city," he said, "you realize those two buildings are just a tiny fraction of the skyline."

Were he to walk along Broadway, past so many miles of buildings wide and tall, he would realize the same thing.

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