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There is no place like it, no place with an atom of its glory, pride, and exultancy—Thomas Wolfe

GOTHAM

Life in the New City

The Sequel

The fog of war comes to Rockaway Beach, Queens. By Michael Wolff



The crash of flight 587 in Belle Harbor, Queens, was: (a) less of an event because of September 11? (b) a more fearful event because of September 11?

It's less—although it's among the biggest plane crashes in city history—because we're already half-mobilized for disaster. This catastrophe is not, we understand, nearly as catastrophic as catastrophes can get. Everything is relative.

But it's more fearful than it might otherwise have been—it will disrupt travel more, it will get talked about in more people's therapy sessions, it will surely form a subtext of conspiracy theory—because it's an event in the new narrative of terror. It's the next twist.

Then again, it's *just* another twist. Oh, we can handle this, the mayor said.

War—we, who know absolutely nothing about war, are starting to learn—is about perception.

The idea that truth is the first casualty of war has always seemed to imply that governments and military personnel and security people and the press lie, which of course they do. But the bigger truth problem may be of a cognitive order, or disorder.

We close New York—all area airports, all bridges and tunnels, outbound and incoming (we all now know this language). We evacuate the Empire State Building. We go on level-one alert when things go bump in the night. Then, too, we replay *the* event. The event. The mayor—the mayor with his uniformed-services cap of choice. The police chief. The get-me-in-the-picture-too governor. Add to that Congressman Anthony Weiner, on his home turf, one of the real up-and-coming press hounds in the city. The gang's all here. It's comforting—we can do disaster.

On the other hand, just as we once more accept the hard truth that the world has changed forever, that we are now, formally, in a world of sudden horrific disasters, we get lulled by the repetitions, the descriptions, the pictures—it's just like an ordinary plane crash, most of us started to feel.

But there are, in that last sentence, two perceptual fallacies. There are no ordinary jumbo-jet crashes at major metropolitan airports. When it happens, it's news of the highest order. It's international-level news. And such an event doesn't lull anyone. A big plane crash breaks through the news clutter. What's more, this one, with its dubious provenance, should be really up there, flight-800 caliber. Lockerbie.

So what is it? All or nothing?

That we're emotionally numb is, arguably, both cause and effect here. We just can't feel events properly. We can't rank them because the catastrophe bar, the violence-and-mayhem standard, has been set so high. Something similar happened with crime two generations ago. Random violence went from a major news event to a part of the daily fabric of urban life. The perceptual phenomenon was that at the same time that crime became more consequential, it became less consequential.

In our inability to differentiate, we dump everything into the same story, making the plot so thick we'll never be able to unravel it.

Anthrax, which is now a major chapter of the titanic clash of cultures and the ensuing Islamic bioterror war, actually may be a story about a right-wing nut from New Jersey. We've consolidated our paranoia. At the same time, in some compensatory process, we trivialize it.

Just now, an e-mail crosses my screen from a colleague who finds the present NTSB (we're really getting to know our acronyms) estimation of mechanical failure on flight 587 "not credible." Attached is a piece from *Salon* about shoulder-launched missiles. They are "cheap, portable, and deadly against lumbering commercial jets," says *Salon*, adding that "terrorists in the U.S. may already have them." Is this possible? I have no idea. Is it plausible that someone is launching a missile from a backyard in Queens? It is not.

In war, or in what we perceive to be war, we muddle the emotions as well as the facts In our altered state, we're really not to be trusted.

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