

“I think the New York that I’ve been writing about for all these years has in some way ceased to exist. I can’t imagine feeling the same way about the city again”

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jay mcinerney esq



Since the early Eighties, Jay McInerney has been both chronicling and indulging in the lifestyle of New York's glittering classes. But, just as he was reassessing his relationship with the world's most glamorous city, a terrible darkness fell across Manhattan

1. BRIGHTNESS FALLS

Jay McInerney and I are in New York City, riding into the area now known as "Ground Zero" on the back of a motorised golf cart. Driven by a young National Guardsman named Mark, who has taken command of this distinctly unmilitary vehicle to ferry relief workers and supplies around the downtown area, we are heading up Broadway towards Wall Street. It's about 7:30am, and in some ways it is a typical early morning in Manhattan's financial district; people are dressed in smart business clothes, the coffee shops are open, and workers are rushing out of subways and ferry terminals into offices.

Ahead of us, however, we see the first of the many checkpoints and command posts leading to the World Trade Center site. Manned by officers from the Army and the New York Police Department, these are the barricades beyond which most people cannot venture. While many New Yorkers have journeyed down here to get some idea of the devastation, and others have come to pay their respects, Mayor Giuliani and the multiple relief organisations have declared Ground Zero out of bounds.

With more than a million tons of rubble waiting to be cleared and the debris still smouldering and igniting nearly three weeks on, the site remains highly dangerous. We are wearing bright yellow hardhats and jackets, and heavy boots – in some areas, the heat of the fires burning beneath you is hot enough to melt the soles of your shoes. Despite the horrific destruction wreaked by an inferno that reached over 2,000°F and the fall of two 110-storey steel and concrete skyscrapers, bodies are still being discovered here.

With a military escort and a legitimate reason for being near Ground Zero, however, we are waved through. Since 2am that morning, McInerney and I have been working as volunteers at an ad hoc soup kitchen

located at Bowling Green Park. Set up by an actor named Christian Camargo, who arrived in the area the day after the attack with a van full of food and drink, the kitchen and its support network of friends have expanded daily ever since. Some volunteers managed to persuade the National Guard company stationed across the road to give them an army tent, generators and spotlights. Benches were dragged in from the parks and a food preparation area improvised under plastic sheeting attached to the railings.

Hanging inside the army tent are messages and drawings by local schoolchildren that commemorate the events of 11 September; outside flies a US flag. Here, on the edge of a small park in the world's most important business district, at a historic site thought to be where Manhattan was bought by Dutch settlers from Native Americans in 1626, is a scene reminiscent of the Vietnam war – or, perhaps more pertinently, of *M*A*S*H*.

Scattered around the soup kitchen are supplies of food, snacks, water and soft drinks donated by local businesses, restaurants and individuals. With three other volunteers, we labour to keep the food hot, the sandwiches fresh and the coffee strong. It is chaotic yet functional, and for the ranks of fire fighters, police officers, rescue workers, demolition experts, marines, army privates, National Guardsmen, subway employees and security men who are mostly working 12-hour shifts at Ground Zero, it is a godsend. And it makes us feel good, too.

"I was pretty damn lucky because, although I know friends of friends who died, and a couple of people I know were working on the lower floors of the World Trade Center and escaped, I didn't lose anybody close – none of my friends or relatives is dead or missing," says McInerney, explaining his involvement. "But I did feel terribly guilty that I hadn't been able to do something to help, and when I heard about this place and

The New Yorker
The horrific events of 11 September came at a time when the 46-year-old McInerney was introducing a new seriousness into his life and work





Wall Street
Station

2 3

“I don’t think we’re all going to start loving each other or that Americans are going to suddenly adopt, for example, an enlightened and noble foreign policy”

that they needed volunteers, I rushed down here. It’s not a great effort or a life-saving effort, and it’s not something I want to make a big deal about, but I guess it addresses my need to feel that I might be doing something in the wake of this disaster. It seemed far better than sitting on one’s hands at home doing nothing.”

Most rewarding, however – and it is, as McNerney explains later in an article in *The Guardian*, “the unspoken, dirty secret of each new volunteer” – is what we are doing now: visiting Ground Zero. Every few hours, soup-kitchen volunteers dragoon an army or police driver and vehicle, load the truck with food and drink, and go out in the field. It means we provide workers at the site, many of whom have been standing at security posts through the night, with much-needed sustenance; but at the same time it allows us to witness the destruction first hand. At some level, if we’re honest, it satisfies our morbid curiosity, “our guilt at this voyeuristic impulse assuaged”, as McNerney puts it, “if only partially, by the sense that we have done something to earn it.”

So, for the next hour or so, we drive around much of the World Trade Center site with Mark and his army golfmobile. It is an emotional experience; the thanks we receive for simply handing out candy bars and bottles of water is humbling and inspiring. Yet there are elements of the absurd mixed in with the horror. At one point we pass a large McDonald’s stand – naturally, the only fast-food outlet to have been granted permission to operate at the site – which is handing out free burgers and shakes 24 hours a day. Over by West Street, we spot an army command post that is flying the US flag under a sign that reads “Fort Apache Outpost”.

It is hard, however, not to be affected by the frozen grief and desolation of the place. In contrast to the bright, late summer sunlight and clear skies – what airline pilots call

“severe clear” – that greeted the morning of 11 September, today it is wet, grey and overcast. We are tired, and the sharp, acrid smell, something like burning rubber, that permeates all of downtown Manhattan has started to seep into our clothes and skin, and to unnerve us.

No mood, good or ill, however, can prepare you for the epicentre of Ground Zero. It is the scale of the disaster that hits first, what *The New Yorker* referred to as “both greater than you can imagine and smaller than you can believe”. Looking around the 16-acre site, at the ugly mounds of pulverised concrete and distorted steel, at the huge mechanical diggers that are picking at the debris like giant insects, at the teams of rescue and demolition workers swarming over the rubble, it is difficult to conceive that the Twin Towers ever actually stood here. At the same time, as much as the devastation engulfs you, it is curiously contained. These buildings melted; they fell in on themselves and collapsed in a matter of seconds, and it is incredible that the surrounding buildings were not damaged more. Ground Zero is the opposite of the site of a bomb blast that obliterates in explosive waves; it is the remains of a destruction that was highly internalised.

But it also looks like nothing else on earth. You grasp for a visual language, for random reference points to make the scene comprehensible. Images flash in my mind’s eye of shelled buildings in Sarajevo and Mostar, of the bombed cathedrals of Reims and Coventry in the Second World War, and of Hiroshima and Chernobyl.

From somewhere I recall Joseph Beuys’s installation of steel frames and basalt columns at Tate Modern (one of which is titled *The End of the Twentieth Century*) and, more prosaically, scenes from disaster movies such as *Towering Inferno*, *The Siege* and, of course, *Independence Day*. Later, I think of images that are more Gothic, of Babylon Burning,

of Dante’s *Inferno*, and of the mountains of ash that engulfed Pompeii.

Then I realise, with shame, that all this is just a denial, a desperate reduction of the reality of the terror to a near-manageable scale. Ground Zero exceeds expectation, and is infinitely greater than any trite simile or fatuous cliché, because 5,295 people died here, many of them jumping to their death from heights of 400 metres or more. Worse, at the time of writing, only around 422 bodies, or parts of bodies, have been identified at Ground Zero. The rest, in that heat – many times greater than that of a crematorium – have been crushed and incinerated. They are “unaccounted for”, “the missing and disappeared”, because there are simply no bodies to be found.

A gruesome realisation then strikes you. We have been aware of the spectral dust from the moment we arrived at the soup kitchen; 19 days on, it still shrouds the buildings and hangs in the air. It’s so fine, like moon dust, that it soon starts to grit your eyes and bite the back of your throat. Nearer to Ground Zero, where workers use respirators and face masks, it is almost too thick to breathe.

“You see the particles clearest at night when the huge banks of light illuminate the whole site and catch the smoke as it rises from the ruins,” McNerney tells me. This is the third time he has worked here as a volunteer. “The scene is more striking and theatrical at night, and far more unnatural; it’s as if the area has been lit for a movie. But mostly it’s more terrifying, more incomprehensible and macabre, because you have to acknowledge to yourself, whether you want to or not, that some of the smell, and certainly some of the dust, has to be made up of burned flesh and bone.”

As we return to the soup kitchen along Broadway, stilled and silenced, our supplies finished apart from the odd peanut butter and jelly sandwich, we pass the famous



The city that never sleeps Top, life almost back to normal at a downtown deli. Above left, McInerney with third wife Helen Bransford. Above right, with ex-girlfriend Marla Hanson and Bret Easton Ellis

three-and-a-half ton bronze statue of a charging bull that has stood at the top end of Bowling Green Park since 1989. In the past, it has been seen as a symbol of the bull market, of the prosperity enjoyed by Wall Street in the Nineties. A sign nearby includes a statement from its sculptor, Arturo DiModica, which reads: “The statue represents the strength, power and hope of the American people for the future.”

2. BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

“Well, yes, I suppose it is a little different to my previous pre-dawn activities – I used to be up till 8am for entirely different reasons.”

A couple of days later, McInerney and I meet for lunch at one of his “favourite hangs”, the quietly chic Union Square Café on 16th Street. Striding in wearing a black Armani leather jacket, black Gucci shirt, casual jeans and Prada slip-ons, Ray-Bans perched on top of his head, he is neat and groomed, and back in familiar territory, playing the hip and

self-possessed New York literary celebrity, a role he has perfected over the past 17 years.

It is easy to forget after all this time that McInerney’s first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, published in 1984, was perhaps the most spectacular literary debut of modern times. Set in the Manhattan demi-monde of clubs, parties and publishing, and sprinkled liberally with references to the galvanising effects of “Bolivian marching powder”, the novel sold more than a million copies and cast its 29-year-old author into centre stage.

A highly comic slice of social realism that prefigured Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* and Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities* as the defining document of the decadent Eighties, *Bright Lights, Big City* was soon

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being celebrated as one of the great novels of the late 20th century. To his many fans, McInerney was the long-awaited voice of his generation, the arch chronicler of New York cool, and the born leader of a hard-living new literary “brat pack”; a natural successor to Fitzgerald and Hemingway, no less.

The novel’s ambitious central conceit was that it was written in the second person, so that the sympathetic protagonist, the book’s “you”, quickly became you, the reader. With its streetsmart dialogue, a narrative that possessed all the rush and randomness of a drug high, and a well-observed engagement with larger issues of love, life and loss, it recalled the youthful angst and exuberance of JD Salinger’s Holden Caulfield.