

Chapter Nine

So at that time in my life when I was working on Sopranos, various VIP rooms in Manhattan, and Brunellis, my life was terrific. Just great. I had a beautiful wife. Multiple jobs I enjoyed. Wads of cash on my dresser. Life was beautiful. Life was beautiful for a lot of people at that point in human history. There's a valid argument that Generation X is the last of the great generations.

First off, we were the last ones to not have cell phones during our party years; could actually go off the grid and get a break from the world for a moment. Second, we didn't have stupid cameras everywhere documenting every moronic decision we made. And third, no internet, so news and gossip could actually die instead of living on forever like some dumb drooling zombie.

I mean honestly, there are a million reasons why life was better pre all that - but by far the best thing was we got to exist in a world before 9/11. Fuck 9/11. Seriously. Fuck that caveman Osama bin Laden, fuck what they did to New York, and fuck the War on Terror. All of it. Kids these days cannot comprehend how much that sheep-fucker changed the world for the worse; how serious he made it. The 1990s may just go down in history as the last time people in America truly lived care-free...

That morning I was in bed with Maureen sleeping off our hangovers when my cousin Christine called.

"Steven, do you know where your aunt is working today? She's not downtown is she?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Why? Aren't you not watching the news?"

So I turned on the television like everyone else in the world and watched the smoke billowing off the first World Trade Center. I woke up Maureen and we sat, frozen, as the second plane hit. I figured we were under attack, but the second plane confirmed it. The first thing I did was grab some cash off the dresser and run down to the bodega. I bought tons of water and canned goods - like twenty-five bags of stuff I hauled back to my place in the event this was just the beginning. We didn't know. Nobody knew. This was our Pearl Harbor.

My apartment was just three miles north of the World Trade Center. There was smoke everywhere. Sirens everywhere. I could see the Empire State Building from my place, so I went to the roof to take pictures just in case. After that I put on my rollerblades and went around town with my camera doing my best to document all I could. Two pictures I took that day have been added to the National Archives. One of my friend Yahn's baby wearing a red, white, and blue bandana, and another of some downtown firefighters with their heads in their hands, overcome by the destruction.

The mother of a wrestling friend of mine who'd joined the fire department called asking if I knew where her son was. I had no clue and can't imagine the heartache a mother would have in a moment like that. So it was a bright spot on a dark day when we saw him on the news at ground zero in the background pouring a bottle of water over his soot-covered face. Rob wound up staying at my apartment for the next few days, sleeping in three hour shifts and showering before heading back down to pull twelve-hour shifts in the smoldering rubble.

One day he came home, overwhelmed. "Steve, there was this girl... A beautiful Puerto Rican lady in a business suit. I picked her up, and... And all her insides came out, man. They just came out."

We opened Brunellis a day or two later just to have somewhere to be; somewhere for anyone to be. A regular was sitting at a table, staring blankly at the menu. I asked if I could get her anything, but all she could do is stare frozen into the distance.

"I was at Cantor Fitzgerald. I was supposed to be there. I called in sick... Everyone I work with is dead. Everyone I see everyday is dead..."

Cantor Fitzgerald had taken up the 101-105th floors of 1 World Trade and lost 70% of their workforce that day.

"Take all the time you need."

We opened up Hush shortly after too, again, just to have somewhere to be. But none of us were in any mood for that shit. So we got the idea to empty our refrigerators of ice as the news was saying hospitals needed as much as they could get their hands on. We filled up trash bags and took a cab down to St. Vincents on West 12th, but when we got there the cops on site said they didn't need ice any more, but that the morgues did.

There were mobs of people everywhere in the street and there we were with trashbags of ice. These dudes in a Suburban with "Death to Osama" painted on their windows offered to give us a ride. The morgue was on 27th, but you could smell death ten blocks away. We rode down with our ice, dudes hanging outside the car standing on the running boards. After delivering the bags, I pulled out my camera and started taking more pictures of the scene. Next thing I know I had multiple red dots swirling around on my chest. The cops swarmed me, guns drawn. Luckily, one of the officers there was a guy I knew from a charity softball game I did every year for fallen officers.

"You almost got killed, Steve. What are you doing down here?"

"We were delivering ice. I was taking pictures."

"You know how much foreign press we got trying to sneak in there and snap photographs of dead bodies? We don't know what the hell is going on. Nobody does. Be careful out there, man."

My cousin Theresa worked in the Trade Centers, but was lucky enough to get out in time. My father was a mailman with a route down in Bowling Green by the Bull Statue near Wall Street. He was stuck down there all day, but was ok, thank God. I had an aunt who was with the Local 3 Electricians Union, but wasn't on site down there that day. 9-11 touched the whole world, but for us in New York, that shit is going to stay on our brains forever.

The whole city was fucked up. It was surreal. Silent streets. Nobody was in a festive mood so the crowds at my regular spots dried up. Production ended on New York-based shows so *Sopranos* went on hiatus. There was no work, the city was busy picking itself back up. Just a month prior I'd been to the premier party for the show at Radio City with an afterparty down on the 30 Rock rink. I was in a two-thousand dollar suit. Timmy Van Patten, director of such gems as *The Wire*, *The Pacific*, and *Game of Thrones* came up to me at the party looking to talk.

"Steve, I wanted to speak with you. You crushed it in that scene the other day. I have a ton of work coming up and I want to add you to my stable. I want to help you with your career."

"Holy crap, Timmy, really?"

He gave me his personal number. "Call me, we'll sort you out."

A few weeks later the towers came down and guess where Timmy lived? Battery City, just minutes from ground zero. He moved, got a new address, new number, I never heard from him again.

Sopranos shut down, my restaurants shut down, Brunellis was barely staying afloat... It was a miserable time. The wads of cash on my dresser took about three months to burn through. My cards were maxed out. Things were getting desperate. My aunt, and just about everyone else I knew, was on me hard to get a backup job. Truthfully, it was sound advice. I was almost broke. But I'd been carving my own path for so long doing this and that up to that point, a regular 9-5 was a foreign concept to me.

Like I said, my aunt was in the Local 3 and suggested I give them a shot. Everyone is always gonna need electricians. She didn't pull any strings for me, I got in there on my own. It was a six-year commitment to apprentice during the day and take courses at night. Local 3 insisted on at least an associates degree, so luckily I had most of those credits knocked out through Hunter, but it was still a lot of work and long days. I never minded the physical aspect of the job, but if you don't have a lot of mathematical understanding you're gonna have a tough time like I did. But it wasn't either of those things that drove me nuts. It was more the people who rubbed me the wrong way. Not all of them, of course, but some of those guys were the absolute worst.

Like this one guy, I forget his name, learned I'd been on Stern for so long and began riding me like Howard used to. He was a journeyman so I had to take it, though I did warn him once that I was only an apprentice on site... All bets were off once that whistle blew. Still he didn't care. One time he starts telling us about a video he'd seen online of these Koreans boiling cats in oil before they ate them. I've always had cats and didn't want to hear that shit and told him so. He kept going on about these cats. Again I asked him to knock it off - again he kept going on about these poor cats. So the third time he brought it up he was about ten feet in the air wiring something or another. "I said, stop talking about those damn cats, you stupid mother fucker!" I threw my tool bag at the ladder and it came crashing down beneath him. Like Clark Griswold hanging lights in *Christmas Vacation*, that moron was hanging from a conduit, feet dangling in the air.

Sopranos began production again after a while and asked if I wanted to come back, but I'd agreed to a six-year stint, so had to pass. Maureen was the first to recognize the change in who I was.

"What happened to you? The man I married was a good time."

"What do you mean, what happened to me? I gotta do this bullshit job all the time, that's what."

"So quit and do something else."

The straw that broke the camel's back happened a while later when I'd gone out to Queens to pay for my Union card. I asked the lady for a receipt and she told me they don't do receipts anymore, just talk to my foreman. I didn't think anything of it and showed up on site the next day. The shop steward, standing next to the foreman, asked for my card.

"I just went out to renew it yesterday."

"Ok, where's your receipt?"

"The lady said she doesn't do receipts anymore. Said to speak to the foreman, maybe you can call her."

“Are you kidding me right now? You’re a fucking apprentice and you’re telling me and the foreman what to do?”

This guy was supposed to be the in-between for union guys and the higher ups, but the only thing he was in-between was the foreman’s cheeks. They told me to go take a seat while they worked it out, but all they worked out was they weren’t paying me for the day.

“Wait, you’re not paying me for today?”

“You don’t have a card. Go get on a bus, go to the union hall, do what you gotta do, but go get that card.”

That was it. I was done. My aunt could have pulled some strings for sure, but I was never the type to go that route. I’m a hardhead, what can I say? I’d gone from making eight-hundred a night bartending to three-hundred a week busting my hump. Maybe had I joined the Local 3 when I was eighteen I would have been happy to eat the shop steward’s shit, but I’d gone a different route... A route where my boss didn’t get mad about stupid stuff like keeping receipts, but about me walking in while he was busy with Oscar nominee Sally Kirkland over his lap spanking her.

Howard smiled as he spanked. “What are you doing, Gorillo? Get out of here.”

The world was different after 9/11. Colder. More serious. Polarized. The internet took that polarization and amplified it to its current, terrible state. Who knows where we could have been if those towers hadn’t come down? Maybe the trillions spent on war could have gone to cancer research. Maybe the internet could have been used for good instead of turning into a soapbox for the dumbest people in the world. Maybe Terry would have written me that part and I’d have been a regular on *Sopranos*. Who could know for sure. All I know is 9/11 was the absolute worst day of my life. Of many people’s lives.

You know, just three days before 9/11, I was at the Trade Center up at Windows on the World, the restaurant that was on the 107th floor of the North Tower. I remember distinctly when I left that night, standing on the sidewalk and looking back up at the towers, thinking to myself how beautiful it all was. A lot of people who live here get used to being surrounded by greatness, by grandeur. Not me. I still walk these streets with my head to the sky, marveling at the magnitude of what this city is. The fucking balls it takes to build a city as great as New York. An animal like bin Laden can’t build shit - he can only tear things down. We got kicked in the nuts that day, all of us. Millions of us. But we came back stronger.

Police officers, hot dog vendors, lawyers, nannies, nurses, teachers, bike messengers, interns, doctors, dog walkers, salesmen, doormen, mailmen, actors, bartenders, construction workers, school children, petty crooks, journalists, subway drivers, architects, bodega workers, politicians, waitresses, union reps, Times Square breakdancers, coachmen, street sweepers, women at the laundromat, firefighters like my friend Rob, all of us - *New York fucking City* - picked this beautiful town back up and willed her back to life. The greatest fucking city in the world.

My life was never the same after that day... But what in the world was?