



STAN HONDA / AFP / Getty Images

During the noisy, chaotic third week of September 2001, my father wrote letters to the *New York Times* and the *Post*, and was published in both, asking simply that the press stop calling his daughter, who'd been murdered on live television a few days earlier, a hero. The heroes ran *into* the buildings; she was just a person who happened to have gotten to work a little early on a Tuesday morning, and that was horrible and heartbreaking and difficult enough without the extra assignment. On Sept. 21, the day that would have been my sister's 28th birthday, he gave a eulogy to this effect at her memorial, speaking steady-voiced at a podium in front of several hundred friends and relatives and people who read an announcement somewhere and didn't know what else to do with themselves.

In the days and years after, this was less a mantra than our only way forward: Find a way to separate what happened from what happened to us, to decline participation in most of the ceremonies and pageantry in favor of figuring out on our own our family's new geometry just like any family that has suffered a loss. Sometimes this works, sometimes it feels like its own form of grandstanding. Others, of course, feel the opposite: The world's attention validated the size of their grief. Their sons and daughters and mothers and fathers and husbands and wives and fiancés and friends were worth starting a war over. We understood this and respected this and just chose another, quieter way, at least until my father got sick and couldn't stop blurting it out, over and over, to strangers in parking lots.

Which is why the corner of Greenwich and Liberty on this bright Sunday afternoon, amid a riot of mid-spring tourists with wrinkled maps and exposed knees taking photos of cranes, is the very last place I should be. I am allowed to enter the 9/11 Museum a few days before this week's grand opening for the general public, but why would I want that? Why would I accept an invitation to a roughly \$350 million, 110,000-square-foot refutation of everything we tried to practice, a gleaming monument to What Happened, not What Happened to Us? Something snapped while [reading about the gift shop](#) — I didn't want to duck and hide, I wanted to run

straight into the absurdity and horror and feel every bit of the righteous indignation and come out the other side raw. I call my mother to tell her I'm doing this but that she shouldn't come, and she doesn't disagree. I find the ticket booth, exhale deeply, and say the magic words.



*STAN HONDA / AFP / Getty Images*

After the full-bore TSA-style security check, complete with body scan, there's a dark corridor with word clouds and photographs projected onto tower-like pillars, while disembodied voices tell snippets of stories about the morning, an overture warning us about the symphony ahead. We are eased into it in a sense, lowered into the maw down a ramp along the original foundation of the towers, a marvel of engineering. Girders and rubble and broken staircases, among the ruins. An impossibly mangled hook-and-ladder truck, showroom parked.

The crowded memorial hall is lined with photos of everyone who died and touchscreen consoles that call up their obituaries; my sister is found, as she has been for 12 1/2 years and will be forever, between Gavkharoy Kamardinova and Howard Lee Kane. The names are read aloud on a loop in the adjacent darkened atrium lined with benches. My sister's profile has incorrect information in it that we'd never signed off on or even seen, and the annoyance is tempered by the realization that nonparticipation in the pageantry has its drawbacks. It also occurs to me that I am the only person here alone.

The main attraction is through a revolving door: a minute-by-minute re-creation of the morning and its aftermath, from video of Matt Lauer's first distracted, furrowed brow at the

end of an interview with some author on the *Today* show and on and on through the top of the spire on Liberty Tower. As claustrophobic as the outer area is cavernous, this part is the haunted house — I wander to a tucked-away corner to find a giant photo of people leaping from the burning building and yell, “Fuck!” like someone jumped out and grabbed me, and no one bats an eye. Frayed nerves are the baseline condition.



Steve Kandell / BuzzFeed

There's a multimedia presentation depicting how, precisely, the towers collapsed. A wing for Pennsylvania and the Pentagon, tape loops of survivors telling how they got out. Smoke and fire and ash and twisted metal and the husk of an ambulance. Tattered flags, handwritten pleas for help, missing persons flyers, screams. Dusty, ownerless Topsiders encased in glass. A soot-coated bike rack, as it was found. Countless personal artifacts, artfully destroyed. The posters for *King Kong* and *Manhattan* and *Working Girl* with the towers, resplendent. The president addressing the nation and vowing steely, determined revenge. Hallways dedicated to tracing the hijackers' timeline and of al-Qaeda's rise and a video wall with people like Hillary Clinton laying out the justification for the unending war on terror, tying grief inextricably, cannily to political ideology in a way that might seem crass if I were able to process it all with a clear head.

There is no way out until the end, and it's all so numbing that maybe this is the whole point: The exhibition starts with one

shining, unfathomably terrible morning and winds up as all of our lives, as banal and constant as laundry, bottomless. I can feel the sweat that went into making this not seem tacky, of wanting to show respect, but also wanting to show every last bit of carnage and visceral whomp to justify the \$24 price of admission — vulgarity with the noblest intentions.

The fact that everyone else here has VIP status grimly similar to mine is the lone saving grace; the prospect of experiencing this stroll down waking nightmare lane with tuned-out schoolkids or spectacle-seekers would be too much. There are FDNY T-shirts and search-and-rescue sweatshirts and no one quite makes eye contact with anyone else, and that's just fine. I think now of every war memorial I ever yawned through on a class trip, how someone else's past horror was my vacant diversion and maybe I learned something but I didn't feel anything. Everyone should have a museum dedicated to the worst day of their life and be forced to attend it with a bunch of tourists from Denmark. Annotated divorce papers blown up and mounted, interactive exhibits detailing how your mom's last round of chemo didn't take, souvenir T-shirts emblazoned with your best friend's last words before the car crash. And you should have to see for yourself how little your pain matters to a family of five who need to get some food before the kids melt down. Or maybe worse, watch it be co-opted by people who want, for whatever reason, to feel that connection so acutely.

There are two recording booths for people to tell their own stories of the day, or remembrances of loved ones who were lost. A man exits one of the confessionals, sees me, shakes his head, and says, “Amazing idea.” I enter, sit down, and stare at the screen ahead and say Shari's name and how I was 3,000 miles away that morning and didn't even know she was working there until I got the call at 6 in the morning and that I wish I had seen her more in those last years and remembered more about her and had something better prepared to say and that I wished my kids would have known her and that she'd think it's pretty fucking weird that I'm talking about her to an invisible camera in the bowels of a museum dedicated to the fact that she was killed by an airplane while sitting at her desk and at some point the

timer is up.

By the time I finally reach the gift shop, the indignation I've been counting on just isn't there. I stare at the \$39 hoodies and the rescue vests for dogs and the earrings and the scarves and the United We Stand wool blankets waiting for that rush and can't muster so much as a sigh. The events of the day have already been exploited and sold in ways previously incomprehensible, why get mad at a commemorative T-shirt now? This tchotchke store — this building, this experience — is nothing more than the logical endpoint for our most reliably commodifiable national tragedy. If you want to bring a coffee table book full of photos of cadaver dogs sniffing through smoking rubble back home to wherever you're from, hey, that's great. This is America, you can buy what you want; they hate our freedom to buy what we want. People will find moments of grace or enlightenment or even peace from coming here, I don't need to be one of them. I'll probably bring my son one day once I realize I won't have the words to explain. It can be of use. It's fine. I don't know.



*Spencer Platt / Getty Images*

There is one small room on the main floor of the museum that is in fact not operated by the museum itself and is not available even to many of the families. Tucked away off to the side, behind an unmarked door, it is overseen by the medical examiner's office. This is called the reflection room.

To get past the door, one must register for an appointment. I have not done this, but I present a case number, which means the official from the medical examiner's office can indeed let me through — just a few days into this museum's existence, and a few days before it's even officially open, and already people have apparently tried lying about dead relatives to get in here. The official's name is Ben, and he walks with me into a small waiting room with a couple

of chairs and a large photo of a candlelight vigil, probably from Union Square. Ben tells me softly that no one from the museum is allowed past this part of the room, and even then, only for cleaning. My family is welcome whenever the museum is open.

He points me around the corner to a cramped, dark space but does not follow. A box of tissues sits on a wooden bench and a family huddles silently looking through a window, about 4 feet by 5 feet. They leave almost instantly and I can now see what is through the window: aisles of dark-stained wood cabinets of rosewood or teak maybe, floor to ceiling, lit by small overhead spotlights. I let out a loud, sharp laugh.

Inside these cabinets are the remains that, after nearly 13 years of the most rigorous testing known to man, have not been matched to the DNA of any of the victims. Just drawers and drawers full of...stuff. I wouldn't really want to think too hard about what exactly that stuff is, but given that it's a picture window looking out at cabinetry, there isn't really anything else to think about. This chamber is meant to be a sanctuary, but I cannot ruminate about the arbitrary cruelty of the universe or lament the vagaries of loss and love because all there is to see are armoires packed with carefully labeled bags of flesh too ruined and desiccated even for science. My sister is among the many for whom there have been no remains recovered whatsoever. Vaporized. So there's no grave to visit, there never will be. Just this theatrically lit Ikea warehouse behind a panel of glass.

I remember being at the armory on the east side with my parents, maybe three days after — I was on the very first flight allowed out of San Francisco, a small army of friends mobilized to take care of my dog for however long I'd be gone — to hand over an old hairbrush of my sister's for DNA matching. A nun had my mom swab the inside of her mouth with a Q-tip to help with identification, although the nun said, kindly but nervously, that everything would be fine and none of this would be necessary. My mother comforted the nun and said it was pretty clear that everything wasn't going to be fine, but she appreciated the sentiment.

The presence of the tomb has been a point of contention among families more vocal than ours who want more from a final resting place than the basement of this museum of unnatural history. I don't know how to feel about the matter because to do so would require any of this making even a bit of sense. It's dumb, sure, but what could possibly be less dumb? Where *is* the right place to store pounds of unidentifiable human tissue so that future generations can pay their respects? I would not wish what's happened to my family on anyone, but I begrudgingly admire its infinite weirdness, still, after all this time. A hushed flute rendition of "Amazing Grace" wafts reverently over the escalators as I head back up to sunlight.

