“...Our street seemed left over from a more elegant age, and we cherished it. Then, a year ago, its serenity was shattered...”

Eleventh Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues was one of the quietest, nicest residential blocks in Greenwich Village. As the Village changed, as Eighth Street became a penny arcade of pizza stands, peddlers and button-and-poster stores, 10th, 11th and 12th Streets held fast to tradition and esthetic standards. With its tall trees and handsome ivy-covered townhouses, some of them still one-family houses, 11th was one of the few streets in the Village that seemed left over from an earlier, more elegant age. There was a pride of residence and ownership. Apartments were highly prized, and changed hands infrequently. The building superintendents, the first to know of prospective vacancies, were courted and flattered. Those who lived there cherished the street, and even its oddities like the tiny wedge-shaped Second Cemetery of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. Let a developer cast a covetous eye on that parcel and people would be up in rebellion, just as they were years ago when the New School first moved in. The New School was in fact a modern intrusion on an old-fashioned street, and when the school announced its intention of razing brownstones on 12th Street in order to expand facilities, residents on both streets—usually hesitant about community action—spoke out and signed petitions. The main bane of 11th Street was probably the restaurant on the corner, which had gone through many transformations, including a stint as a homosexual Hawaiian restaurant, and was now a Blimpie Base. It was a teenage hangout and reportedly a drug center for youngsters who loitered on and littered the streets.

But basically the street was old and preserved, like something out of Henry James and Edith Wharton. Some residents had lived there for decades, clinging to low-rent apartments. Others were new and paid royally for the privilege of living on the street. At least a few of the townhouses were always being renovated or painted.

The street, as we came to know it in the three or so years we lived there, was heterogeneous, but with a definite emphasis on people in the arts. My wife and I (and our three-year-old son) lived at 16 West 11th Street in a house owned by Joe Hazan and his wife, the painter Jane Freilicher. We lived on the third floor. Dustin Hoffman and his wife and daughter lived on the second floor. Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft owned a house down the street and rented half of it to James Goldman, who wrote The Lion in Winter. Barbara Harris rented an apartment across the street. Actress Cynthia Harris and her husband, producer Gene Wolsk, owned a house. Among these artists, actors, writers, there was a certain contact. But generally, as in most of Manhattan, there was something insular and isolated about the lives of the people on the street—until the house at 18 West 11th Street exploded.

On March 7, 1970, at 11:40 a.m., my wife Ann and I left our apartment and as we walked past 18 West 11th, a one-family house owned by James P. Wilkerson, Ann noticed a girl looking out of a downstairs window. She said nothing about it and walked with me to the subway. I went to my office at the New York Times and she picked up our son Ethan at his nursery school around the corner. Several minutes after noon, I entered my office, and
...The telephone on the night table rang.'I can't talk,' I said matter-of-factly.'Our house is burning down.'..."

Clara Rotten, the drama secretary, informed me hesitantly that Ann had just called, was terribly upset, and had said that the house next door to ours had blown up.

Ann and Ethan had taken shelter at a friend's house, I called her immediately, caught a taxi, and prodded the driver as traffic slowed, finally jumped out of the cab at 16th Street, and ran down Fifth Avenue. Together with my wife—we left our son at the friend's house—we walked over to the scene of the explosion, and she told me what had happened.

Precisely at noon, she had picked Ethan up at school, and was walking south on Fifth Avenue with the other children and mothers. As they reached the corner of 11th Street, there was a deafening blast, followed by a billowing cloud of black smoke, and as soon as they could see through the smoke—flames leaping from a house on the south side of the street. "My God, it's my house," said Ann, and leaving our son with a friend of the corner, she ran toward the house. As she approached, she saw that the flames were coming out of the windows of Number 18. She ran into the building on the corner and telephoned me. Then she went back toward Fifth Avenue, which was shrouded with dense black smoke three blocks south to Washington Square.

At the moment of the explosion there was only one person inside 18-16 West 11th Street, Marie-Thérèse Thiesfen, the babysitter for Dustin and Anne Hoffman's daughter Karina. Marie-Thérèse was standing in the middle of the Hoffman living room when the fireplace came crashing out at her. Calmly, she picked up O.L., Dustin's pet terrier, walked into the kitchen, telephoned Dustin and the fire department. Afterward, she went outside and for most of the rest of the day seemed to be in a state of nervous shock.

On the other side of 18, at 30 West 11th Street, Arthur Levin, the owner of the house—and an occupant—was at home feeding a dog. Also in the house were two tenants. At the sound of the blast, Levin ran outside, then back in, called the fire department and then back out again.

At the time that my wife was running west on 11th Street, Anne Hoffman was running east on 11th Street. She had been in a taxi cab at the moment of the explosion, had jumped out and run toward her house. After seeing Marie-Thérèse, she entered the building, ran upstairs and knocked on our door to make sure that we were not trapped inside.

At 12 noon Bob and Lenore Schwartz, who rented a duplex in a building toward Sixth Avenue, were standing in their kitchens with their maid. The blast knocked their house. Lenore ran outside toward Fifth Avenue. "There was mortar flying out of Number 18," she recalls, "and a gray screen of dusty debris." She rushed back to her house to call the fire department which, to her anguish, insisted on asking, "Who are you? Where do you live? What's your telephone number?" Finally she shouted, "It's a fire emergency! Get here quick!"

Meanwhile her husband had gone down the street to the blast. There was stuff blowing across the sidewalk, and rubble all over the place. The blast was so strong that a drapery from the front window was hanging across the street on a railing [and as high as the seventh floor, the windows on the building across the street were smashed]. Virtually no one was present. As I stood there, a lady crawled out of a window of Number 18 with no clothes on. She was like a mine victim—heavy dust all over her, glass caked on her teeth, no major bleeding. I took one of the drapes that was on the fence of her house and said, "Here, you better put this on." She was indifferent to this. She said, "There are people inside. I have to go back." She looked very abstracted.

I repeated, "Here, put this on. I felt like an idiot usher. Then I heard the engine on Fifth Avenue. Rubble blocked 11th Street, so I pushed some of it aside and moved traffic through. I was mortioning a truck and as I watched, a huge column of flame shot out of every window. It was like a Cecil B. DeMille movie.

In addition to Schwartz there were at least six eyewitnesses to the explosion, including two policemen, a retired fire marshal (who had also jumped out of a taxicab), a medical student from NYU, and Arthur Levin. Two girls escaped from the fire; all of the witnesses saw one or both of them, and the first four witnesses reportedly helped them out of the house. At the same time at least two series of photographs were being shot, one by an architectural student who, it was said, was photographing buildings at the other end of the block; the other, color pictures by someone apparently in the building across the street. In these pictures appeared not only the eyewitnesses but the two girls.

Also in her kitchen at 50 West 11th Street—at the time of the explosion was Susan Wagner. She ran outside toward Number 18, saw the two girls, put her coat around the one who was naked, and led them to her house. She offered them her shower and some clothes, and went back to the burning house. When she returned to her own house, the girls were gone. They had told the housekeeper they were going to the drugstore for medicine. The fastidious housekeeper straightened the bathroom, in the process removing all fingerprints. Mrs. Wagner felt so strange that the girls left so hurriedly, but "I thought that, if they didn't have anything to hide, why wouldn't they come back?" The girls have never been found.

As my wife and I watched, it was a scene of great horror. We both felt that certainly our house—with every one of our possessions—would burn to the ground, that perhaps more blasts would follow until the street was wiped from the map. That initial horror was followed by a feeling of relief, something we were to feel a great deal in subsequent days. After all, we were alive. Actually my son's school break had let out five minutes later that day. Otherwise he and my wife would have been in our house during the blast. Every other day of that week I had been at my desk at noon, with my back to the wall of the Wilkerson house. What if Marie-Thérèse had been standing by the fireplace rather than in the middle of the room?

The earliest arrivals on the scene were the fire and police departments, but almost simultaneously there were the Red Cross, the press, the photographers, and the insurance adjusters. The adjusters seemed the most ghoulish. Like ambulance chasers, they tried to sign up everyone in sight. The Red Cross immediately set up Disaster Headquarters in the Parish House of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension—two doors from our house—and tried to give everyone coffee and doughnuts. They also offered all of us, including Dustin, a room for the night. Fortunately, each of us had friends and family easily able to accommodate us, and we pitifully declined. The Red Cross lady actually seemed surprised. I wondered later where she used to have sent us.

The street, sidewalk, and parish house were soon crawling with newspapers, magazine, and television reporters, logging heavy television equip-
...We had ridiculed the conspiracy theory, and now we were faced with proof...

neighbor expressed it, "At first there was a camarraderie, but then there was a general sense of helplessness, a kind of loneliness, a sense of distance." Beginning that first night there was also the noise of drilling and demolition. The street looked like a war zone. I would guess that everyone inspected his boiler and locked his doors securely (although of course there was no shortage of police on the street). I wasn't surprised if some people left town immediately.

Almost as soon as the fire died, a huge crane appeared, dwarfing the townhouses. The firemen began tearing down the side and rear walls and carefully sifting the rubble. They were obviously looking for something, possibly bodies. It was also clear that our building and the other one on the other side of the cavity were weakened. After the blast, in fact, both buildings were condemned, and remained, too small the owners had them shored up. High above the street, clinging to the sides of Number 20, and lurking ominously long after the explosion, were the remains of Number 18—a bookcase, charred and seemingly sealed to the wall, looking like a spectral Louise Nevelson sculpture.

Late that afternoon, the firemen in charge said that each tenant in our building could make one quick trip to his apartment—one person for each apartment, accompanied by a fireman who retains small essential property. I tried to decide what was our most essential property, and as if struck by amnesia couldn't for the first time of anything. I went upstairs with a fireman. We walked in the darkness in the bedroom, and as I entered, the telephone on the night table rang. I reached for the fireman as the call might be for him. He, as astonished as I was, shook his head no. I picked it up. It was our friend Nancy Common calling from Great River, Long Island. "I'm just trying to reach you, I can't talk," said matter-of-factly. "Our house is burning down." "That's impossible," said the fireman. "Nancy has a fire alarm." Nancy's husband had heard about the explosion, they phoned to the car radio, and called the police. She had frantically been trying to reach us—at our office, through our daughter, L.J., or had said, "Why don't you call your mother?" Nancy had said, "But they wouldn't answer. She had dialed just as I finished our apartment. "Talk to you later," I said, and put down the phone for the last time. Our apartment was a shambles. Everything was full of smoke and water. The ceiling in the bedroom was splitting. The windows were smashed. I walked quickly to the rear of the apartment. The ceiling above my desk had heaved as if it were about to collapse. The firemen urged me to leave at once. I took a manuscript of my biography of Darryl Zamuck, a large oil painting by my brother, and a few small framed photographs I had taken of my son, and started down the stairs. Dustin and I almost collided at the entrance. He was also carrying a big painting. He went out the door first, and the photographers popped their shutters.

One of our neighbors, a playwright, who, because he made his own trip upstairs—at the time we all assumed this would be our only trip—that three things were most important to him: his completed tax forms, an oil painting and a Picasso drawing. He took all three and was starting for the door with a look of scorn at his collapsed skyline, his rusted antique furniture—his now-desecrated apartment had recently been the subject of a beautiful photo spread in the New York Times Magazine—when, overcome by insatiable gourmet greed, he walked into the kitchen and came out with a tin of crullers. "And then," he remembered, "the chimney collapsed."

We planned to stay at my parents' apartment that evening—we stayed for almost two weeks—but Aunt Anna remained at the blast until about nine o'clock, watching with compulsive fascination. Finally, late that evening, a body of a man, unidentified, was found. It was removed in a blanket, like a limp sack of ashes. Our street was all black. We got the news that night. There were many more rumors than facts. One story persisted—that there was a child missing from the school. It was unseemly, the newscasters showed a picture of the little girl's missing shoe. The tricycle belonged to Ethan. We had left it that morning in the lobby. The policeman was calling, and the girl was charging in, had removed it and thrown it out the window. Saturday morning we began an early work. When the firemen informed us we might be able to go into our house that day during the firemen's break we worked with a sense of purpose. We worked and reclaimed a few small things, mobilizing them for action. The firemen advised us not to stay for the first side of the building since it was too dangerous. They would come later and try to save the building. As we walked in, we met the painter. He was working on his pictures and had a sense of purpose. He was working on his pictures and had a sense of purpose.
had been weakened by the blast.

Our upstairs neighbors brought an assortment of packing boxes, which we shared. All of the tenants, each with a legion of friends, stood lined on the sidewalk. I found a brown paper bag and on the back of it scribbled the most essential items in the house and read off like a shopping list. At a nod from the fire marshal, and as the sightseers watched, we each grabbed a box and lined up. It looked, for all the world, like a super- market sweepstakes. How much could we squeeze into our shopping carts? How many trips could you make in ten minutes? Once inside, everyone forgot my instructions and grabbed whatever was nearest or dearest to their heart. My sister-in-law lifted an unwieldy sliding oak cabinet, and hugging it like a baby, carried it downstairs. And while the friends flocked into our kitchen and somewhat of a toast (but apparently not the moses who had been easily living in it the explosion) and an electric mixer. Ann and I were most interested in saving Ethan’s books and toys. We looked through the boxes, finding his clothes and shoes, his model trains on the shelves. Meanwhile our gourmet neighbor dotted among other things, a cold beef salad, a posset from his refrigerator, and had it with friends for dinner that night. We—the army of scavengers—flew down the narrow stairs. We had been on vacation in St. Kitts, went to Barbados, and returned to New York on Friday night. At 11 p.m. Sunday, they walked past the scene of the explosion and no one seems to recognize them.

On Monday we took Ethan to nursery school. One of his classmates told him that Ethan’s house had blown up. He was happy to hear them. The teacher explained the explosion to the three-year-old, and that seemed to calm him. But it was obvious to me that the beginning of our town was very much stirred by the event, that it was a matter of the whole town, that it did not mean to say, and it would probably be a year or so.

Our store in the church was fairly damaged, which with uniformed officers, firemen and police of the district moved more and more like a front line command post. With our friends, we went over to the Cedar Tavern for lunch. Lunch was served, it suddenly grew dark outside. It was not the apocalypse but a total eclipse of the sun. Shredding our eyes, we went outside. It was impressive, but I must admit, after the explosion a total eclipse seemed anticlimactic.

Sunday was a clear sunny day. The explosion had disappeared to page 71 of the Times, the only news being that one of the girls who died in the blast was thought to be James Wilkerson’s 2-year-old daughter Cynthia. The police were still trying to identify the body of the man discovered in the wreckage. We went downtown early and spent most of the day looking at the house. The fire had stopped and the fire department was cleaning up the rubble and searching the debris.

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Some people suspected that the FBI had staked out the house and was prepared for the explosion. They had photographs...