

## Briley

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Looking at the news archives, there's no focus. The "Tomato King" won a mayoral election back in his hometown in Mexico after getting rich on agriculture in California, but his victory was voided over some kind of technicality. A guy named James Allen Beck was shot and killed after gunning down a sheriff's deputy. He was an odd man, said neighbors. He lied about being a U.S. marshal and his house was full of children's toys even though he lived alone. Now he doesn't even have a Wikipedia page. Thirteen police officers were indicted in the cover-up following a fatal shooting of two purse-snatchers, but I don't remember ever hearing about that. Things faraway were fuzzy. For some reason I thought there was an Appalachian coal mine collapse, but looking back I don't know if that actually happened.

The Associated Press reports from Miami that we're already into September and there hasn't been a hurricane all season.

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The sky's sunny canopy was an untouched clear blue hung over the eastern United States like God's love blanketed over His favorite children, His favorite national parks, dewy suburban buzz-cut lawns, rivers and mountains, His favorite deer

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and dogs and house cats, supermarkets and blacktop parking lots, His favorite power lines, His favorite highways and city skyscrapers and all the freedom they implied. God's favorite birds swimming in the fibers of his love, hawks swooping down to mutilate His favorite field mice.

Warm air still echoed the recent summer, though without the sweating and without the mosquitoes. The weather was an undefined, seasonless middle; either the twilight of summer or the lemon yellow rising sun of fall. I don't know which, and I guess it doesn't matter, but it was the kind of morning that feels somehow nostalgic. It had that smell.

But "nostalgia" comes from the ancient Greek words *nostos* and *algos*, meaning "the grief of returning home." Though I may have felt that strange happy sadness in the morning, or at least breathed its signifying scent, by the afternoon, I did not.

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As a kid, I was kind of stupid, as all kids are and all adults, at least latently, are. Idealistic. I was concerned with things I thought were important, but probably weren't. I no longer can remember what they were. I think I was concerned, vaguely, with my future, but only enough to keep me more or less unaware of the present world around me. I didn't have to think too much, not even enough to understand the comfort of not having to think too much, not having to know much, not having to take a side on any issue, or even know what sides existed. Current events and public discourse were far away and meaningless to me. I'd walk my dog, humming to myself, bored, stepping over the newspapers dropped at the ends of driveways.

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A photograph suspends a man in the air, head facing down, body still and serene against the steel and glass hatching of the building's sides, lengthwise over the vertical split where the corner of the North Tower eclipses the South Tower behind it. Other photos in the series show him somersaulting and flailing as he tears toward the earth, but in this one he plummets motionlessly, almost meditative.

The man in the picture is officially unidentified, but most of those who know the photo believe that he is Jonathan Briley, son of a preacher and brother to Alex Briley, the guy who dresses as a G.I. in the Village People.

The picture showed up in a few newspapers the following day, but due to

overwhelming criticism, never again after that. People found it voyeuristic to show jumpers in the media. So even though hundreds of people leaped out the windows, and even though there were many videos and photographs, those images were kept out of view. Reality was in bad taste.

A spokeswoman for the New York City medical examiner's office told *USA Today* that those who fell were not jumpers— "A 'jumper' is somebody who goes to the office in the morning knowing that they will commit suicide. These people were forced out by the smoke and flames or blown out." But maybe it doesn't matter what you call them. Maybe a homicide isn't any better than a suicide.

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The TV news kept looping the same stuff, so I listened to a repeat of that morning's Howard Stern on the radio. I was at my friend Mark Prestia's house. We were both sitting in his bedroom, but we weren't in the same place. He was reading something on the Internet and I was listening. Gary Dell'Abate, the on-air producer, wondered if it had been some kind of terrorist thing. Everyone called him an idiot. No, come on. Baba Boeey. They would call him that whenever they wanted to remind him that he was an idiot. He got his nickname after screwing up a reference to Quick Draw McGraw's sidekick, Baba Looey. Baba Boeey, get your head out of your ass. Then the second one hit. I wonder if part of him secretly reveled in the validation it gave him.

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People covered in white-gray dust, looking like granite statues, but running. Tidal waves of white-gray dust sweeping through the streets. The airplane over and over again freeze-framed and un-freeze-framed, with the brightness dimmed but for a halo around it to show us where it was on the television screen. *Lots of questions, few answers at this point.* Tidal waves of white-gray dust sweeping through the streets. People running. The airplane. The other airplane. Lots of questions, few answers at this point.

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A few months went by and now not everyone had murder in their hearts anymore, but some still did. America had one voice for the first two weeks or so. We were all united by a shared love for our country and a shared hatred for our enemy. I was told it was all right to hate; I was also told it was all right to feel like life was a ridiculous movie, but I still felt guilty about it. Nobody ever

brought up whether or not it was all right to feel like I was stuck in a fever dream where everything is on a loop and nothing changes or moves forward.

I briefly logged into an AOL chat room, and the first and last thing I saw was “NUKE PAKISTAN.” Logging off, I tried to figure out what was evil and what wasn’t. It was the first time, I think, that I didn’t entirely know. But it was a bad time not to know. There was no room for shades of gray. Only black and white. And red and blue.

Mrs. Prestia—Stephanie—covered every surface of their house with American flag tablecloths, pillows, doilies, whatever. The decorations stayed up for years. As far as I know, they’re still there. Her wardrobe for several years consisted almost entirely of knitted Old Glory sweaters and tee shirts with patriotic slogans. She still had her “These Colors Don’t Run” bumper sticker, by then faded to a pale pink rectangle, on her 1988 Chevy Nova when it finally went off to the scrap yard a few years ago.

She’s a petite, aging woman with a soft voice and a constitution defined by headaches and bad hearing, but she didn’t hesitate to pick herself up and march down the street to confront a neighbor who by late November had taken down his flag from the front yard.

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I remember reading a particular letter in the “Ask Marilyn” column of *Parade*, that crappy magazine that comes as an insert in some Sunday newspapers. A woman asked how she, as an atheist, should deal with the constant outpouring of God-bless-Americas. It was fatiguing. Maybe even a little nauseating. Clearly she was just venting, but Marilyn answered her anyway, telling her not to make a fuss about how others were reacting, to let them deal with the tragedy their own way. I guess Marilyn was right, but my empathy is with the woman writing the letter.

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Jonathan Briley worked at Windows on the World, the restaurant on the top floor of the North Tower. Nobody in the restaurant survived, nor did anyone else above the point of impact in the North Tower. People got phone calls and text messages from family members in the top floors who couldn’t escape through the fire in the stairwell. The messages gradually got shorter and more cryptic as the rooms filled with smoke. A lot of bodies fell out the windows, but it’s hard to say which bodies had jumped and which ones had suffocated

and burned up. A lot of people prefer not to know. Four people above the point of impact in the South Tower escaped. Running down, they found that Stairwell A was miraculously undamaged. Everyone else, however, ran up, only to find that the access to the roof was locked. I read that something like 300 people on the ground were killed when jumpers landed on them. I can't stop thinking about that photograph, how sad and serious and brutally calm it is, and how that guy's brother is one of the fucking Village People. It's like reality made an inappropriate joke that I don't quite get.

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I had this dream once when I was sick. Everyone in it kept saying the same abstract phrase. "*That's the stuff my dad uses to burn food.*" They continued saying it long after repetition had drained it of any meaning. It was the only thing anyone could say. I would get frustrated and try to tell them to stop, but the only thing that would come out of my mouth was "*that's the stuff my dad uses to burn food.*" Eventually, I forgot that there was anything else that could be said, and carried on full conversations with the people in my life. "*That's the stuff my dad uses to burn food,*" my mom would say. I would nod my head in agreement and respond, "*That's the stuff my dad uses to burn food.*" I'd turn around and my swim coach would be standing there in the kitchen. "*That's the stuff my dad uses to burn food.*"

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I was still frustrated, but I didn't know why anymore. In fact, I was more frustrated because I didn't know why I was frustrated. Trying to figure it out, I would just think, *That's the stuff my dad uses to burn food.* When I woke up I felt unrested, but relieved to have escaped.

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It is absurdly unnecessary to make the argument that it was a transformative moment in history. Its effect on the biography of my generation, however, is less understood. On its ten-year anniversary, I talked with a couple friends about what we remembered. Wes is three years younger than me, and Eric is my age. Wes remembers a day when his mom picked him up early from school and he got to play video games. He knew something big and bad had happened; he knew people were upset, but there wasn't anything he could do. September 12th was, more or less, the same as September 10th. Something had

happened far away, but nothing had happened to him. Eric remembers what I remember: blameless, comfortable ignorance yanked away like a blanket, waking him up for the first time to a cold new world. He came to feel accountable for his thoughts, first feeling angry and patriotic, and proud because his feelings were right. Then, over time, feeling bored with the feverish tedium of society's endless narrative, and guilt-ridden because his feelings seemed wrong. For Eric, and for me, the attacks left a rift between childhood and whatever comes next. We grew up in a changed place.

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Jonathan Briley's reflection flickers on the windows like an old movie. At this moment, he thinks of nothing. The white noise of wind roaring across his ears sounds like silence.

The attacks were loud. They drowned out everything else. The ringing in our ears lasted so long that we forgot what life was like without it.

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On the eleventh of September, 2001, just days after voiding the mayoral win of Andres Bermudez in the small town of Jerez, Mexican officials reversed their initial ruling, making him the first immigrant in the United States to win a mayoral election in Mexico. Bermudez, the son of a poor farmer, grew up in Jerez. In 1973, he crossed the border into the United States hidden in the trunk of a Buick. In California, he made millions in the tomato business, earning himself the nickname "Tomato King." In 2001, he returned to Jerez and was elected mayor, only to have his victory overturned. In order to be eligible for elected office, officials said, one had to be a Mexican resident for at least a year. The decision could not be appealed, they said. Heartbroken, the Tomato King got on the next flight back to California. To go home. In less than a week, he'd be on another flight back to Mexico. To home. In 2009 he died of stomach cancer. There isn't any news, really, after that.