Which Way Did He Run?

By DAVID GRANN   JAN. 13, 2002

Firemen have a culture of death. There are rituals, carefully constructed for the living, to process the dead. And so on Sept. 11, when members of Engine Company 40, Ladder Company 35 discovered that every man from their house who responded to the World Trade Center attack -- 12, including a captain and a lieutenant -- had disappeared, they descended on the site in droves, prepared, at the very least, to perform the rite of carrying out their own. Several who had been on vacation in Maryland barreled into their cars and raced up the Interstate, arriving within hours. Others, who got to the firehouse only to find there were no more vehicles, commandeered anything with wheels -- taxis, Red Cross vans, buses.

Eventually, they located their engine and ladder trucks, covered in soot, near ground zero, and tried to "visualize," as one of them later put it, what had happened: where the men had gone, what their last movements might have been. By the rigs, they found some of the missing firefighters' extra shoes, a discarded shirt, a pair of sunglasses. Slowly, in makeshift teams, they fanned out into the rubble, trying to retrace their steps, searching for air pockets. But there was nothing to be found. It was as if the fire had consumed not just the living but the rites of the dead as well.

Then, that evening, as the number of the missing grew into the thousands, word spread that rescue workers had found someone -- a member of Engine 40, Ladder 35. He had been buried under rubble. What's more, he was alive. The men hurried to the hospital, hoping he could tell them where the others might still be trapped. "If there was one," said Steve Kelly, a veteran member of the house, "we were hopeful he could lead us to the others."

When they got there he was lying in bed awake. He had fractured his neck in three places and severed his thumb, but he seemed alert and happy to see

them. After they embraced, they began to pepper him with questions. Do you remember where you were? they asked. "No," he said. Do you know where the others were before the towers came down? He looked at them utterly perplexed. "The towers came down?" he asked.

I first heard the story of the survivor who couldn't remember what no one else could forget as I went from house to house reporting on the Fire Department's recovery. Initially, I assumed it was one of the many myths that had begun to circulate, but when I visited Engine 40, Ladder 35 one afternoon, a firefighter told me that there was in fact one survivor in their company -- a man named Kevin Shea -- who had some kind of amnesia. He said Shea was still in the hospital, but I left him my number, and a few days later the phone rang and a peculiar voice said: "This is Firefighter Kevin Shea. How can I help you?"

The next morning I went to meet Shea at his firehouse on Amsterdam Avenue and 66th Street. It was only two weeks after the attack, and he had just gotten out of the hospital. "Technically, I'm not supposed to be working," he said, "but I can still answer phones, and I thought it might help to be near the guys." He wore a thick neck brace that pressed against his chin, thrusting his face forward. He is a handsome mix of Italian and Irish, with intense brown eyes; but the doctors had shaved his head, making his features seem disconcertingly stark, and as he bent to answer the phone I could see curving along his scalp a long gash flecked with dried blood. "I fractured the fifth vertebra in my neck," he said. Although his doctors were still skeptical, he said he was determined to make it back as a fireman. "I don't want to be a pencil pusher," he said.

Outside the firehouse, people were gathering to light candles. As word spread that Shea was there, more and more of them came inside. He had become, in a strange way, a shrine for the living -- the hero who had made it out. At one point a little girl walked in with her mother and handed him a donation for the company. "Thank you so much for what you did," she said. He smiled

awkwardly and extended his good hand to take the check. But as each person streamed in, approaching him and shaking his hand, he grew more and more uncomfortable. "This isn't about me," he told one man who praised his courage. And while he had agreed to let me document his recovery over the next several months, after the last person had trickled out, he turned to me, his face ashen, and said, "Please don't make me out to be a hero."

As he glanced around the room, taking in all the emblems of the dead -- photos of the missing men, piles of donations, a notice for a memorial -- he started to fidget nervously. He said he had no way of knowing what he had done in those crucial moments. "Maybe I panicked and /-." He closed his eyes as if trying to conjure something out of the blankness. He seemed haunted not just by the gaps in his past but also by a single question that they prevented him from answering: had he survived because he was a hero, as everyone treated him, or because, as he feared, he was somehow a "coward," someone who had abandoned his men? "I like to think I was the type of person who was trying to push someone out of the way to save them . . . and not the type who ran in fear," he said. "But I can't remember anything, no matter how hard I try. It's like my memory collapsed with the building, and now I have to piece the whole thing back together again."

There are some things he does remember. He remembers Mike D'Auria, a 25-year-old rookie with a bright Mayan tattoo on his leg. He remembers Frank Callahan, his captain, and Mike Lynch, another firefighter who was about to get married. He remembers what they carried: a Halligan, a maul, an ax, a Rabbit Tool, 8-penny nails, utility ropes, wire cutters, chucks and a screwdriver. He remembers waking on Sept. 11 and the alarm sounding at the firehouse at 9:13. He remembers them getting on the rigs. He remembers the rigs. He remembers asking the lieutenant if he thought it was a terrorist attack and the lieutenant saying yes and them riding in silence.

There are other things he remembers, too. He remembers his nickname, Ric-o-Shea. He remembers his age, 34, and his favorite color, yellow. He

remembers growing up on Long Island and hiding from the other kids in a giant cardboard box. He remembers his parents fighting and his mother moving out when he was 13. He remembers some things even if he doesn't want to -- things that refuse to dissolve, along with all the insignificant memories, with the passage of time.

Memory is a code to who we are, a collection of not just dates and facts but also of epic emotional struggles, epiphanies, transformations. "Memory is absolutely critical to our identity," says Daniel L. Schacter, a psychologist and expert in the field of memory research. And in the wake of tragedy, it is vital to recovery. After a traumatic event people tend to store a series of memories and arrange them into a meaningful narrative. They remember exactly where they were and to whom they were talking. But what does one do when the narrative is shattered, when some -- or most -- of the pieces of the puzzle are missing?

In the last week of September, I went with Shea to visit the St. Charles Hospital and Rehabilitation Center in Long Island. The doctors still didn't know if he was blocking out what had happened as a result of physical or psychological blows or both. A neuropsychologist named Mark Sandberg greeted Shea in the lobby and led him into a small, cluttered office. "I know very little about you," Sandberg said, closing the door as Shea sat nervously crossing and uncrossing his legs. "So what do you remember?"

Shea said: "I can tell you what I remember and what I was told. I remember responding to the scene. I'm in Ladder 35, but they have an engine in there as well and they had a free seat. I wasn't working that day, and I said, 'Can I jump on?'"

The doctor seemed surprised. "You were off-duty that day?"

Shea explained that he was buffing, or volunteering, which was "the right thing to do." Then he added: "So the officer gave me permission, and I . . . went down the West Side Highway. . . . We noticed car fires and debris falling

everywhere -- like big falling carpets. There were pieces of metal and glass. And people were falling --."

"Do you recall that or did someone tell you that?"

Shea closed his eyes. "I recall that."

Sandberg made several notes, then asked Shea to go on. On the way to the scene, Shea said, he pulled out the video camera that he sometimes used to document fire scenes for training. "I remember putting it in the plastic bag and putting it back in my coat," he said. "I knew I couldn't be filming that long." He then prepared to go into the chaos. "I don't remember anything after that, except waking up in the hospital."

"Are your memories back after that?"

"Yes, they started to come back. They were in and out. They were drugging me at the time, with morphine, I think. They said I was conscious, but I don't know."

"You can be conscious and have no memory. It's called post-traumatic amnesia."

"That's what this is?"

"That's what I'm trying to understand."

Shea fidgeted with his bandages. "Some say it's better not to remember. Maybe the fact that I don't know if I was trying to save someone, maybe that's helping me deal with the post-stress . . . or whatever you call it."

Sandberg asked how many men from his house were lost. For the first time, Shea looked up from the bandages he'd been fidgeting with. "All of them," he said. "All of them but me."

He had never intended to become a fireman. Though he came from a long line

of firefighters -- his grandfather and uncle and father and older brother Brian were all firemen -- he didn't fit the stereotype. He wasn't, as he put it, "a typical macho." He was smaller and more bookish than the other men; he didn't drink or like sports. Initially, he embarked on a career in computer software, at which he excelled, but by 1998 he felt compelled to follow in the family tradition.

When he was first assigned to Engine 40, Ladder 35, last summer, he showed up at 3 in the morning. The men were going out on a call, and when they returned, he was standing there with piles of eggs and French toast and chocolate-covered strawberries. "They were looking at me, like, who is this freakin' guy?" Shea recalled.

"A lot of the guys didn't know what to make of Kev," Kelly says. But he displayed an almost monkish devotion to the job, until he gradually found his place as the guy who was always willing to help out, speaking in frenetic bursts, saying, "Yes, sir," and "Negative K, sir," and answering the phone with the refrain: "Firefighter Kevin Shea. How can I help you?"

"When I got on the job, I loved it," Shea said. "It was like a big freakin' family. Even when they bust on you, it's direct. When they'd say, 'You're one freaky kid,' I'd have no problem with it. It was all done with love and to my face."

After the disaster, many in the house assumed Shea would retire, given the severity of his injuries. But within days he vowed he'd be back on the job by Christmas. "I have my family," he said, "but this is my family, too."

Yet even as he tried to move forward -- eating only protein, gingerly strengthening his legs -- he seemed trapped in the past. Unlike some amnesiacs, he could not forget that he had forgotten. He was reminded of the gaps in his memory at every turn, when he flipped on the television or saw the relatives of the missing men, staring at him, too afraid to ask what he knew. "He needs to figure it out," his brother Brian told me. "I don't want him 30 years from now walking around angry at the world and not knowing why. I

don't want him to be like one of these guys who comes back from Vietnam and loses his mind."

When one of Shea's colleagues mentioned offhandedly a news clip of a lone rescue worker who, instead of carrying out victims, was standing in front of the towers paralyzed with fear, Shea worried that the other men in the house suspected he was that guy. Worse, he dreaded they might be right. "I hope that wasn't me," he said. "I hope I wasn't that kind of person."

His brother was right, he said; he needed to figure it out -- no matter what I discover." And so, with his body still in bandages, he set out on his search, sifting through names and pictures like a detective, trying to find clues.

He started with only a scrap of paper, a note from the hospital that read: "Patient is a 34-year-old white male firefighter . . . who was knocked unconscious by falling debris just outside the trade center."

He soon tracked down the neurosurgeon who treated him on Sept. 11 and beseeched him for something more. The doctor said all he knew was that he was carried in on a stretcher and that the injuries to his neck were consistent with being hit by something from the front. "Is there anything else?" Shea asked. "Anything at all?"

The doctor thought for a moment. "Well, I remember one thing," he finally offered. "You said you crawled 200 feet toward light."

Shea didn't remember crawling or even saying that he had crawled. It was common in patients with amnesia, the doctor explained, to continue, shortly after the trauma, to forget. Still, Shea seemed stunned. "How the hell could I have crawled 200 feet with a broken neck?" he asked.

He tried to be scientific. First, he interviewed his closest friends and family for other things he might have said in the hospital, things he had subsequently forgotten. He discovered that he had mentioned grabbing a

Purple K extinguisher, which was used to put out airplane fires.

He now had three clues, one of which -- because of the image of the frozen lone rescue worker that was now embedded in his mind -- filled him with dread: "If I was hit from the front," he said, "then I was most likely facing the building, like that guy, as it came down."

As more people learned of Shea's search, he was inundated with tips from strangers. One morning he flipped on his computer and showed me a list of individuals who claimed to have information. "People keep calling, saying, 'Yeah, I was there, I pulled you out.' It's hard to know what to believe."

One person who called was Joe Patriciello, a lieutenant whom he had known for years and who recalled for Shea the moment they saw each other just before the first tower came down. "You embraced me in the command center," Patriciello said. "Don't you remember?"

"What command center?"

"In the south tower."

Shea felt something jarring loose in his mind, a fragment: a room full of people. They were standing in the lobby of the south tower, which was decimated only a moment later. Oh, my God, Shea thought. "I remember that," he later told me. "I'm sure of it."

While he tried to free other recollections -- It's possible other things could come back," he said excitedly -- he received a call from a doctor who had seen him at the scene and who told him he had been found on Albany Street. Shea frantically searched his house for a map and measured the distance from the lobby of the south tower, where he had hugged Patriciello, to Albany, trying to imagine how he had gotten there. He made several notes: Saw Patriciello 10 minutes before the first tower came down. Tower came down in nine seconds. Albany Street about one block distance.

Though he tried not to make guesses, he slowly began to construct fragments of his story: "I was found on Albany Street," he started to tell people matter-of-factly. "I was in the lobby command center and hugged Lieutenant Patriciello."

Then, on Oct. 17, more than a month after the attack, he visited his firehouse for the first time in a while and saw pinned to the wall a Daily News article about several firefighters who had rescued two men lying in the street after the first tower collapsed. One of them was badly injured, his face covered in ash. His name, the article said, was Kevin Shea. "I'm looking at it, going, 'What the hell, that's me!'" He carefully wrote down the name of each person in the article and asked other firefighters to help him find them.

A few days later, he parked his car outside a station on the Upper East Side near his apartment. As he was walking home, a man on the street yelled out, "Oh, my goodness, Kevin Shea?" Shea looked at the man's face but didn't recognize him. "Don't tell me you don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"We went in the ambulance together."

He recalled a detail from the Daily News story, that he was rescued along with another bloodied firefighter. "You're the other guy?" Shea asked.

The stranger smiled. "That's me. Rich Boeri."

They shook hands, as if they were meeting for the first time. Shea took out a piece of paper and pen and began to pepper him with questions. Boeri said they were transported in an ambulance to a police boat and taken to New Jersey. "Did I say anything about the other guys from my company?" Shea asked.

Boeri shook his head. "You just kept saying: 'Did the towers collapse? Did the towers collapse?'"

Days later, he still seemed overcome. "I'm just walking down the street and out of nowhere he starts telling me what happened to me." Perhaps because of his own miraculous survival, he began to believe in accidents of fate. "Guess what the name of the firefighter who was injured on the first attack on the World Trade Center" -- in 1993 -- was," he said to me one day. "Kevin Shea. Pretty freaky, huh?"

As shea sensed the puzzle inexorably coming together, he found the phone number of one of the people The Daily News said had saved him, Capt. Hank Cerasoli, and asked him to meet him at a diner on the Upper East Side. "I hope I can handle it," he told me earlier. As he walked in on a Saturday morning, he spotted a small, muscular man wearing a fireman's coat.

Cerasoli had brought his wife with him, and Shea had brought his girlfriend, Stacy Hope Herman. Over eggs and French toast, Cerasoli, a modest man in his 50's with a bald head and silver mustache, described how he was struggling with his own memory loss. He had also been hit on the head and initially could not recall the location of the firehouse he had worked at for 17 years. But his memories had gradually come back, he said, and he recalled stumbling upon Shea in the middle of the street just after the first tower collapsed. "I thought you were dead," he said. "You weren't moving at all."

The color drained from Shea's face, and Cerasoli asked if he was sure he wanted him to continue. When Shea nodded, Cerasoli explained how he and several others, including another firefighter, Gerard Pirraglia, carried him on a backboard when they heard the second tower rumble. "We lifted you in the air and ran with you on the board, down an alleyway and into a garage. It suddenly got all black and dark." He drew a map on a napkin, showing where the garage was on the corner of West Street and Albany Street.

"Was I conscious?" Shea asked.

Cerasoli thought for a long moment. "I don't remember. There are some details I still can't remember."

Shea asked what happened next. Cerasoli said the Fire Department doctor, Kerry Kelly, opened Shea's shirt and pants. "I was holding your hand. You kept asking me: 'Where are the others? Are they O.K.?' I said, 'Yeah, sure, they're O.K., they're out there laughing.' I didn't really have any idea, but I wanted you to feel O.K." Cerasoli paused, then asked, "So were they O.K.?"

Shea shook his head. "No, none of them made it," he said.

"I'm sorry," Cerasoli said. "I had no idea."

After they finished eating, Cerasoli's wife took a picture of them sitting together. "I know he doesn't want to forget this," she said.

Cerasoli reached over and put his arm around Shea. "God was with you that day," he said.

While he wasn't searching for his past, Shea went from memorial to memorial. One out of every 10 people who died that day was a firefighter. Thirty-three died in Shea's battalion alone, and 11 in his house, including his captain, Frank Callahan, and Bruce Gary, a veteran whom Shea worshiped. "Bruce Gary was a senior man with over 20 years," Shea told me. "He was like Yoda in the house. He was very wise. I wanted to hang out with him all the time. I'm asking: 'Why you? You would have been a resource for everyone. Me? I'm a positive guy, but when people have enough of positive they can't come to me.'"

He tried to attend as many memorials as he could. But there were so many that he had to do what everyone in the department had to -- choose between friends. In late October, as another service was taking place in the city, I accompanied him to a Mass in upstate New York for his lieutenant, John Ginley. Shea still couldn't drive, and Steve Kelly picked us up. Kelly and Shea both wore their Class A uniforms -- navy blue suits and white gloves -- and as we made our way along the highway, they both spoke of the dead.

But as they talked about Sept. 11, Shea seemed detached from his own words, as if he were reading from a piece of paper. Several people close to him had noticed that rather than seem depressed, he seemed increasingly numb. ''I don't know what's wrong with me,'' Shea told me at one point. ''I'm not sad enough. I should be sadder.''

While the other men spent more and more time together -- searching at ground zero, eating all their meals at the firehouse, drinking at P.D. O'Hurley's nearby -- Shea spent less and less time at the house.

As we rode toward the service, he stared out the window at the changing leaves. ''Look at them,'' he said. ''They're all orange and purple.''

Kelly watched him peering out the window. ''You sure you're O.K., Kev?''

Shea lowered his window and let the wind wash over him. ''Ten-four.''

By the time we arrived at the church, scores of firemen were already lined up. There was still no body, and in place of a casket a helmet rested at the foot of the altar. ''I will never forget those memories,'' one of Ginley's brothers said in his eulogy. ''I believe in time this pain will become bearable because all our memories will be alive in our mind.''

I glanced at Shea. Unlike the other men who had begun to weep, his face was utterly blank.

By the end of October, Shea began losing interest in his search. ''What's the point?'' he asked me one day. ''What am I going to figure out? They're all dead.''

Even though he now knew how he was rescued, the part that had always mattered most to him -- what he was doing in the moments before the tower collapsed -- remained a mystery. Indeed, the closer he got, the more impenetrable it seemed. One day a Daily News photographer named Todd Maisel who had been searching for Shea for weeks showed up at his

apartment. He had seen him at the scene and was the one who had originally gone for help. As if to prove his story, Maisel pulled out a photo he had taken of Shea lying on the ground, covered in mounds of debris, blood trickling down his forehead. Shea stared at the image. But even after he had looked at it for hours on end, studying every detail, every nick and cut, nothing came back to him.

And even before then, those close to Shea said he had started to get angry for the first time. He lashed out at his doctor and at his girlfriend, Stacy. "I don't even realize I'm doing it," he said.

Then one day he found, through the relatives of one of the dead in his house, a news clip from Sept. 11 that showed the men from Engine 40, his truck, going into the towers. At last it was over, he thought, as he prepared to watch the clip. On the grainy film he could see each of the men from his company going inside, their faces grim and determined, heroic. But he wasn't there. Everyone was there but him. "I don't know where the heck I was," Shea said. "I don't know what the hell happened to me."

Finally, he just stopped looking. Rather than track down leads or scour the paper or search for "cues" that might trigger his recollections, throughout the rest of the fall he went from fund-raiser to fund-raiser, trying to raise money for the families of the dead. He often wouldn't stop, would keep going even when he hadn't slept or his body ached. He had increasing pain in his hand and leg, where the contusions were, and in his groin, where the doctors had removed 90 percent of the tissue in one of his testicles. At a fund-raiser in Buffalo in November, after having appeared only a few days earlier at another in California, he was wan and exhausted. "He's not letting himself heal," Stacy said. "He's in so much pain but he won't say anything."

As he stared off into space, strangers surrounded him as if he were a rock star; one even asked for his autograph. "I'm not a hero," he snapped. "This isn't about me."

The next morning, after Flight 587 crashed near Kennedy Airport, reporters, believing it was another terrorist attack, tried to track Shea down for comment. Rather than speak to them, he went to the hotel gym and got on the StairMaster, climbing up and down with his neck brace, watching the fire burn on TV. "How do you feel, Mr. Shea?" he said over and over, parodying their questions. "How do you feel? How do you feel?"

"He's starting to have nightmares," Stacy said. "He's kicking and thrashing." One dream involved the ark of the covenant. People had gathered all around it to peer inside. He told them not to, to look away, but they didn't, and in an instant, a ray of light appeared, disintegrating everyone but him.

He woke up sweating; he turned on the light and began to write down what he had seen. "I remember the dreams," he said.

Emotions that once seemed nonexistent now overwhelmed him. One minute he was numb, unable to feel anything, and the next he began to cry without warning. "I don't know what's happening," he said.

He found an article about post-traumatic stress that he began to read obsessively: "It is O.K. to be in pain. That is the first principle of recovery."

By the beginning of December, many in the house were showing their own signs of trauma. "You see signs," Kelly told me. "Guys are getting hurt, pulling muscles from the stress. Marriages are starting to come under fire more than usual. I don't know if there is more drinking, but there is plenty of it."

But while the rest of the men relied on the familial nature of the firehouse as a refuge, Shea had drifted further away over the last several months, and he now felt cut off. Many of the new men who had replaced the missing barely recognized him. And so in early December he tried for the first time to reintegrate himself back into the fabric of the force. "Being with the guys," he said. "That's the most important thing to me right now."

He went with them to Roosevelt Island for courses on antiterrorism. "He was so excited," Stacy said. "He got to wear his uniform again."

His physical injuries were gradually healing, and in mid-December the doctors removed his brace. It would still take another year for the bone to completely fuse, but it was possible that he could then return to active duty.

Yet even as he drew closer to his goal of making it back full time, he still seemed caught in a strange netherworld. In the kitchen, where the men gathered to eat and reminisce, he sensed that they were shying away from him. Sometimes when he showed up in the morning they barely acknowledged him, he said, and when he tried to engage them in conversation, they seemed uninterested. "A lot of the guys are reluctant to even look at me," Shea told me one day, sitting in his car. "As odd as it may sound, I think I remind them of the others."

Once he told me that one of the other firefighters had come up to him and said there was a rumor going around the house about why he alone had survived. "People are saying you were out there at the site, just taking pictures with your camera."

"That's not true," Shea said. "I put it back in my pocket. I wouldn't do that." In early December, at another wake, Shea seemed to stand off by himself. "I sometimes think it would've been easier if I had died with the rest of the guys," he said.

"It's hard to watch," Kelly said. "Every time I talk to him he's not the same guy who walked into the firehouse" five months earlier. "First thing he needs to do is simply heal physically," Kelly went on. "Hopefully, then he can come back and be a full-duty fireman, because he lived for that and he was going to move up in the department. He was brilliant in the books."

Just before the three-month anniversary of the attack, Shea showed up early for the Christmas holiday party to help with preparation. Many of the

relatives of the dead were there, and he served them hot dogs and sauerkraut. He worked alongside the other men, saying, "Yes, sir," and "Negative K, sir," as if he were still on active duty. "More of the guys are talking to me," he said. "Maybe in time it will get easier."

Hanging on the wall at the firehouse was the riding list from the morning of Sept. 11, a chalkboard that had the names of each member who had hopped on the rig and died. The men had put a piece of Plexiglas up to preserve it as a memorial. On the bottom, scribbled almost as an afterthought, were the words Kevin Shea.

"I need to go down," Shea finally said.

He had called me at home one night, his voice agitated, and it took me a moment to realize he meant ground zero. He said someone in the Fire Department would pick us up tomorrow afternoon in Chelsea.

It was a cold day, and Shea wore a sweatshirt and mountain-climbing boots. Stacy stood beside him, holding his hand. He had never gone down since that day and had consciously avoided pictures of it in the newspaper and on TV. A member of Rescue 4 -- a hulking fellow named Liam Flaherty -- showed up in a Fire Department van. He had trained Shea at the academy and had been down at the site, digging for his men since Sept. 11, leaving only long enough to sleep. "I saw guys at their absolute best that day," he said as he drove. "Guys just kept running in. They went up as it came down. They didn't turn and run."

As we passed through several checkpoints, trying to follow the route in which Shea had come with his own company, Shea stared silently out the window. He seemed nervous, pressing his face against the glass. We could see the tops of the cranes rising out of the debris and, farther on, two huge metal beams, molded together in the shape of a cross.

"Look at that," Shea said, suddenly pointing out the opposite window. "That's

Engine 40. That's the rig we drove in on." On the side of the road was a huge red truck, the number 40 painted on the side. "It must've been moved," Shea said. "We weren't parked there." He looked at me for reassurance. "Right?"

As we passed through the final checkpoint, Flaherty said: "This is it. You're in."

"There's the south tower," said Stacy.

"Where?"

"There. By the crane."

"Oh, my God," Shea said.

All we could see was a giant hole in the sky. We parked the car and climbed out. Flaherty got us hard hats and yelled at us to be careful as we approached the debris.

"Where's the lobby command post?" asked Shea.

"Ten stories underground," Flaherty said. "It's still burning."

Shea opened and closed his eyes. He began to recall all the pieces that he had strung together, his words flowing out faster and faster. "I grabbed a Purple K," he said. "I was going to look for my men in Ladder 35. There were bodies falling. I remember them hitting the ground. I remember the sound. I went to put out car fires. Then I went into the command post. I saw Patriciello." He closed his eyes. "I hugged him. I told him to be careful."

He stopped. How could he have gotten from the lobby command post to Albany Street? He couldn't run that fast. "Maybe you were blown out," Flaherty said. "A lot of guys were picked up and blown out from the concussion."

"Where's Albany?" Shea asked.

"It's over here," Flaherty said. We started to run, mud splattering on our shoes. We turned down a small street. There were cars still covered in ash, their windows shattered. Shea said the doctor told him he had crawled 200 feet toward light, and now he walked several paces, then stopped and turned around. "This is where they found me," he said. "Right here." He looked back at the tower, surveying the distance. "Is there a garage around here?" There was one up the road, Liam said, and we ran again, past a burned-out building and several men in surgical masks. "This must be it," Shea said.

The garage was small and dank. We waited a moment, then an instant later we were rushing out into the street again, down one alley and another -- over here, over here -- until we arrived at the edge of the water. "This is where they lowered me down on a stretcher."

As he finished his story, drawing new theories from Flaherty about being blown out, estimating the wind speed and the power of the concussion, we were all cold and exhausted. By the time we got back to the site, it was dark, and the workers had turned on their spotlights. While the others wandered off, Shea walked toward what was left of the south tower.

He stood in silence, listening to the cranes. I watched him for several minutes, not saying anything. Finally I said, "Are you O.K.?"

"Yeah."

He finally seemed aware, after months of searching, of calling strangers, of waking up in the middle of the night trying to interpret his dreams, that he might never know everything, that there was no way to piece together a logical story for that day. "I'm so tired," he said. He wiped his eyes. No matter what happened, I offered, he'd done his job, and at some point he needed to let go of the rest.

Shea stepped closer to the hole, his feet now resting on the edge. "I just wish I had learned one thing today," he said, "anything that showed I was trying to

save someone other than myself."