

LIBERTY ISLAND



Sunday, November 18, 2001, television morning news shows carried the story of an incident on Liberty Island. A suspected terrorist had been detained near the monument.

A spokesperson for the National Park Service reported that a park policeman on his rounds Saturday night had encountered a young man outside the statue. The suspect—described alternatively as a Middle Eastern male, a young Arab American, and a Muslim male of Arab American descent—had resisted arrest. Heavy rain and gale force winds—from the season’s first nor’easter—had hampered police efforts, but the suspect had been apprehended and turned over to the FBI for questioning. His name was not released. A press bulletin from the deputy director of the NPS stated that the incident was under investigation. An FBI spokesman called the report “unconfirmed.”

Like many watching the television news that morning, Hasan Ahmed reacted by uttering the universal, “Oh, no.” A young Muslim male resisting arrest near the Statue of Liberty? That sounded like a terrorist.

His “Oh, no” was spoken not solely out of concern for the effect this development was sure to have on a failing business. It was spoken out of concern for his son who had departed for

New York four days earlier. Hadn't his club visited the monument just yesterday?

"Lisa, may I see Mohammed's itinerary?" he asked his wife that morning.

Lisa Ahmed removed it from the refrigerator door, where she had consulted it every day. Using the big city references from her Chicago days, she tried to imagine her son in this place or that according to the names on the itinerary.

"It seems they caught a terrorist at the Statue of Liberty."

"*Dios mío!*" she said. Then she remembered. "But they no go there. No peoples go. It close."

He scanned the itinerary, recalling that he had heard something about the statue's closure. At this hour his son should be on a bus back to Ohio. Miss Cutter had called to say that bad weather had delayed their departure.

"Well, obviously nothing happened," he said, handing the itinerary to his wife, who returned to the kitchen where Nura Maryam sat in her high chair, spooning oatmeal—the only one not fasting that morning.

He opened the *Cincinnati Post*, looking for more news of the incident. He found none. *What a sad business*, he told himself, shaking his head. *Praise Allah the rascal had been caught.*



Six hundred and fifty miles to the east, a National Park Service police officer, now off duty at his home in the Bronx, was also talking to his wife about the incident. He hadn't seen it on the news. He did not scan the Sunday paper for information. He had been there. He had caught the perpetrator.

Officer Bob Slocomb had arrived at his two-story house off Vyse Avenue bone-tired and storm-weary. As he breakfasted in dry clothes, the kitchen quiet—his teenage boys asleep

upstairs—the roar of the gale still filled his head. He felt the pelting rain. He heard the wind. Seven years he had worked on the island, seven years patrolling Liberty. He had been a witness to lightning strikes, jumpers, stowaways—he had been on duty the night they caught the French stuntman hiding in a horse chestnut tree—protesters, bomb scares, and blackouts. But he had never seen anything like this.

“Craziest night ever,” he told his wife across the table. “The old girl was rocking.”

Slocomb had come to the park police after serving in the military. A former marine, he was a big, broad-shouldered man with unshakeable cool and a tough-guy bravado that masked a more caring, sensitive side. He was no newcomer to rain and wind in the coal black of a screaming night. He knew the importance of remaining vigilant, especially now. Vigilance was the backbone of security. And security was what kept America safe. That belief together with his sense of duty had gotten Officer Slocomb through many long watches on Liberty Island.

But now the monument was closed to the public. Ferry service had been suspended and the residential quarters were empty (since September rangers and administrative staff had lodged off-island). With frequent flyovers by the National Guard and patrols by the Coast Guard, policing the island had gotten a whole lot simpler. With that much help, it was easy to drop one’s guard on a stormy night—easy to assume that Miss Liberty was safe.

It was raining sheets, the wind at thirty knots, when he and Officer Glovsky came on duty the evening of the seventeenth. Murray, the third in their crew, didn’t make the boat, calling in sick. An hour later a second ferry with Murray’s replacement was scratched when NOAA radio issued a level-two travel advisory for nonchannel harbor craft.

“So it was just Glov and me,” Slocomb told his wife that morning as a third cup of coffee nudged the chill from his bones. “Of course, if the fancy detection hardware had been operational, we would have known we had an intruder—saved all of us some hairy footwork.”

Since late September, security contractors had been “wiring” Liberty Island with motion detectors, laser trips, underground sensors, surveillance cameras, even a satellite uplink. Park policing was going high tech, and the rumor at the NPS field office at Floyd Bennett Field was the “new” island was going to cost jobs.

But it wasn’t running yet.

Glovsky made the first round, returning forty minutes later to report that “It’s wild out there.” But Slocomb already knew that. From his post inside a secure, windowless room at the Park Service administration building on the northwest end of the island, he had heard the wind screaming in the large oaks. He had heard the sea.

“Surf’s to the south wall,” Glovsky said, shedding his wet gear and going to the coffeepot.

“Did you check it out?”

“Heck no. I got a mortgage to pay.”

Slocomb had seen it only once. From the terreplein of the old fort, it had been quite a sight—like a trailer on the Weather Channel—the big waves lifting over the sea barrier, rolling across the perimeter path, and crashing onto the fort wall.

“What’s the wind?” Glovsky asked.

“About forty.”

“It felt stronger.”

Slocomb liked the lanky, kinky-haired, prone-to-exaggerate Glovsky. He was dependable, plainspoken, sometimes edgy if life veered from the predictable, but otherwise good company.

“Let Coast know.”

Slocomb clipped on a radio and donned his wet-weather. Before leaving, he joked, "If radar picks up low flying, tell them it's me."

Outside, he leaned into the wind. For once Glovsky hadn't exaggerated. This was no forty-knot blow. This felt like he was standing up in the backseat of a Chrysler convertible doing sixty on the interstate—something he had done once when he was young and foolish.

He looked south, shielding rain from his eyes as he scanned above the trees, searching for the statue's familiar shape. It was why he was there—to make sure Lady Liberty was there, *always* there. No history was going to be made on his watch. No breaking news at ten.

Her figure stood gray in the driving rain—sketched in charcoal—but her torch remained extraordinarily bright. Officer Slocomb was not surprised. He knew that at the very beginning—before she became the symbol for other, loftier ideals—Miss Liberty had served as the upper harbor's first navigational beacon—a lighthouse—one watched over not by a cop, but by a light-keeper, a man who had spent his nights running a steam generator. *Simpler times*, Slocomb told himself. No fear of saboteurs or terrorists then. The job had been making light for ships.

The wind tore at his wet-weather as he trudged toward the motor pool, rain slipping past his hood ties and running down his back. He thought of his wife and teenage sons, warm and dry in their two-story home back in the Bronx. Probably watching a rented movie and eating microwave popcorn. It was Saturday night.

Inside the motor-pool shed, the jeep sat in a lake of rainwater, still dripping from Glovsky's round. The hood steamed. The windshield wipers stood straight up—evidence that Glovsky had been in a hurry to finish his round. He didn't like these storms.

The engine rolled over on the first turn. Slocomb backed out of the shed, gripping the wheel firmly. The wind wanted to steer. Rain pummeled the jeep's roof. The high beams dissolved into an impenetrable darkness at thirty feet. He turned on the lateral spotlight and guided it to the edge of the arrival promenade before he eased his foot onto the accelerator. *What a night*, he told himself as the jeep began to move.

To his wife sitting across the kitchen table that morning, he said, "I didn't know it then, but I wasn't the only one out there in that gale."



He drove the length of the arrival promenade, spotlighting the empty residential quarters and maintenance buildings, stopping at the flagpole circle to beam past the linden trees. Manhattan through the rain had the glow of a moonrise stalled just below the horizon.

Turning south, he inched along the central mall, lamping toward the harbor, catching sight of the distant breakers, deadly white as they lurched above a roiled sea. Near the monument, the roar of the rain dropped to an audible drilling, its intensity diminished by the massive shelter of a fort, a pedestal, and 150 feet of metal statue. She was a gigantic windbreak, a big umbrella. Slocomb stopped the jeep beside the fort.

At the entrance he angled the spotlight up both stairways, following the balustrade across the open landing to the recessed entryway. He beamed up the fort walls and along the granite stonework of the promenade, wet quartz and mica flecks catching the light. On a clear night the light would have cut cleanly past the pedestal socle, illuminating the balcony parapet and the hem of Liberty's stola. Tonight it lit only slanted lines of rain.

With the spotlight turned off and the window lowered enough to peer out, he checked the torch. It swayed a foot, maybe