

Just a Few Sleeps Away

A family's discovery of good and evil in the aftermath of 9/11

By Mike Nichols

Twenty-five percent of the net proceeds of every book will be donated to a 9/11-related charity of the Haberman family's choice.

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For Andrea, and all those with her.

“She (was going) to be back on the 12th or 13th. So our thing was, to make it sound like less, I just kept telling her it was only two sleeps away. That was like our thing. Whenever one of us would go out of town, you know, be away from each other, it was ‘Just a few sleeps away.’”

— *Al Kolodzik, recalling a phone conversation he had with his fiancée, Andrea Haberman, shortly after she had arrived in New York City late on the night of Sept. 10, 2001*

Part One

Chapter One

Andrea Haberman and Al Kolodzik had a little competition every weekday morning. Whoever called the other one first after 7 a.m. would win. There was no real prize. The victor simply got proof that he or she was the first to think of, and call, the other — even though most days they'd only been separated for an hour and were at jobs no more than 20 to 30 miles apart.

The morning of Sept. 11, 2001, was a little different.

The evening before, Andrea had flown from Chicago to New York on her first business trip ever. A small-town Wisconsin girl who had met Al at tiny St. Norbert College near Green Bay, and then moved to Illinois to be near him, she had never even been to the East Coast before. The truth was she didn't really want to be there then.

There were, after all, a lot of other things happening in her life. At an age when lots of people are still trying to find themselves, the 25-year-old had already found everything from a promising job to a cute house on Chicago's northwest side to the guy she was going to marry and, one day, have lots of children with. It had been just five months earlier that Al, on a weekend trip back to St. Norbert, had gotten down on a knee and proposed in a gazebo along the Fox River. He told her he wanted them to spend the rest of their lives together and asked her if she wanted the same. Andrea — who had known exactly what future she wanted but didn't know that was the day Al had chosen to mark the beginning of it — quickly said yes. All the things she had dreamed of — the job, the house, a man she loved — had come together in a way almost too blissful to be true.

Unaware that Al had already asked permission of, or at least run the idea by, everyone from her younger sister Julie to her grandmother, Therese, to her parents, Gordy and Kathy, Andrea couldn't wait to share the news with her family. After eating at a favorite restaurant and spending the night in Green Bay they drove directly to Gordy and Kathy's house the following day.

The Habermans live in the Town of Farmington, about seven miles northeast of West Bend and 40 miles northwest of Milwaukee. It's about a 90-minute ride from St. Norbert, and when they arrived there was still plenty of daylight. It was a warm, sunny afternoon and there is a picture of Andrea that Gordy took that day in their yard not long after they arrived. Gordy doesn't think it's the best shot he ever took of his daughter, not even the best one he took that afternoon. But there is something in it — exuberance, shared joy as she glances at someone just outside the frame, a look on her face of slight disbelief, maybe, that life had turned out to be so good — that perfectly captured the moment. In the picture, Andrea is standing in the sun, wearing a T-shirt underneath bib overalls. Her curly brown hair flows halfway down her upper arms.

There's something beautiful and innocent in the way she is standing, and in her smile. There is also something a little unusual. Enthralled with the new engagement ring on her finger, she is holding her left hand up over her chest for everyone to see. The picture is not a close-up, though, so when you look at it now, it is not the ring that is most evident. It is Andrea herself from a distance standing there with her hand held flat and diagonal over her heart, the way a young child might when facing the flag and saying the Pledge of Allegiance. It is a picture that seemed to perfectly capture both love and a certain unspoken faith that she lived in a place in the very heart of a country where surprisingly good things happen to people who deserve them.

Little did anyone know that day just how wrong that would prove to be.

* * *

Andrea had many reasons to smile that day, some she had, indeed, never foreseen. It was Al who had the business degree. She had been a psychology major who ended up at Carr Futures, a futures brokerage firm in Chicago, after a headhunter told her it would be a good match. It didn't seem like it at first. She was hired onto a team that supported Richard "Rick" Ferina, the head of the company's North American branch. The job included an invaluable view of the very top of the company and how it was run, a decent salary and, most importantly, the opportunity to be in Chicago near Al. For all that, though, she didn't initially like it. She'd often call Gordy and Kathy, discouraged and sometimes in tears.

"This," she would tell them, "is just so intense."

The woman she worked for was demanding, says Al. Andrea would come home and tell him that her supervisor, instead of handing work to her, would just toss it up over her cubicle. Andrea wasn't used to that. She came from a small Wisconsin town where most people said "Please" and "Thank you." She took it personally. Al told her not to.

"She's just testing you," he told her. "But if you don't like it, don't stay there."

Andrea, though, did not walk away. She didn't just stay, she prospered. She went from being tested to being trusted; worked a lot with the brokers and the marketing people, and directly for Ferina himself. She proved her competence and was rewarded with steady salary increases. Al, in the meantime, had a very good job with a Chicago highway contractor and asphalt producer and, like Andrea, wasn't afraid to work long hours. Here they were, three years out of college, still only in their mid-twenties and making enough money the month after they were engaged to close on a 1,300 square-foot Cape Cod on Chicago's Everell Avenue, near the city's border with Park Ridge. The brick house sat on a small lot, only 37-by-115 feet, but it had two full baths and a half-bath and was across the street from a manicured stretch of green space that surrounds and links the Resurrection Medical Center and nearby Resurrection High School. It was a quiet block and convenient for both Andrea, who could take the

“L” downtown, and Al, who worked mostly on the city’s North Side. They moved in, had the hardwood floors refinished, painted everything and started looking for furniture, when there was time.

Chicago was busy building roads in 2001, and Al worked 70 hours a week that summer, including a lot of Saturdays. Andrea put in at least 50 hours Monday through Friday, and spent a lot of time on the weekends in Wisconsin, planning the wedding that was scheduled for September 2002.

Choosing a place for the wedding was a no-brainer. It was to take place Sept. 28, 2002, at St. Frances Cabrini in West Bend, the church the Habermans had attended for years. Finding a place for the reception proved a little more complicated. At first, Andrea just wanted to have it in her parents’ spacious backyard — where Gordy had taken her picture the day of the engagement and where she and Julie and their neighborhood friends had grown up, walking in the woods and playing capture the flag and ghost in the graveyard on moonlit nights.

It is hard to imagine a safer, more carefree place than the subdivision that abutted the woods and farm fields of semi-rural Wisconsin, where the girls had the freedom to explore and lots of friends to do it with. They were, however, never far from the Haberman house or Kathy and Gordy.

Friday nights were the rare times when neither parent was home. That was a night that Gordy worked late at his restaurant, Piper’s, in Mequon, and Kathy usually stayed at her mother’s house in West Allis, a Milwaukee suburb, because it was near the hair salon where she worked early on Saturday mornings. Andrea, in high school by then, and Julie, three years younger, would give the neighbor kids burritos and fish sticks and goof around until Gordy pulled into the driveway. Before he made it in the front door, all their friends would flee out the back, off the Haberman deck and out into the dark woods. Even then, though, Julie and Andrea figured Gordy knew what had been going on because, within a half an hour, the neighbor kids would be back on the deck and Gordy would be there, too, sitting and laughing and talking. Together they would enjoy the night, the outdoors

and the fields that led down to a small, pristine lake known as Little Green.

The backyard was ideal for hide-and-seek. Andrea finally realized, however, that it would not be ideal for a wedding. It sloped everywhere and it would be hard to find a place for the tent. There wasn't enough room for parking. The reception would have to be elsewhere. She must have looked at 20 places before settling on the Silver Spring Country Club, in Menomonee Falls, with its large, airy ballroom and spectacular, bucolic views. Andrea loved it. She loved the way everyone could move from the inside to the outside and back again. Loved the hardwood floors, the beamed ceilings and all the windows. The place had a nice flow to it. It suited her.

Julie, who Andrea had asked to be her maid of honor, didn't go along on most of the forays in search of the reception site because she was at school. She was there, though, the first time Andrea went looking for a wedding dress, and had no small amount of trepidation. If Andrea had looked at 20 reception sites, Julie was sure she would want to look at hundreds of dresses. Her fears seemed to be confirmed when, at the first bridal shop they went to, a place in Cedarburg; Julie made a suggestion about a dress she thought might work. Andrea thought it was "ugly," and said so.

"Just try it on. C'mon," said Julie and then went and sat down with Kathy, certain it was going to be a very, very long and painful day. The door from the dressing room wasn't even half-way open 10 minutes later, though, and they were stunned, Julie and Kathy both. The dress was an A-line, simple and unadorned. It hadn't looked like much on the hanger. On Andrea, though, it was enough to induce tears. It was both elegant and beautiful, the way Julie had, secretly, always thought of her big sister.

* * *

Gordy Haberman hunts black bear. There are three mounted in the Haberman house. What he really wanted, though, was a grizzly. He and a friend had already booked what they thought of as the “hunt of a lifetime” in Alaska the following spring; were already training for the rigors of two weeks in the Alaskan bush. He’s not a man prone to irrational fear. He’d known for a while that Andrea had been asked to start traveling periodically to New York and that, after originally being scheduled to fly out on a different week, she had switched trips with a colleague and arranged to go on Sept. 10. But he didn’t know until Labor Day, Sept. 3, that she would be in the World Trade Center towers — and he did not have a good feeling.

One of his customers at Piper’s had been with the Secret Service and Gordy recalled the guy once telling him how close some thought the towers had come to falling after the bombing in 1993. He was concerned enough that he called his younger sister, Shelley, who travelled a bit and had been in New York several times, and hinted that it might be nice if she went along.

“Andrea has to go to New York for business,” Gordy had said. “We were thinking Auntie Shelley has been to New York. None of us has been to New York. I wonder if she would want to go with her.”

It was a brief conversation that had no real significance at the time. Gordy didn’t even really ask a direct question. But Shelley — who would end up traveling to New York for Andrea no less than six times in the year that followed and too many times to keep track of in the decade ahead — answered it anyway. She was undergoing intensive physical therapy for serious shoulder and rotator cuff issues, and was also preparing to go to Washington, D.C.

“Oh Gordy,” she said. “I’m coming off this shoulder thing and am scheduled to go out to D.C. I don’t know that I can do both.”

Gordy didn’t say anything about his apprehension to Andrea, although, unbeknownst to him, she was thinking the same thing. She and Al had even talked about it.

“Do you think it’s safe?” Andrea had asked Al.

Back in 1993, when Andrea was still at Kewaskum High School, she had actually written about the attack on the towers in a journal for school. Her teacher, Elizabeth Rydzik Biskobing, still remembered it vividly eight years after it was written. She recalled the compassion Andrea had expressed for the victims who had been killed and her bewilderment over why anyone would have done such a thing to them.

Al grew up around tall buildings. His dad, an engineer, used to take him into the Chicago skyscrapers all the time when he was growing up.

“Oh, that place is so safe now,” he assured Andrea when they talked about the World Trade Center. “They’ve probably got so much security there, Andrea. You don’t have to worry about anything. Nothing like that is going to happen.”

Still, she was apprehensive; and not just because of what had happened in 1993.

Andrea wasn’t afraid to speak up for herself or tell somebody she disagreed. Still, she could be quiet to the extent that some saw her as shy. She had a contemplative, artistic side and, among strangers, a reserve that made her, at times, stand back and quietly assess things before moving ahead. She never liked to rush into something — or someplace. Whenever they walked into a bar or a restaurant, Al would invariably hold the door for her and she would, just as invariably, give him a look that let him know she didn’t like it. Not because she thought it was chauvinistic. She appreciated small kindnesses. No, she didn’t like it because she just didn’t like to be the first one in — her role exactly on the morning of Sept. 11.

Andrea was a modest person who was “not one to put herself in the middle of a situation and that is why this whole thing is so ridiculous,” said her aunt Shelley. “The quietest girl in the world ends up being the middle of the biggest event of our generation.”

Ferina, Andrea’s boss, had a meeting in the World Trade Center at 9 a.m. on Sept. 11, but wasn’t flying out until early that Tuesday morning. In order to lay the groundwork and prepare things, Andrea was asked to fly out ahead on Monday, Sept. 10 —

alone. She was busy that day. She needed to get some work done before she went to New York and spent that Monday morning at the Carr offices in Chicago before heading back to the house on Everell Avenue for a few minutes to pick up a bag. Al, who was working not far away, snuck home and met her. The trip was only going to last a couple days, and he had just seen her that morning, but they were going to miss each other and he wanted to assure her that everything was going to be fine; tell her that a little jaunt to New York was no big deal. Remind her that he loved her and say goodbye.

It wasn't quite the parting they had envisioned. As it turned out, they weren't together at home that afternoon for more than a few minutes. She had to get to the airport. The company had sent a car for her. There was barely time to hug before Andrea had to leave to make her flight — or so they thought. After waving goodbye to Al and hurrying to O'Hare, she found that her original flight was cancelled because of weather problems. Then a second flight was cancelled and she was put on a third. It was at that point, already past the dinner hour, that Al suggested she bag it.

"Just come home," he told her over the phone. O'Hare was practically right in the neighborhood, after all. "Go in the morning."

Andrea did think about it.

"If this next one is cancelled," she said, "then I'll come home."

She had, however, already checked the new luggage she had bought for the trip. It had all her makeup in there, and everything else she would need in New York.

"Who cares?" said Al.

Andrea did. She was supposed to make sure everything was ready for Ferina; wanted to do a good job. The next flight from Chicago to New York on the night of Sept. 10 went as scheduled. And so did she — a 25-year-old woman off to New York City for the first time in her life. She wasn't thrilled with the idea, but she was doing her job and, anyway, what could there possibly be to

worry about? Millions of people flew in and out of New York every year. Some 40,000 people worked in the World Trade Center each day and, except for what happened in 1993, had never had a problem.

Al worked until about 7:30 that evening, and was asleep on the couch when the phone rang at about 10 p.m. It was Andrea. She was in a room at a Marriott hotel a block or two from the World Trade Center. She was tired, a little nervous, and missed Al already. She would have much preferred to be with him back at home in Chicago. But, yes, she was there.

Lying on the couch back in the house on Everell Avenue, Al tried to comfort her. Although neither had travelled for business before, they did occasionally spend nights in different cities. When they did, they always tried to minimize the amount of time they were going to be apart by counting “sleeps.” That was their “thing,” as Al would put it. Some people counted hours; others counted days. They counted “sleeps.” He told Andrea that he loved her, that they would soon be together again and that the moment was only a few “sleeps away.” Then he hung up and, before going to bed, called Gordy at the restaurant.

Gordy, who typically worked 11- or 12-hour days, remembers it being after midnight when he got the call at Piper’s – already early in the morning of Sept. 11. Al thought it was a little earlier. But they both recall vividly what Al said.

“The eagle,” Al told Gordy, “has landed.”

Both of them had a little chuckle over the reference to Neil Armstrong in his lunar module, finally touching down on the moon with the earth all lit up beneath him.

While his daughter went to sleep in her room in the Marriott in New York, Gordy drove home from Mequon confident that all was well. Sure of the same, Al quickly fell asleep. He had to be up early and out at his job site by 6:15 a.m.

Al had already been on the job an hour the morning of Sept. 11 when Andrea called his cell phone, winning their morning competition. It was an hour later in New York, already well past

8. She had walked the block and a half from the Marriott, and made her way to the Carr offices near the top of the World Trade Center, and had already been shown to a desk and a phone. It was a clear, sunny, beautiful day in New York. She could see the Statue of Liberty as they talked. She could see the ferries crossing the Hudson River from New Jersey. It was a crystal clear view of one of the most famous views in America.

The conversation was short, maybe three to four minutes. Andrea still didn't really want to be where she was — more than a thousand feet up in the air above New York City. She missed Al enough that she teared up a little again. She was, after all, still a 25-year-old girl from a small town in Wisconsin in love with a guy halfway across the country. She would much rather have been back in Chicago where she kept a wedding planner in her desk drawer along with a big box of cereal, hand lotion and some roses from her fiancé.

There would be plenty of time for roses, though, and for everything else.

She would see Al and her mom and dad and Julie soon enough, finish the plans for the wedding, finish fixing up the house on Everell. She'd be married at St. Frances Cabrini, and dance in the ballroom of the Silver Spring Club with the beautiful views of the fall foliage and the future. She and Al would have lots of kids who would one day run under the moonlight in her parents' backyard, the way she and Julie always had, waiting for their father to get home.

Anyway, one sleep was already down.

It was the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, and she had work to do.

She hung up happy.

Chapter Two

Tricia Perrine worked for Carr Futures on the 92nd floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center. A 29-year-old credit analyst, she traveled to Chicago occasionally, and had met Andrea Haberman a few times. They had gone out for lunch. Tricia found Andrea personable, clearly smart and just as nice. Andrea was only 25, but Tricia could see that she was headed somewhere, was going to be successful. Tricia could also see, when she stood by the cubicle in Chicago with the roses and the pictures, listening to Andrea talk, one other thing:

If there's one thing about Andrea, she always thought, it's how much in love she is.

Tricia didn't usually start work in New York until 9 a.m. Her boss knew Andrea had never been to the offices in the World Trade Center prior to Sept. 11, though, so he asked Tricia to show up a little earlier that morning, help show Andrea around. Get there around, say, 8:30.

Tricia gladly agreed; and intended to keep her promise.

She made it to lower Manhattan much earlier that day than she normally did. She also did something else out of the ordinary that morning: She drove her car, and ended up having a hard time finding a parking place. By the time she found a spot, according to the time-stamped parking receipt she carried with her as she walked toward the twin towers, it was already 8:39.

She knew she had to meet Andrea. She was also hungry, though, and was passing by the Amish Market on Park Place and West Broadway, practically underneath the towers. Without really thinking about it, figuring it would take just another minute or two, she impulsively darted inside.

Hustling into the market, she bought a bagel and was standing near a toaster, showing a perplexed French couple how to turn it on, when there was a massive, earth-shattering explosion.

The windows of the Amish Market were blown in.

It was 8:46 a.m.

Chapter Three

Al left the job site immediately after he talked to Andrea and brought some paperwork to an asphalt plant near O'Hare. No sooner did he get there, though, when his cell phone rang again. It was about 7:50 a.m. in Chicago – 8:50 a.m. in New York – barely half an hour since he had spoken with Andrea. He answered the call and heard a familiar voice. It was his mom, and something was wrong.

A plane, she said, had just flown into one of the two towers at the World Trade Center.

"Which one," she asked, "is Andrea in?"

A plane?

Al's first thought was that it was a Cessna or something else small. And he had no idea which tower Andrea was in, or on which floor.

"I don't know," he told his mom.

But he said he would find out. He would call Andrea. He hung up and immediately called both her cell phone and the number she had given him for the desk she was using when they had talked half an hour earlier. She didn't answer either one, not the first time and not the second. Or the third. Each time he called, the lines were either busy or just rang and rang and rang, so he called Gordy and Kathy in Wisconsin. Andrea talked to her parents every day. Maybe, if Andrea was having trouble getting through to him, she was having more success calling them.

Kathy answered.

"Mom," said Al to his future mother-in-law. "Did I wake you up?"

"No," said Kathy.

“Do you have the news on?”

She didn’t.

“Turn the TV on,” said Al. “A plane hit the Trade Center.”

Kathy didn’t believe it.

“Al, c’mon,” she said. “Quit joking.”

But Al was not laughing.

The TV in the Haberman’s house sits in a dining area between the kitchen, where Kathy had brewed a pot of coffee, and some patio doors that lead out to the large wooded backyard where the engagement picture was taken the prior spring. Kathy turned it on. There was a picture of one of the towers with thick, black smoke coming out of the top and wafting over lower Manhattan.

Kathy ran for Gordy, who hadn’t arrived home until almost 2 a.m. and was still sleeping.

“Get up!” she told him. “Al said something has happened. He can’t get ahold of Andrea.”

There was no footage of the actual crash, just pictures of the towers and the smoke pouring out of one of them as the morning talk show personalities switched gears and tried to find out what was happening — tried to deduce whether it was pilot error, some sort of suicide or something else.

At NBC, Bryant Gumbel was sitting at an anchor desk, giving only the barest of details.

At ABC, Charlie Gibson and Diane Sawyer, hosts of “Good Morning America,” like everyone else, were trying to decipher things. A reporter on the scene was describing what everybody could already see: The north tower was aflame and fire crews were on the way. Suddenly he stopped in mid-sentence.

“Oh, my God!” he said.

“Oh, God,” whispered Sawyer, barely audible.
“My God . . .”

It, happened in a second, was captured live. A second plane had flown into the second tower and immediately burst into flames.

At first, even the veteran newscasters weren't sure what they had seen. It took a few seconds to register.

"That," said Gibson, "looks like a second plane has just hit. We just saw another plane coming in from the side."

Gibson sounded almost as calm as he was serious.

"So," he said, "this looks like some sort of concerted effort to attack the World Trade Center that is under way in New York."

The networks immediately re-cued footage of the plane, the second plane, smashing into the World Trade Center at more than 500 mph. They played it again and then a third time.

"We will see that scene again," said Sawyer, "to make sure we saw what we thought we saw."

They had. Everyone had. It was just past 8 a.m. Wisconsin time – 9 a.m. Eastern – and a Boeing 767 had just flown into the second tower. It was both surreal and incomprehensible. This was *intentional*. The United States was under attack — and Andrea, who had never even been in those buildings until less than an hour earlier, a girl from the Town of Farmington, was right there in the middle of it.

Gordy picked up a cup of coffee that Kathy had left on the counter in the kitchen.

What he did with it wasn't out of anger, he would say later. It was out of fear.

He threw it against the wall.

Then he, like Al, started trying to call Andrea. Kathy, in the meantime, called Julie, who was away at college. Julie had a part-time job at an Applebee's, and worked late the night of Sept. 10. She slept in the next morning, just like her dad. A very light sleeper, though, she woke up quickly when the phone rang. When she heard her mom's voice, she knew immediately something had happened.

“Julie ...” said Kathy.

“Mom,” she asked, “what happened?”

Julie, too, turned on the TV, but just for a minute. She knew enough already. She got in her car and turned the radio on and headed home. As she made the 90-minute drive, she looked around and noticed something: All the other drivers on the highway were on their cell phones, talking as they wore blank expressions of disbelief.

Julie herself talked only to Andrea.

“It’s OK, Andrea. It’s OK. We’re coming to get you. You’re going to be OK,” she said over and over to her big sister. She drove down the highway, pausing not at all between words, running her sentences together with a rhythm that was half-assurance, half-fear. “You’re going to be OK. We’re coming to get you. I love you. I’m with you. I love you. I love you. We’re coming to get you. Don’t be scared.”